

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr.

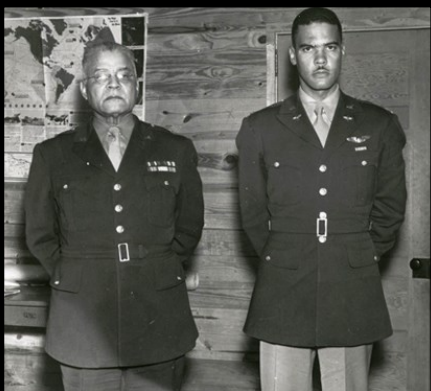
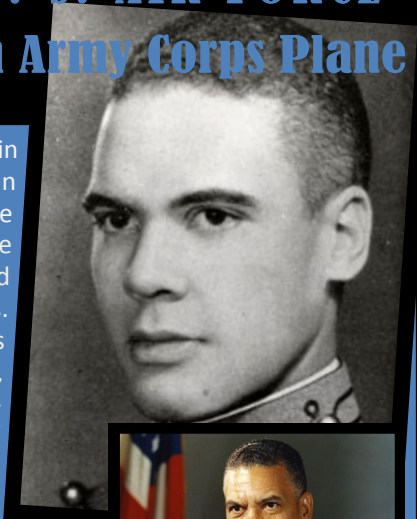
First African-American General in the U. S. AIR FORCE

First African-American to Make a Solo Flight in an Army Corps Plane

(December 18, 1912 – July 4, 2002)

Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr., was born December 18, 1912, in Washington, D.C. The son of Benjamin Oliver Davis, Sr., the first African-American General in the U. S. Army, the younger Davis followed in his father's military service footsteps, but paved his own path to a place in history by becoming the first African-American General in the U. S. Air Force. After attending the University of Chicago, he entered the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York in 1932. He was sponsored by Representative Oscar De Priest (R-IL) of Chicago, at the time, the only black member of Congress. In spite of racial isolation and mistreatment from fellow cadets, Davis, Jr., graduated 35th in a class of 276. When he was commissioned as a second lieutenant,

the Army had a grand total of two black line officers – Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. and Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Because of his high standing in his graduating class, Davis should have had his choice of assignments, but when he opted to apply for the Army Air Corps he was denied because the Air Corps did not have a Black squadron. He was instead assigned to the 24th Infantry Regiment, an all-Black division located in Fort Benning, Georgia. After attending the U.S. Army Infantry School, he traveled to Tuskegee, Alabama to teach a military tactics course at the Tuskegee Institute. Despite the prestige of being an instructor, Davis wanted to fly. Thanks to pressure on the administration and the fact that the country was moving towards war, President Roosevelt directed the War Department to create a black flying unit. Davis was assigned to undergo training in the first class at the Tuskegee Army Air Field. In



Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. and Jr.

1942 he finished his training and was one of only five blacks to complete the course and then became the first Black Officer to make a solo flight in an Army Air Corps plane. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and in July 1942, he was assigned as the commander of the 99th Pursuit Squadron.

In 1943, Davis organized and commanded the 332nd Fighter Group, The Tuskegee Airmen. By the end of the war, Davis himself had flown 60 combat missions and had been promoted to Colonel. After the end of World War II, when President Harry Truman fully integrated the military branches, Colonel Davis was called upon to help draft the new "Air Force" plan for carrying out this order. For the next few years he was assigned to the Pentagon and to posts overseas. When the Korean War broke out, he once again participated in the fighting, manning a F-86 fighter jet and leading the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing. In the summer of 1949, Davis was the first black permitted to attend the Air War College. Despite the tense racial climate in Montgomery, Alabama, he persevered and excelled and upon graduation, received an assignment to serve at the United States Air Force Headquarters at the Pentagon.



Davis, Jr. was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General in May 1960 and to Major General in January 1962. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General in April 1965 and retired from active duty on February 1, 1970 after more than 33 years of military service. Finally, on December 9, 1998, President Bill Clinton decorated him with a four-star insignia, advancing him to the rank of General, U.S. Air Force (Retired).

Davis's wife Agatha died in early 2002. Davis, who had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease, died at age 89 on July 4, 2002 at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Davis was buried July 17, at Arlington National Cemetery. A Red Tail P-51 Mustang, similar to the one he had flown in World War II, flew overhead during funeral services.

