

## **"FAA Checkride for David Cunningham"**

submitted by David Cunningham, Redtail 49  
(10/23/03)

David Cunningham recently achieved what many others have done in the past. He has completed his life-long goal of becoming a licensed pilot. What makes his story different from others is that David is the son of an original Tuskegee Airman and has traveled from California to Tuskegee, Alabama to accomplish this goal.

David's father, Major John O. Cunningham, was one of 30 Liaison/Forward Observation pilots trained at Tuskegee for the segregated Army artillery units in WWII. He began his service as an enlisted man and was ordered to Officer Candidate School (OCS) and then to Tuskegee for basic flight training. Advanced training was completed at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma for the then Lt. Cunningham. He joined his artillery outfit and departed for the South Pacific Islands where he joined the fight against the Japanese. In all, he twice 'Mustanged' from enlisted to officer, fought in two wars (he also fought in the Korean War), and retired a Major with 21 years of service. David, himself, served in the Viet Nam War aboard a Navy aircraft carrier.

David set out on Saturday, October 18, 2003 for the east coast. Accompanied by his long time friend, Oscar Gray, the two arrived in Atlanta on Sunday and drove the distance to Tuskegee. God provided great weather. The weather in Tuskegee was perfect for flying. Warm, calm and clear was the expected weather for the week in Alabama. The airplane was ready and waiting. Antonio Smith, the Tuskegee flight instructor was also ready to give David some additional training.

Point of information: the airplane, a 1979 Cessna 172, was the last airplane that the late Charles Alfred "Chief" Anderson had owned. "Chief" as the Tuskegee Airmen fondly called him, was a self-taught pilot. He was the chief flight instructor for the Tuskegee Airmen and had personally trained many of the Airmen. It was "Chief" Anderson who actually took Eleanor Roosevelt for a 40 minute flight around Tuskegee which began the cadet flight program.

Moton Field is the airport at Tuskegee. This is the same airport where all primary flight training was done for the Tuskegee pilots during the 1940's. Moton Field is now run by the airport FBO, Col. Roosevelt Lewis, (Ret.). Col. Lewis is the gentleman who commissioned David's daughter into the Navy where she is now a Naval Flight Officer, navigating P-3 Orion's in Hawaii. Col. Lewis was also one of "Chief" Anderson's closest friends. In addition, it was Col. Lewis who made all of the preparations for David at Tuskegee. All David had to do was to show up.

Thursday, October 23, was the date of the check ride. When FAA examiner, Steve Carter, arrived at 1:00pm, he tried to calm David's nervousness with some success. Even with the calming atmosphere, there were problems. The oral part of the exam went long. And while the oral was going on, a bug went into the pitot tube of the airplane. This did not show up until the flying part of the exam.

After the airplane preflight, startup, taxi and run-up, there was no indication of any problem. The problem showed up on David's first take-off. As the plane began the take-off roll, the airspeed

indicator stopped working. Minus the airspeed indicator, David took off but stayed in the pattern. The in-flight troubleshooting indicated the pitot tube was blocked. David had to land the airplane and abort the flight until the pitot tube could be fixed. After necessary repairs were completed, the flight was resumed. With the required maneuvers, landings and take-offs, David and Steve, the examiner, returned to the ground just as the sun was going down.

One of the highlights of the exam was to execute an "emergency landing" at the airport where the Airmen did their advanced training. Successfully approaching the only remaining runway, David neatly touched down on that runway. Never in his life had he wanted to hear the chirp of the wheels touching terra firma as at that time. Alas, the examiner asked to execute a go-around. So, the chirp did not happen at that place. Maybe there will be another time.

PASSED was the word of the day. The check ride was complete. Time to celebrate. David's wife and son would be in the next day to help celebrate. The celebration could not begin until thanks were given. The glory and praise went out to God. Much thanks went to David Swan, David's California instructor; Antonio Smith, David's Tuskegee instructor; Colonel Lewis, who set all of this up; Steve Carter, the FAA flight examiner; the Tuskegee Airmen, including "Chief" Anderson and all of the Tuskegee flight instructors, who gave inspiration for David to do this project; Oscar Gray, David's traveling companion and moral support for this trip; David's family, who gave encouragement to him from afar; and, David gives thanks to his parents, his late father and his mother.

The pride of being the son of one of America's WWII heroes was apparent. David was honored to be flying at the same field that trained the famed WWII pilots sixty years ago. And what a thrill to fly "Chief" Anderson's last airplane, the man who was a hero to heroes! David Cunningham was in heaven. To his surprise, David discovered through his dad's military records that his dad had completed his primary flight training at that same airport in the month of October, in 1943, some 60 years ago.

Before he died in 1996, "Chief" told Col. Lewis to, 'KEEP THEM FLYING'. Now David feels honored and pleased to carry on that order from the air as well as from his FAA job at the Oakland Center.

With a Wing and a Prayer...

David Cunningham