



# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A

# TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

*The month of February is a celebration of Black History — a time used to emphasize the significant roles African Americans played in U.S. history. This quarter, The Combat Edge magazine pays homage to one individual in particular — Tuskegee Airman Col. (ret.) Charles E. McGee — one who is close to this editor's heart (he just happens to be my cousin).*

*In an effort to open doors, civil rights organizations and the black press exerted pressure that ultimately resulted in the formation of an all African-American pursuit squadron based in Tuskegee, Ala. in 1941. McGee was one of many who participated in the Tuskegee Airmen Project, demonstrating that African Americans were capable of becoming qualified pilots.*



**BY MRS. BARBARA TAYLOR** (Editor, *The Combat Edge Magazine*)

**C**harles McGee was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on December 7, 1919, to Lewis Allen and Ruth Elizabeth Lewis McGee who died shortly after the birth of his sister. His father was a teacher, social worker and an African Methodist Episcopal church minister.

During his youth, he was a member of the Boy Scouts of America and earned the Eagle Scout award. Later,

he served in district and regional positions in the BSA. At the 2010 National Scout Jamboree, he was recognized with the Distinguished Eagle Scout Award.

In March 1942, McGee was a sophomore at the University of Illinois studying engineering. After enlisting in the U.S. Army on October 26, 1942, he became a part of the Tuskegee Airmen having earned his pilot's wings, and graduating from

Class 43-F on June 30, 1943. The very next day he was sworn in to the enlisted reserve, and a few weeks later, got the call to go to Tuskegee.

He entered preflight training as part of Class 43-G, but skipped upper preflight, and ended up graduating in Class 43-F. His primary training was at Moton Field, near Tuskegee, in the Stearman PT-17. His basic training was in the Vultee BT-13a and advanced training in the AT-6.

By February 1944, he was stationed in Italy with the 302d Fighter Squadron, 332d Fighter Group, flying his first mission on February 14. McGee flew the Bell P-39Q Airacobra, Republic P-47D Thunderbolt and North American P-51 Mustang fighter aircraft (nicknamed "Kitten" after his wife), escorting Consolidated B-24 Liberator and Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress bombers over Germany, Austria and the Balkans. During missions, he also engaged in low-level attacks over enemy airfields and rail yards.

On August 23, 1944, while escorting B-17s over Czechoslovakia, he engaged a formation of Luftwaffe fighters and downed a Focke Wulf Fw 190.

Promoted to Captain, McGee had flown a total of 137 combat missions, and had returned to the United States on December 1, 1944, to become an instructor on the North

American B-25 Mitchell bombers that another unit of the Tuskegee Airmen was working up. He remained at Tuskegee Army Air Field until 1946, when the base was closed.

After World War II, McGee was sent to Lockbourne Air Field to become the base operation and training officer; later in 1948, he was posted to an Aircraft Maintenance Technical Course and was assigned to an air refueling unit. When the Korean War broke out, he flew P-51 Mustangs again in the 67th Fighter Bomber Squadron, completed 100 missions, and earned a promotion to major. Continuing his service with the United States Air Force during the post-Korean war, McGee continued to serve as a fighter pilot, flying Lockheed F-80 Shooting Star and Northrop F-89 Scorpion aircraft.

In January 1967, McGee reported to Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, Tactical Air Command (pre-

cursor to Air Combat Command) for reconnaissance ground school in Class 67-4R. After Shaw he was transferred to Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho for aircraft checkout. During the Vietnam War as a Lt. Col., McGee flew 172 combat missions in a McDonnell RF-4 photo-reconnaissance aircraft. In a 30-year active service career, he achieved the highest three-war fighter mission total, 409 fighter combat missions, of any Air Force aviator.

Fast forward years later and after a series of other appointments both in the United States as well as in Italy and Germany, and promotion to colonel, McGee retired on January 31, 1973. He ended his military career with 6,308 flying hours.

After his military service, McGee held many prestigious functional and honorary positions around the field of aviation. In 1978, at the age of 58, he completed his college degree at

Columbia College in Kansas City, over 30 years after his initial enrollment at the University of Illinois. Though interrupted by World War II, attaining a college degree had been a lifelong goal.

McGee served as the director of the Kansas City Airport and as a member of the Aviation Advisory Commission. For over 30 years, he functioned as an ambassador of the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., giving numerous public addresses and has received accolades including the National Aeronautical Associations "Elder Statesman of Aviation." McGee served as National President of the association from 1983 to 1985, and is currently serving as its president.

In 2005, McGee was part of a group of former Tuskegee Airmen who flew to Balad, Iraq, to speak to active-duty Airmen serving in the 332d Air Expeditionary Wing, the current incarnation of the 332d Fighter Group.

He was recognized for his combat and military service with a number of awards including: Distinguished Flying Cross with two Oak Leaf Clusters, Legion of Merit with one Oak Leaf Cluster, Bronze Star, Air Medal with 25 Oak Leaf Clusters, Army Commendation Medal, Presidential Unit Citation, Korean Presidential Unit Citation, Hellenic Republic World War II Commemorative Medal along with related campaign and service ribbons.

In 2007, President George Bush awarded him and the surviving Airmen the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor, the nation's highest civilian award, and in 2011, he was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton, Ohio. He also served as a consultant to the 2012 George Lucas film, *Red Tails*.

McGee lived in Kansas City for many years; after his wife passed away in 1994, he moved east to live with his daughter. His approach to life has been and still is: "Do while you can."

*The well-trained and highly motivated Tuskegee Airmen were able to overcome obstacles posed by segregation. They flew 15,500 missions, destroyed over 260 enemy aircraft, sank one enemy destroyer, and demolished numerous enemy installations. These Airmen also established an enviable record throughout the action they saw. Their achievements proved conclusively that the Tuskegee Airmen were highly disciplined and capable fighters. Having proven themselves in combat, they earned the respect of fellow crews and military leaders. **The Combat Edge salutes the Tuskegee Airmen and all who continue to fight for our freedom — thank you!***

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