



A crowd gathers around the mural “Black Americans in Flight” at its 1990 unveiling at Lambert–St. Louis International Airport. The mural, created by two McDonnell Douglas employees, memorializes and celebrates the contributions of African-American aviators.

BOEING ARCHIVES

Linking the past to the future

A look at the connection between African Americans’ contributions to aviation, the Tuskegee Institute, a mural in St. Louis—and Boeing

By Henry T. Brownlee Jr.

If you’ve flown into Lambert–St. Louis International Airport and walked from the main terminal to the baggage claim and ground transportation area, you’ve probably seen a mural titled “Black Americans in Flight.” The mural, created in 1990 by McDonnell Douglas employees Spencer Taylor and Solomon Thurman and measuring 8 feet tall and 51 feet long (2.4-by-15.5 meters), memorializes and celebrates the historical significance and enduring value of African-American aviators and their contributions to aviation since 1917.

“Black Americans in Flight” also depicts 18 aircraft, several of which were developed and built by Boeing predecessor companies. African-American pilots and astronauts used these aircraft to accomplish various missions while simultaneously breaking race and gender barriers in the U.S. military and the defense industry.

The creation of this mural, an effort supported by Boeing heritage company McDonnell Douglas, reflects the importance of Tuskegee University, previously known as the Tuskegee Institute, to the contributions of African Americans to aviation. As a sign of this facility’s prominence, it’s one of 13 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) in the

United States that Boeing supports today. As the United States observes African American History Month in February, here’s a look at what this mural portrays—and how it conveys the importance of the Tuskegee Institute and the Tuskegee Airmen, the popular name of a group of African-American pilots who trained at the college and flew with distinction during World War II.

MCDONNELL DOUGLAS BACKS MURAL

Taylor, a senior industrial artist, and Thurman, a senior re-production equipment technician, worked on their own time to create the mural. Among the organizations supporting their efforts was the McDonnell Douglas Foundation, which donated \$65,000 in 1989 to the organization financing the mural. “[McDonnell Douglas feels] that the role of black aviation history should be brought out,” said Jim Ramsey, a McDonnell Douglas spokesman, at the time. “We’re strongly involved in the community and in improving education, and we feel that these black aviators will serve as symbols that young people can follow and copy.”

And that it does, as “Black Americans in Flight” traced the history of African Americans in aviation.

The first panel shows figures of pre-Tuskegee African-American aviators. Among them: Eugene Bullard, a combat aviator who fought in World War I with the French Lafayette Flying Corps; Bessie Coleman, the first licensed African-American pilot in the United States; and Willa Brown, who organized the National Airmen's Association of America, the first black aviation association.

In this panel, Taylor and Thurman also included former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and President Harry S. Truman. To show her support for African-American combat aviators, Roosevelt went for a flight with Charles Alfred "Chief" Anderson, chief instructor at Tuskegee. While he was a senator, Truman encouraged Congress to fund the Tuskegee Experience, the unit at Tuskegee Army Air Field. As president, Truman in July 1948 issued Executive Order 9981, which required the integration of the U.S. armed services.

The second section of the mural, titled "Tuskegee Pilots 1940-1945," must be considered the quintessence of the full mural. Both the pre-Tuskegee section and the following three portions make sense only when considered in reference to this section.

Here, Taylor and Thurman focused their attention on the first graduating class of Tuskegee Airmen, or Red Tails as they preferred to be called, in March 1942. Taylor and Thurman included 17 pilots and one anonymous crew chief. Now-famous Tuskegee Airmen in this section include Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the first African American officer to fly alone for the Army Air Corps; Clarence "Lucky" Lester, famous for downing three enemy aircraft in five minutes; and Joseph Ellesberry, the first

Tuskegee Airmen to down three enemy aircraft in a single sortie.

The third, fourth, and fifth panels present a "who's who" of African-American aviators and astronauts.

The third section contains images of African-American pilots from 1950 until 1990 including Gen. Daniel "Chappie" James, the first African-American four-star general in the U.S. Air Force; and U.S. Army helicopter pilots Capt. Ronald Radliff, a pilot in Vietnam, and Capt. Marcella Hayes, the first African American female to fly Army helicopters.

Taylor rounded out his mural with images of some of the first African Americans in the space program. Among them: Ronald McNair, who died in the *Challenger* explosion in 1986; and Guion Bluford, who in 1983 became the first African American in space.

At the 20th anniversary event commemorating his historic Space Shuttle flight, Bluford attributed his ability to become an astronaut to the success of the Tuskegee Experience and the Tuskegee Airmen. His reflection on the importance of the Tuskegee Airmen and those committed to inclusion of African Americans as equals into every part of U.S. military service and the defense industry is not an overstatement. The Tuskegee Experience and the efforts of civil rights groups and politicians to make integration and desegregation real in the U.S. armed services produced several new laws. They included Executive Order 8802, a 1941 decree that prohibited discrimination in defense industries and federal bureaus.

BOEING AND TUSKEGEE TODAY

Boeing maintains a relationship with Tuskegee University. The college, in Tuskegee, Ala., is one of 13 HBCUs with which Boeing has developed a long-term strategic partnership. Boeing is actively recruiting young business and engineering talent at the college, increasing interaction with students participating in the Boeing Scholars Program, and increasing the number of visits by company executives to the campus, said Barbara Wilson, director and program manager, T-45 Training System Program, and the Boeing Executive Focal to Tuskegee University. There are currently 54 Tuskegee University Boeing Scholar graduates working at Boeing in various engineering and business fields.

In 1998, U.S. President Bill Clinton signed a law establishing the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site to commemorate and interpret the heroic actions of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II. At last October's site dedication ceremony, Boeing was a major sponsor of the event, at which Boeing was represented by a cadre of executives, managers and employees. ■

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Spencer Taylor, a senior industrial artist, was one of two McDonnell Douglas employees who created the mural "Black Americans in Flight." He's shown here at the unveiling of this work. BOEING ARCHIVES