

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Theodore Roosevelt (T.R.) Davidson Remembers



"And, I was standing at this area--they provided a little space for you to put in your order--and I heard this one lady say, 'I wish he would go away....' Things like that sort of dig really deep down."

[T.R. Davidson graduated from the Tuskegee Institute, where he was a member of the 1868 Aviation Engineers and performed as an electrician, aviation maintenance mechanic, and various other MOS's. In addition, he studied and became a flight instructor at Tennessee State College. In this narrative, Davidson talks about growing up, studying, and working in the South, as well as the various manifestations of black/white relationships during Jim Crow.]

To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- What does Davidson mean when he says that he "knew how to function" in the areas where he was raised? Can you think of ways he adapted his behavior to fit the expectations of the Jim Crow era?
- Why does Davidson call the owner of the little airport, where Davidson worked, a very enlightened white man? In what ways did he play a pivotal role in Davidson's pre-Tuskegee life? Was this unusual and why or why not?
- How did Davidson's ability to "adapt well under Jim Crow" change as he got older? Why do you think this shift occurred?
- In what ways was the Tuskegee Institute more challenging for students than other similar flight schools for white students? What was the white response to Tuskegee's high graduation rates?
- Can you think about why, according to T.R. Davidson, people usually do not hear about Tuskegee having gotten "the cream of the educational experience as far as the blacks were concerned?"

In this passage, T.R. Davidson talks about growing up in the South and his early fascination with airplanes.

I was born in York, South Carolina on March 16, 1926. So, that puts me at 76 years old, looking forward to 77. [When I was growing up, I definitely] knew what Jim Crow was. I knew what it meant, and I think I was very well adapted to Jim Crow. I knew how to function in the areas where I was raised in North Carolina. Consequently, I was able to perform in a reasonably comfortable style. But, there were times when I had my doubts [about] whether or not I was coming out of a situation intact....

I do remember specific incidents. About the fifth grade of my life, I had a job ... at a variety store in North Carolina. They called it Ritz Variety Store. And, my job there was to keep in order the incoming written media: newspapers, magazines, and so on. Also, I worked in the model airplane department. I was interested in model airplanes [and] was a model airplane builder at that time. And one day, the owner of this store, who was a German guy, we were making inventory.... And, at my age, I was doing things that maybe a teenager might be doing. Ritz, Daniel Ritz was this guy's name. And, he had encouraged me right along, as far as my interests in aviation, to read

various books, literature, and this type of thing. One day, he approached me and said, "You know what, Davidson, it's too damn bad you're not a white boy. If you were a white boy, you would really have it made." And from then on, it sort of registered in my mind how serious this thing really was. And, that only intensified me to really know I [had] to make a greater effort. I really got to push a little harder if I really want to achieve my goal, as far as being an aviator or aviation mechanic [or having] something to do with airplanes.

His interest in aviation, African-American newspapers, a chance encounter at the local airport, and a job he was given by "a very enlightened white man" all spur Davidson to apply for admission to the Tuskegee Institute.

Well, of course, my parents didn't know what...Tuskegee was. They had heard of Tuskegee Institute. They knew that I was highly interested in aviation [and] model airplane building. Of course, they gave me encouragement but also reminded me, "Hey, you're not a white boy, now. You can understand that you're just not going to fly any airplanes...maybe in 100 years from now, maybe." Or, something like that, but [they] never exactly discouraged me.... At that time, it was basically "survivalship" in my household. With the job I had...I made a few dollars, also, which I shared with my parents, my mother, and grandmother. At that particular time, my dad had gone to another town to live. And of course, I kept a few coins for myself, for my participation in the purchase of airplane building material.

Eventually, in the...sixth, seventh, eighth grades, my interests continued to intensify. Weekends, I would go to a little country airport. And, in exchange for me scrubbing these clods of red clay on aircraft when it rained, I would get an airplane ride, plus they paid me a few cents.... I continued to do that, usually summers or on weekends. I continued to do that type of thing, dividing my attention between the store and the little dirt airport, say from 12 until 17 years old. Now...of course, the war was intensifying throughout that period....

You're reading the newspapers...articles in the aviation magazines. I was looking forward to various newspapers, then. We were very fortunate to have three black newspapers in this little town that, of course, were shipped there from various parts of the country. [So that's how I learned about] the training and what was going on at Tuskegee: through the Pittsburgh Courier, the Afro-American, the Norfolk Guide, and...there was a paper in New York called the Amsterdam News. It was highly local in New York, but we also would occasionally have a copy of this in our little town. I began to see photographs, and I knew of General Davis and other trainees being taught at Tuskegee.

Then, one of the more thrilling and encouraging events happened. One day, at this very little airport I'm talking about, a segregated area, they came to visit a young guy by the name of Charlie Smallwood. Charlie Smallwood was a black flying instructor in Tuskegee, Alabama. Nobody's heard of such. And here, all of a sudden this guy appears on this airport. In fact, he was with a young lady that I knew. And, he came out and wanted to rent an airplane.

There was some hesitation about, "Are we going to rent this guy an airplane? This guy--a black guy--wanted to rent an airplane? Hell no! What's going on here?" Some of the local people at the airport...were the ones that were sort of protesting. But, what happened, the instructor at this airport was one of these visionaries. He talked with this guy and said, "Well, of course, we have to give you a check ride before we rent an airplane to you, and I have to look at your credentials [and] your license." And, he looked at the guy's paperwork...he was a certified flying instructor. So, he gave him a check ride. And...of course, Sunday's in these small towns, [there are] a lot of aviation enthusiasts and others around these small airports. And, so he...went around the field with Charlie and came around and landed.

And, he got out and told Charlie's passengers, "Okay, I'll help you to get in the airplane." He was going to give this young lady a ride. In the meantime, we use the term "lookie-loos," but here are these people looking on the scene, and they were sort of concerned. They said, "Louis, you going to let that guy flying your airplane?" He said, "Well, hell. The guy flies it better than I do. Why not?" So, later on in the evening, after going back home and cleaning up the dust from the airport, I went to these people's house where this guy Charles Smallwood was being accommodated, and we started to talk. He began to tell me about Tuskegee and encouraged me to take the test. I'm thinking, "Where the hell am I going to take a test?"

What eventually happened, the owner of this airport, who knew me well, was a Captain in what they called, the Civil Air Patrol. This was an auxiliary organization started during the war to assist in any way they can as far as home defense is concerned. I got word that you could take the test in Charlotte, North Carolina, and [that], at this time, the requirement was a high school certificate. And, I was on the verge of graduating. And lo' and behold, it came at a time when the Air Force of the Air Corps...organized the Civil Air Patrol to give the aviation cadet examination. Here I am, 17 years old, just turned 17, [and] the requirements were [to] pass the test, send the letters of recommendation, and [meet] other requirements. They set it up that I could take the test, the aviation cadet examination, right there at that airport under the authority of the Civil Air Patrol.

...During the period that I was preparing for the test...a sailor showed up at the airport, a young white guy.... This guy had just returned from overseas in taking the original squadron to North Africa. And, he was telling me about these guys...that was another area of encouragement. This guy told me, "Oh, man, you could be a pilot. I know these black guys...I just came back from overseas, and I was participating in taking this whole squadron...." That was a tremendous amount of encouragement....

The day that I'm taking the test, there were tremendous amounts of people in the airport office: noisy, noisy, noisy, with a lot of, well, what we refer to sometimes as hillbilly music going loud, blasting all over the place. And, here's the place I'm going to take the test. How in the hell am I going to pass it? ...I was able to complete the examination, you wait three or four weeks, and lo' and behold, I passed the thing. And, after taking the physical and [passing] other requirements, they...actually they swore me in as a member of the enlisted reserve corps, which meant that I would be in the enlisted reserve corps for almost a year until a month after my 18th birthday. And, a month after my 18th birthday, I was sworn in...I think the paperwork read, "You have been accepted as a candidate for aviation cadet training by the President of the United States of America." I showed everybody in town this thing. I went all around showing people this thing.

Well, the general population [of whites], they...didn't know [I'd been accepted]. The ones that knew, they weren't very encouraging. But, the ones that I was closely associated with are the ones that gave me a tremendous amount of support. From even earlier than 1943, I began to get some flight instruction right there at that airport. Actually, when I was introduced, I really had a flying license. This was in Concord, North Carolina. Also, the same person who owned this airport and flying school had also taught another black person to fly prior to me...[he was a]...very enlightened white man. He did go around quoting the bible and this type of thing. I haven't shared too much with a lot of my friends, but I had a lot of responsibility around that airport, also....

Davidson reflects on the difficulties he faced during his Tuskegee experience due to the Jim Crow culture.

...I think the worst memory [about being a black person during my Tuskegee experience] is, I had accumulated my flying license, I had accumulated a ground instructor's license, and I really couldn't go, like say, into general aviation and really get a job. I really couldn't go out and apply at some particular airline for anything. It didn't matter.... Personally, being where I was from in the Deep South, North Carolina, it was pretty easy for me to really handle, because I had been taught from childhood that you really had to take easy steps in order to survive. If you reached out too

far, there was a possibility that you might get yourself cut down. And then, there were times when, as a kid, I experienced some bad moments and so on.

And, of course, as you grow a little older, you begin to feel that you are under siege...you always had to make a special effort...to find out the places where you could go, where you wouldn't be embarrassed or refused service. So, if you were in a strange place, no matter what part of the country it was, you had to say, "Where do they serve black people?"...or colored people as we were called...Negroes or Colored People.... You always had this thing on your shoulder to take under consideration. And, I would say that after I got out, I recall I went one day to the restaurant at the airport in Nashville, Tennessee, to [get] some take-out food. And...you had to go right to a particular counter to order what you wanted. And, I was standing at this area--they provided a little space for you to put in your order--and I heard this one lady say, "I wish he would go away...." Things like that sort of dig really deep down.

And, there were many, many other experience.... As a student pilot, I was doing a cross-country, one day. I found myself lost, and I landed...somewhere in the Tennessee area...[at] a small airport. And, I was damn near frozen--airplanes are cold--and I landed all right and wanted to buy some gas. They filled my tank up, and I asked them where could I get warm. They would not let me inside of the little operations building to get warm. They told me, "We just don't have a place where you can get warm." And hell, I took off and finally made it....

For students at Tuskegee, graduating was no easy task.

We always talk about the number of graduates [at Tuskegee]. But in...basic and advanced training, there must have been 2,000 people who washed out. Basically, they washed out for two reasons. [First,] there was only one place for flight training, which was Tuskegee, Alabama. Plus, the washout rate was about 62 percent. And, that was designed, because there was a period of time when the percentage of wash outs for the black people that were going through Tuskegee...dipped real low. And, the completion rate for the blacks going through Tuskegee started to go higher than [it did for] the whites. And, they said, "Hey, no. We can't do this." So, we got to bring the wash out rate into the 60s, because we cannot let people know that these guys have a better completion rate than we have." And, the reason for that is, the requirements were initially very, very high--like four years of college and then two years of college and so on. So, they were really getting the cream of the educational experience as far as the blacks were concerned. Also, that is one point that usually you don't hear too much about. Okay....

...Tuskegee actually produced about 400 flight instructors...[and] was sort of the epitome of the secondary thing, in that the other schools usually had the piper cubs, and basically we call that sort, "primary." Tuskegee had the primary and the secondary, because Tuskegee actually started off with the bi-planes and so on. Also, you could go to Tuskegee and take advanced training in instrument flying and so on. They had quite a set up there.... Then, we had a very famous aviator, Alfred Anderson, up here. He was the chief flying instructor. If you recall seeing the motion picture, there was a scene where it showed an aviation cadet given an airplane ride by Mrs. Roosevelt. Well, it wasn't like that. The truth is, that Chief Anderson is the person that actually gave her the ride in the aircraft.

Davidson discusses his life as an aviation instructor in the segregated South after Tuskegee.

...I eventually... became a flight instructor at Tennessee State College, and this is all after these particular situations. I actually initially washed out of Aviation Cadets. That would be the class 45-E [that] I was supposed to graduate with. I became a member of the 1868 Aviation Engineers [and] performed with the 1868 Aviation engineers as an electrician, aviation maintenance man, and various other MOS's. I had a total time of about two years and six months service--all domestic. I was discharged in 1946.

At that time, maybe six months after my discharge, I found myself in Nashville Tennessee. I decided to go up to Tennessee, and I matriculated at a couple of schools. I did a summer institute...in aviation...at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Eventually, I went down to Tennessee State College as a student and an employee. I worked at Tennessee State College, actually employed [from] '49 through '52. And, at that time, I did flight instruction and aviation mechanics....

All [my students in those days were] black students. You must remember that segregation was still on. And at that time, this school was called A&I State College. We had our own airfield. Let me tell you about the airfield. We were located and had an operations building on one part of the Cumberland Airport. The school had a contract with the City of Nashville Airport Authority to refuel our aircraft. We did all the maintenance, but they would do the re-fueling. We actually had a viable, certified flight operation out of there. We operated two piper cub aircraft, two Steermans, that's the bi-wing primary trainer, and a PT-19.

Most of the students that we had were ROTC, plus students that were sponsored by the State of Tennessee. The State provided ten hours of flight training to each student who was interested in teaching aviation in the Tennessee school system. So actually...we gave them ten hours of dual instruction, a tremendous ground school course, and that was it. We didn't solo people. The people we did solo were students who were on the ten-hour program in the Air Force ROTC program. Consequently, I was able to acquire a tremendous amount of flying time.

In conclusion, T.R. Davidson offers advice to young people about going forward.

I would tell young people that it's really out there for you...people are waiting for you. You are going to run into some areas that you might be conscious of the fact that somebody may not be too sincere, although they may be in that position to help you out, or to guide you along. But, you cannot let anything like that really deter you from your desire to learn or to get experience or in any way to impede your future. Just don't get yourself excited. Intelligence is the primary reason for you to continue. And anybody, no matter who they are throughout the world, has problems. So, continue to go out there, set yourself a goal and continue to look forward. Say, for example like, you're out there with one of these navigation problems, and you might be lost and disoriented, but you have that old magnetic compass up there. And, by the time you find your general direction, you pick out a point on the horizon and you lay that compass on there and just keep that thing going. Don't matter what's out there...the idea is to go forward to that point. That is true in flying, and that is true in life.