

Major John O. Cunningham, Tuskegee Airman

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93rd Infantry Division, 594th Field Artillery

Major John O. Cunningham was born on July 26, 1915, in Indiana. He joined the Army in 1941. In the days before World War II, one of the best jobs for a Black man (or 'colored' in those days), was to be employed as a porter on the train system. And for a woman...teaching or nursing was the best they could do. Mom was a teacher until I came along. And when children came into the family back in the day, mothers stayed at home to raise their children. Dad was not a porter. Instead, he had joined the Army.

Prior to WWII a Black man was not allowed to be a military officer (except in very rare cases). So Dad was an enlisted man in 1941. Before the war started for the United States, Dad became a Surveyor and reached the enlisted rank of Staff Sergeant. He was assigned to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. When the war started, the US military had a need for some Black pilots to be the "eyes" for the two segregated Black Artillery outfits being developed for the war effort. Dad had had one year of college, which qualified him to be selected for this job. Dad was assigned to and completed Officer Candidate School. Afterwards, he was sent to the only place, in those days, Black men could learn basic flight - Tuskegee, Alabama. Dad completed Basic Flight Training in Tuskegee, and Advanced Flight Training in Artillery/Forward Observation, back in Ft. Sill. Upon completion, his title became 2nd Lt. John Cunningham, Liaison/ Forward Observation Officer. He was assigned to the 93rd Infantry Division, 594th Field Artillery as an Officer and pilot. He remained in the regular Army where as other pilots went on



Major John O. Cunningham and his Helicopter

to advanced flight school in Tuskegee in the Army Air Corps, and on to fighter aircraft to be flown in North Africa and Europe. His unit took him into the war effort in New Guinea, The Solomon Islands and the Philippine Islands, all in the South Pacific.

After WWII ended in 1945, Dad separated from the Army only to return to the Army a year later. In Japan, Dad was assigned to the US Army occupying forces in the late 1940's. Dad had married and taken Mom with him to Japan, and that is where I was born. The Army had no need for pilots and officers, so Dad returned in the Army as an enlisted man. When the US went to war against North Korea in the early 1950's, the Army once again needed officers and pilots. Dad was re-issued his Officer commission and his flight status, and he went off to Korea, sending Mom and me from Japan back to their home in Indiana.

After leaving Korea, Dad came back to the States and was sent to North Carolina to learn to fly helicopters. We then went to Germany for 2 years. Even though I was only 4 or 5 years old at the time, I still remember seeing Dad bringing Santa Claus to the Post Exchange in his helicopter during one Christmas in Germany. That is a fond memory for me. Later on, after a year in Kansas, Dad was re-assigned to the Ohio Air National Guard where his assignment was to overhaul the Ohio Air National Guard flight program in Northern Ohio. He received a Presidential Award for this accomplishment. After successfully completing that job, he retired with the rank of Major. We moved to southern Ohio after his retirement.

Dad died in May of 1969, seven years after his retirement. Sadly, Dad is not around for the honors bestowed on the Tuskegee Airmen this year. Mom was there to receive the honors on behalf of my Dad. I was honored to be Mom's escort.

David Cunningham, FAA System Specialist
President, William "Bill" Campbell Chapter, TAI
Proud son of an Original Tuskegee Airman