

ATTENDING

Ruminations on the medical life



The Tuskegee Airmen painted their aircraft with distinctive red tails. INSET: Higginbotham in his flight gear as an 18-year-old cadet in Tuskegee, Ala., circa 1945.

A SORT OF DEFIANCE

SOMETIMES IT'S ENOUGH TO GET BACK

UP IN THE AIR | BY CHUCK STARESINIC

Robert Higginbotham was the cream of the crop. The tests said so, and that's probably why he initially reacted with confusion upon being told that his services were not wanted.

The scene was Sewickley High School in April 1944. Higginbotham (MD '57) was a high school senior who, like many of his peers, wanted to serve his country and make something of himself. He enlisted before graduation. With test scores like his, he was told he could be a cadet in the air corps of either the army or the navy. He took one look at the crisp, white uniform and the gold wings on the chest of the naval officer and chose the navy. At the front of the line, the sergeant looked at him and said, "I'm sorry, we don't accept Blacks in the Navy Air Corps."

"All of this, naturally, left a little hurting in your heart, to be treated in this manner," Higginbotham says now, at age 82. But he was young, and he wanted to do the right thing. Persistence is a sort of defiance. He followed his brother Mitchell Higginbotham into the U.S. Army Air Corps and boarded a train leaving Pittsburgh that summer. He was bound for Mississippi for basic training. The train stopped in Cincinnati, where he and six of his friends were told to move to one of two cars right behind the engine; they were reserved for Blacks.

That train rumbled south through the night. Somewhere in Tennessee at daybreak, it stopped in the middle of a wide, open field. Higginbotham and others looked around to find out the reason for the stop and saw a group of soldiers ready to board. Everyone in Higginbotham's car was ordered to move up to the next car, where there were no available seats. They stood from Tennessee all the way to Kessler Field in Mississippi.

In basic training, the soldiers were put through more physicals, tests, and exams that finally ended with a select group of cadets sent to Tuskegee, Ala., to join the now-famed Tuskegee Airmen of

the 332nd Fighter Group. Higginbotham was among them.

Formed in 1941, the purpose of the program was to support the Army War College's conclusion that Blacks were not fit to operate complicated machinery such as aircraft. It was a project set up to fail. It did anything but. By the end of the war, the 332nd Fighter Group had flown 15,553 combat sorties on 1,578 missions and racked up 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 744 Air Medals, eight Purple Hearts, 14 Bronze Stars, and three Distinguished Unit Citations.

Even the training was dangerous. Higginbotham was at the airfield when one of his fellow airmen came in for a landing too close to another plane. Roughly 700 feet off the ground, the pilot drove his propeller into the tail section of the plane in front of him. The first plane landed safely, but the one that caused the accident crashed, and the pilot was killed instantly.

Nowadays, an incident like this might result in all planes being grounded. But this was 1944. "Automatically, when somebody crashed, everybody was to get back in the air," says Higginbotham. "You were called out, even if it was 10 o'clock at night. You have to get back in the air, so that you won't get that feeling that you might be next."

He was 18, and he had no fear in the air, even after witnessing a crash. As part of their training in PT-17 biplanes, they did loops and spins. They stalled the aircraft, listened to the rush of air as the engine went silent over Alabama, then fired it up again. Flying was absolutely wonderful, he says.

He received his pilot's license, but the war was over before Higginbotham completed his flight training. He was discharged in 1946, then served two years stateside during the Korean War.

He guarded his G.I. Bill educational support like a precious inheritance. If a term ended mid-month, he would find a way to pay out of pocket rather than squander an entire month of the stipend. He studied civil engineering at Howard University, transferred to the University of Pittsburgh, and signed up for premed when it became clear that engineering jobs were drying up in the postwar period. Higginbotham received his bachelor's of science in 1951. When he entered Pitt's School of Medicine, he was the only African American in his class. On the one hand, he always felt a bit like he was not a part of the class—he studied alone. On the other hand, he has good friends to this day from that class, three of whom he regularly meets for lunch. He points out that the faculty always treated him with respect.

After a few years of family practice, he decided that orthopaedics fit perfectly with his mechanistic interest in civil engineering. He moved with his wife and children to Cleveland for a residency, then on to Southern California, where he began a long career as a general orthopaedic surgeon, eventually serving on hospital boards in Inglewood and heading up the credentials committee in Hawthorne. He stopped performing surgery several years ago and now works one day a week in a clinic. And he continues to attend reunions of the Tuskegee Airmen, who have received a lot of attention lately, including a feature film; a WQED documentary called *Flyboys: Western Pennsylvania's Tuskegee Airmen* (made possible with support from the University of Pittsburgh), in which Higginbotham appears; and a 2007 Congressional Gold Medal.

The things he learned in Tuskegee have stayed with him throughout his life, he says, including the notion that when things appear grim, it's enough to simply get back up in the air. ■