

# I AM A TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

By Harry and Linda Kaye Perez

*Recently, while waiting at the St. Louis Airport for our flight home to San Antonio, we noticed an older gentleman, wearing a baseball cap bearing the word "Tuskegee." I wanted to speak to him - to thank him for his service. I approached this man dressed in a burgundy blazer and wearing the Tuskegee cap. I extended my hand and I asked, "Were you a Tuskegee Airman?" Still shaking my hand, he said with a gentle smile, "I AM a Tuskegee Airman." And this is how we met Dr. Granville Coleridge Coggs, an original Tuskegee Airman, and started beautiful friendship.*

Weeks later, we had the privilege of meeting him at his home in San Antonio for this interview. As he welcomed us at his front door, he was wearing that familiar burgundy blazer, with a yellow tee shirt emblazoned with his "plan for longevity," several medals around his neck and, of course, his Tuskegee cap.

We sat on the couch in his living room, Harry at one end, me at the other, and Dr. Coggs in the middle. In the corner of the room was his famous "gutbucket," a musical instrument made with a washtub, a broom handle, one string that is plucked like a bass fiddle and a copious amount of duct tape. He played a song for us before we left, just one of his many talents.

Granville was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 1925 and growing up Black in the segregated South was not easy.

*My father told us many times that for us, par won't get the job done. We have to excel. And there's only one way to do that: through hard work. We have to outwork everybody else.*

-Dr. Coggs



Granville took that to heart and that is exactly what he did. Education was emphasized in his family, evidenced by all five of the Coggs' children earning college degrees. When he was 10, he saw the film *West Point of the Air* starring Wallace Beery that showed how pilots were trained. At that time, he had no hope of ever becoming a military pilot because the military did not accept Blacks for pilot training.

In 1943, following high school and as the war raged in Europe and the Pacific, Granville enrolled in Howard University with pre-med in his sights. While there, however, he received a letter from the draft board notifying him that there was a good possibility of him being drafted. Wanting to avoid the infantry, he made the decision to apply for admission into the new all Black Army Air Corps based in Tuskegee, Alabama, and was accepted. By mid 1944, the Tuskegee Experiment, as it was originally called, had already proven to be successful with the famous Red Tail fighter pilots. The Tuskegee Experiment was implemented to determine if African Americans had the mental and physical ability to learn to fly airplanes. Granville, one of 992 Tuskegee pilots, was originally trained as a bombardier on B-25s, and also qualified as a gunner.

His dream of becoming a pilot was finally achieved, receiving his wings as a multi-engine military pilot in October 1945, one month after the Japanese surrender. During this time, he met the love of his life, Maud, who later became his wife.

Even though Granville Coggs did not go into combat, he did participate in the grand experiment. Although it was truly not necessary, it proved once and for all that all people, and specially all Americans, can achieve what they set out to do if only they put their heart and soul into it. In looking back, it is sad that this group of young Americans had to “fight for the right to fight” and that they did.

After the end of World War II, Coggs wanted to stay in the military but remained unassigned to an aircrew. One rationale behind the non-assignment of trained African-American officers was stated by the commanding officer of the Army Air Forces, General Henry “Hap” Arnold: “Negro pilots cannot be used in our present Air Corps units since this would result in Negro officers serving over white enlisted men, creating an impossible social situation.” However, the Tuskegee Airmen had a profound influence on the eventual integration of the U.S. Military Services. In 1946, Lt. Granville Coggs was discharged from military service.

With financial help from the GI Bill, he earned a Bachelor of Science Degree, with Distinction, in chemistry at the University of Nebraska and in 1953 graduated from Harvard Medical School as one of only two Black students in his class of 140. Maud already had earned a Masters degree in nutrition.

He had an illustrious career as a radiologist; he was the first Black physician on staff at the Kaiser Foundation Hospital, San Francisco; Associate Clinical Professor at the University of California; Professor of Radiology, University of Texas Health Science Center and Chief of Radiology Services at the Audie Murphy VA



Hospital, both in San Antonio, Texas, where he still lives today. He continued to provide his medical expertise until 2008.

Dr. and Mrs. Coggs have a plan for longevity.

Number one on the list is selecting long-lived parents” (his dad lived to be 105) followed by exercise, healthy eating and vitamin supplements. Other items on our plan are don't smoke, don't drink, and don't do drugs.

-Dr. Coggs

The list is rounded out with the benefits of marriage, a sense of humor and getting enough sleep. And they follow each of these precepts. They both swim several times each week; Granville rides his bike and runs. In 2010, at the age of 86, Dr. Coggs won three gold medals at the San Antonio Senior Games for the 100, 200 and 400 meter event. Of course, Maud was right at his side as his coach.

*Dr. Coggs: On Nelson Mandela's birthday on July 18th, 2013, I heard Morgan Freeman recite the poem Invictus (by William Ernest Henley, first published in 1875); a poem Mandela often recited to his fellow inmates while imprisoned in South Africa. I was so impressed that I decided on that day that I would memorize this poem. I believe that reciting the poem without a script makes a positive statement of one original Tuskegee Airman.*

He also memorized the entire Gettysburg Address that can be viewed on YouTube. He loves to get his message out about the importance of physical and mental fitness.

*Dr. Coggs: Every year on the third Friday of September, on the running track at Lackland Air Force Base, there is a 24-hour vigil dedicated to prisoners of war and those missing in action. During these 24 hours, there is always someone on the track. On September 20, 2013, at 5:00 a.m. there was me and 300 newly inducted basic trainees; they were my captive audience. I first delivered the poem Invictus from memory and then I led this group of 300 on a run around the 400 meter track.*



Dr. Coggs is a loving husband, father and grandfather, a physician, a runner, a musician and one very proud American. He also co-authored the book *Soaring Inspiration* with his daughter, Anita Coggs Rowell. But when asked what legacy he would like to leave, Dr. Coggs replied, "All of us are just here for a short time on this earth. I would like to be remembered as a surviving original Tuskegee Airman. I am the benefactor of the 66 Tuskegee Airmen who lost their lives in combat - I am not a fighter pilot - I am a B-25 pilot - **I AM a Tuskegee Airman.**"

**To watch Dr. Cogg's recitation of the  
Gettysburg Address, visit:  
[www.youtube.com/  
watch?v=NwdOMkxrNoM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwdOMkxrNoM)**

