

“A Rare Bird....’: Race, Masculinity, and the Community of Pilots in Postwar America”

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Introduction

In the late 1960s, Roosevelt Lewis took a Civil Air Patrol plane out for a routine training flight. After he landed, he noticed a commotion on the far side of the airport fence. Children on a field trip to the airport had rushed over to watch him taxi the plane to its parking place. As Lewis, wearing aviator’s sunglasses and a flight suit, climbed out of the cockpit and ambled over to answer questions, he heard several kids shout, “Hey Mister, where’s the pilot?”¹ A few years later, Jessie Lee Brown, a former helicopter door gunner in Vietnam who had earned his civilian pilot’s license upon returning home, rented a plane for a cross country flight in his home state of Alabama. As he carefully cleaned the windshield before his flight, another pilot called out for Brown to come over and wash *his* windshield; clearly this man had mistaken Brown for a lowly airport attendant instead of a fellow pilot.² A decade later in the early 1980s, Leon Johnson was routinely hailed as he walked through the airport concourse in his airline pilot’s uniform by travelers who asked him to carry their bags. In another case of mistaken identity, these folks thought that Johnson was a common skycap, not an exalted airline pilot.³

¹ Interview with Roosevelt Lewis by the author at the Tuskegee Memorial Day Fly-in, Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama, May 28, 2011, notes in author’s files.

² Interview with Jesse Lee Brown and Rodney Brown by the author at the Experimental Aircraft Association Headquarters in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, July 29, 2005, audio recording in author’s collection.

³ Interview with Leon A. Johnson by the author at the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. National Office, Tuskegee, Alabama, May 24, 2011, notes in author’s files.

Lewis, Brown, and Johnson had three things in common. All three were pilots. All three were black. And all three were accustomed to having people – young and old, white and black, pilots and non-pilots alike – automatically assume that a black man was not a pilot. This raises an intriguing question: why did everyone seem to draw the same conclusion regarding who could and could not be an aviator? On the surface, this is the question that we’ll explore in today’s talk, which represents a work-in-progress regarding the role of race in postwar private aviation. But this is also part of deeper discussion regarding the complex relationship between race and technology in American society.

In the introduction of a 2004 collection of essays titled *Technology and the African-American Experience*, Bruce Sinclair observes, “The history of race in America has been written as if technologies scarcely existed, and the history of technology as if it were utterly innocent of racial significance.” In her bibliographic essay published in the same volume, Amy Sue Bix argues: “To date, the link between the history of technology and African-American history has remained for the most part undiscovered territory. Too often, historians of technology have remained content to focus on mainstream white middle-class society, papering over crucial issues of race, class, and cultural differences. Too often, historians of African-American life have imagined technology as irrelevant, or as a subject limited to stories of black inventors. If such perspectives could be enlarged, if the best African-American history could be integrated with good, contemporary history of technology, both fields would be multiply enriched.”⁴ Only

⁴ Bruce Sinclair, “Integrating the Histories of Race and Technology,” 1, and Amy Sue Bix, “A Bibliography of Technology and the African-American Experience,” 198, both in *Technology and the African-American Experience: Needs and Opportunities for Study*, ed. Bruce Sinclair (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004). There are of course a few exceptions, including Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Carolyn Marvin, “Inventing the Expert: Technological Literacy as Social Currency,” in *When Old Technologies were New:*

recently have scholars started to explore the deep-rooted connections between racial identity; who was (and was not) allowed access to technology and skill; and who held social, economic, and political power throughout America's history.

Private aviation provides a useful window into these questions, as it represents a highly technical activity that exists at the intersection between hobby and professional vocation, and also because aviation has long held a kind of mystique in the public consciousness regarding technical prowess, masculine courage, and total control over both self and powerful machines. It's no mistake that Tom Wolfe titled his bestselling book about postwar military test pilots *The Right Stuff*.⁵ And it's also no coincidence that this title has become a familiar catch-phrase in the popular lexicon. Ultimately, this project is not so much about *what* this mythic "right stuff" was, or who *actually had* the "right stuff" to become a pilot, but rather who Americans generally *expected* to be a pilot, and conversely, whom they assumed was *not*.

Mr. General Aviation

This is what the typical private pilot looked like in post-World War II America: middle class, middle-aged, male...and white. [Note to reader: visual image shown during original presentation] This image comes from a 1969 graph that charts the growth of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association since its founding in 1939. Essentially this is an ordinary bar graph,

Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late 19th Century (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1988). 9-62.

⁵ Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979). A Hollywood adaptation of this book was released in 1983 under the same name and received four Academy Awards, further popularizing this phrase.

except that the artist chose to substitute different sized versions of this “Mr. General Aviation” figure to depict changing membership numbers over the years.⁶

We should pause a moment to define “private aviation.” In short, this includes any civilian pilot who flies an airplane for any reason other than for hire. Donald Trump riding around in the back of a private jet flown by professional pilots is *not* an example of private aviation. On the other hand, a private pilot flying his or her own plane, or a rented plane, to Rochester, NY in order to attend this conference would be a good example of private aviation. Other examples include that same private pilot taking a short local flight to practice takeoffs and landings, flying to a nearby airport for lunch with friends, or taking a long distance trip by personal plane to vacation in Disney World or the Bahamas.⁷

⁶ Image from “AOPA Membership Growth 1939-1968,” in Lew Townsend, “AOPA Members Cast Large Shadow,” *AOPA Pilot* 12, no. 5 (May 1969): 94, graph.

⁷ Technically, private aviation is a subcategory of “General Aviation” a catch-all phrase used by the federal government and aviation industry since the 1950s to label all flying activities aside from military and airline operations. For an early use of the term “General Aviation,” see “What is Private Flying?” Editorial, *AOPA Pilot* (September 1954): 50b. General Aviation encompasses non-airline commercial flights done for hire, including charters, corporate aviation (where a professional pilot transports executives aboard a company plane), and aerial application operations (better known in the popular lexicon as crop dusting). Despite the fact that private aviation and General Aviation are not truly synonymous, pilots, aviation journalists, and government and industry officials regularly used these terms interchangeably throughout the postwar era. Thus, unless otherwise specified, whenever “General Aviation” appears in this paper, the reader may assume that it means “private aviation” as defined above. Also, unless otherwise noted, statistics used in this paper reflect the total number of all civilian pilots in the U.S. including holders of Student, Private, Commercial, and Airline Transport Pilot certificates. The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) cautions: “Certificate type (private, commercial, etc.) cannot be used to determine the number of ‘private pilots’ or general aviation pilots. Many pilots who fly for personal business or pleasure earn higher FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] certificates or ratings for personal achievement. As a rule of thumb, about 20 percent of all pilots are actually employed full-time as pilots.” This statement suggests that the remaining 80 percent of pilots fly exclusively for personal reasons, regardless of what kind of license they hold. Thus, the term “private aviation” is defined broadly by the kind of flying a pilot does, not narrowly by what kind of rating he or she happens to hold. Just as the terms private aviation and General Aviation were often used interchangeably in my sources, the same is true regarding the term “private pilot.” For this reason, unless specifically noted, the terms

It is quite possible that the decision to depict the “typical” private pilot of 1969 in this manner was based solely on some anonymous graphic artist’s impressionistic understanding of who was involved in private aviation. But in fact, the statistical evidence bears image this out. In 1969: 96 percent of all civilian pilots were men, 60 percent were aged 35 or older, Most lived in households that fell comfortably within the top two-fifths of the population in terms of annual income, and 97 percent were white (by comparison, only an estimated 0.3 percent were black). Perhaps this isn’t so surprising for 1969. However, perhaps more surprising is the fact that the demographics of private aviation have not changed much since then. As of 2000, 94 percent of civilian pilots were male, and approximately 93 percent were white.⁸ Of course it would be easy

“private pilot” or “private flier” in this paper refers to *any* civilian pilot engaged in private aviation activities. From Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, “FAA Certificated Pilots: 1929-2011,” updated March 2011, <http://www.aopa.org/whatsnew/stats/pilots.html> (accessed on November 30, 2011).

⁸ Total U.S. licensed pilots and statistical breakdown by sex from Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, “FAA Certificated Pilots: 1929-2011.” Information about pilots ages from U.S. Department of Transportation, FAA, “Airmen Certificates by Categories in Each Age Group of Holder: December 31, 1969,” *FAA Statistical Handbook of Aviation*, 1970 ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1970), 169, table 7.9. Income information from Townsend, “AOPA Members Cast Large Shadow,” 94-95; U.S. Census Bureau, *Income Inequalities, “Income Limits for Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent of All Households: 1967 to 2010,”* Table H-1, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/inequality/index.html> (accessed November 30, 2011). The FAA (and the CAA before it) has never included information on the race of pilots in annual *Statistical Handbook of Aviation*, a practice of exclusion that continues to this day. However, starting in 1950, every ten years the U.S. Census Bureau compiled figures (including racial demographics) regarding the total number of pilots who flew for a living. Making a broad assumption that the racial demographics for those pilots who flew for a living is a microcosm of the larger private aviation community, it is possible to estimate the numbers of white and non-white pilots involved in postwar private aviation. Though admittedly crude, this methodology represents the only known attempt to date to determine the racial demographics of postwar civilian pilots. Census data on professional pilots from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “Airplane Pilots and Navigators” [listed under “Professional, Technical, and Kindred Workers”], “Table 3. Race of the Experienced Civilian Labor Force and of Employed Persons, by Detailed Occupation and Sex, for the United States: 1950,” in *Occupational Characteristics, Special Reports: Report P-E No. 1B, 1950 Census of Population*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1956), 1B-29; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “Airplane Pilots and Navigators” [listed under “Professional, Technical, and Kindred

to explain these demographic disparities away by simply saying “well, flying is expensive,” or by invoking the legacy of racial segregation and discrimination in the United States. And these are very real factors. But as is often the case, the deeper one digs and the more questions one asks, the more complicated things become. So today I would like to briefly describe some of my findings to date, along with some of my very tentative conclusions.

World War II and before...

In 1939, there were just over 30,000 licensed civilian pilots in the nation. By 1950, just over a decade later, this number had soared to nearly 600,000.⁹ Correlation does not always equal causation, but in this case there is a clear link between wartime programs and this dramatic growth. During the war, some 435,000 college-age individuals, most of them young white men, earned their private pilot’s license through the government-sponsored Civilian Pilot Training

Wkrs], “Table 3. Race of the Experienced Civilian Labor Force and of the Employed, by Detailed Occupation and Sex, for the United States: 1960,” in *Occupational Characteristics, Subject Reports: Final Report PC(2)-7A, 1960 Census of Population 1960*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1963), 21; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “Airplane Pilots” [listed under “Technicians, Except Health, and Engineering and Science”], “Table 223. Detailed Occupation of Employed Persons by Race and Sex: 1970,” in *Detailed Occupation of Employed Persons by Race and Sex for the United States: 1970*, Supplemental Report PC(S1)-32, 1970 Census of Population (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, March 1973): 1-740; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “Airplane Pilots and Navigators” [listed under “Technicians; Exc. Health, Engineering, & Science”], Table 1. Detailed Occupation of the Civilian Labor Force by Sex, Race, and Spanish Origin: 1980,” *Detailed Occupation and Years of School Completed by Age, for the Civilian Labor Force by Sex, Race, and Spanish Origin: 1980*, Supplementary Report PC80-S1-8, 1980 Census of Population (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, March 1983), 9; U.S. Department of Commerce, United States Census Bureau, “Census '90 Detailed Occupation by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex,” <http://censtats.census.gov/eo/eo.shtml> (accessed August 7, 2012); U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, “Census 2000 EEO Data Tool,” <http://www.census.gov/eo2000/> (accessed August 7, 2012). Similar information from 2010 Census was not available at the time this paper was presented in October 2012.

⁹ Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, “FAA Certificated Pilots: 1929-2011.”

Program (CPTP).¹⁰ More than quarter million more earned their military wings as aviators in the Army and Navy.¹¹ Then after the war, several hundred thousand veterans used their GI Bill benefits in the late 1940s to become private pilots.¹² Not everyone who learned to fly during or immediately after the war continued to fly afterwards, but a sizable number did. In 1969, for

¹⁰ Approximately 2,000 black men participated in the CPTP in segregated training programs, mostly operated by seven black colleges and universities. About 2,500 women also learned to fly through the CPTP before changes in the rules effectively barred them from participating. Based on these figures, women (all races) and black men combined made up 1.03 percent of the program's total graduates. Dominick A. Pisano, *To Fill the Skies with Pilots: The Civilian Pilot Training Program, 1939-1946* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 75-76, 131.

¹¹ Nearly 200,000 American servicemen completed all phases of Army Air Forces flight training during the war to earn their silver aviator's wings, and the U.S. Navy produced another 66,000 thousand naval aviators and Marine Corps pilots. SMSgt Timothy Tellgren, "A Brief History of Air Education and Training Command," U.S. Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Office of History and Research, Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, circa 2002, table ("Fixed-Wing Undergraduate Pilot Production FY 1941-1991"), <http://www.aetc.af.mil/library/history/historyofaetc.asp> (accessed on August 1, 2012); "Appendix 1: The History of Naval Aviator and Naval Aviation Pilot Designations and Numbers, The Training of Naval Aviators and the Number Trained (Designated)," in *United States Naval Aviation 1910-1995*, Department Of The Navy, Naval History And Heritage Command, Naval Aviation History Office, circa 1995, 414, <http://www.history.navy.mil/avh-1910/APP01.PDF> (accessed on August 1, 2012).

¹² According to figures published by the federal government, a total of 345,149 veterans had applied their GI Bill benefits towards flight training as of November 1, 1947 (339,300 at for-profit schools, 5,849 at nonprofit schools). Of those who had signed up for lessons at for-profit schools, 107,200 had completed their training, 118,400 were still enrolled, and 113,700 had dropped out by that date. "Veterans Enrolled in Veteran's Administration Flight Training Program under Public Law 346," in U.S. Department of Commerce, CAA, *CAA Statistical Handbook of Aviation, 1948* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1948), 33, table. Nearly two decades later, an AOPA Foundation, Inc. advertisement claimed that were "316,000 enthusiastic men who trained for and got their pilot licenses under the [World War II] GI Bill – and, shortly afterward, gave up flying!" APOA Foundation, Inc., "Wanted: Do You Recognize this Man?" [advertisement], *AOPA Pilot* 7, no. 8 (August 1964): 46.

instance, one in four active civilian pilots belonged to the same generation who had fought World War II.¹³

So what does this have to do with race in postwar private aviation? Let's start with the situation prior to the war. I hardly need to describe to this audience the grim realities of Jim Crow racism throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but here are a few specific examples of how it affected prewar aviation. By 1939, on the eve of America's entry into World War II, only 125 of the nation's roughly 30,000 licensed civilian pilots were black.¹⁴ Over the next several years, African Americans would take part in all three war-related avenues into postwar private flying. And compared to the prewar era, just having the chance to participate – albeit in the face of skepticism and racism – represented a major symbolic victory. However, in terms of actual numbers, black participation in these programs had very little effect on the demographics of postwar private flying. In 1940, about 10 percent of the American population was black. True racial parity would mean that one in ten wartime pilots should be black. Instead, of those 400,000-plus graduates of the CPTP, about 2,000 were black, less than half of one percent.¹⁵ Of the quarter million men who earned their wings in the military wings, about 1,000

¹³ This figure assumes that most members of the “World War II generation” were between of 18 and 34 years old when the war ended in 1945. Based on this assumption, by 1969 these pilots were between 42 and 58 years old, fitting perfectly the AOPA's visual depiction of the typical private pilot. Information regarding pilot ages from U.S. Department of Transportation, FAA, *FAA Statistical Handbook for Aviation*, published annually starting in 1959.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Negro Aviators,” Bulletin no. 3 (Washington, D.C., September 1940), 1, Connecticut State Library Digital Collections, <http://eslib.cdmhost.com/cdm/singleitem/collection/p4005coll11/id/511/rec/6> (accessed on October 1, 2012).

¹⁵ Pisano, *To Fill the Skies with Pilots*, 75-76, 131.

were black, again less than half of one percent.¹⁶ As a result, a disproportionate number of wartime-trained private pilots in the immediate postwar era were young white men. And they remained active in the private aviation community for decades to come, formally and informally shaping the cultural norms of private flying, and also perpetuating – intentionally or not – public perceptions that aviation was a “white guy thing.”¹⁷

Postwar Factors

Although World War II laid the demographic foundations for postwar private flying, the story hardly ends there. Racism, both formal and informal, continued for decades after the war. For instance, it took the airlines until the mid-1960s – and a landmark Supreme Court decision – before this high-status, well-paying career field was finally opened to African Americans.¹⁸

¹⁶ A total of 992 black pilots earned their wings in the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II. Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly, “Roster of Pilot Training Graduates at Tuskegee Army Airfield,” in *Black Knights: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Co., 2001), 272-315, appendix.

¹⁷ In 1960, almost half of all active U.S. pilots were members of this cohort, and they would maintain a sizable presence at the airport for years. By 1969, the year that AOPA published its detailed description of Mr. General Aviation, more than a quarter of active pilots were old enough to be World War II veterans, and as late as 1980, nearly one in seven belonged to this generation. These figures assume that most members of the “World War II generation” were between of 18 and 34 years old when the war ended in 1945. Information regarding pilot ages for the years 1958 to 1985 comes from U.S. Department of Transportation, FAA, *FAA Statistical Handbook for Aviation*, published annually starting in 1959.

¹⁸ Marlon Green holds the distinction of being the first black pilot hired by a major airline. Green, a former Air Force pilot with thousands of hours of flight experience in jets, was granted a job interview with Continental Airlines in the late 1950s after he purposely neglected to attach the required photograph of himself and list his race on the application form. A half century later, the airline admitted what happened when Green showed up for the interview: “We turned him down for one reason and one reason only – because of the color of his skin.” Green took his case to court, and eventually the U.S. Supreme Court decided in his favor. Meanwhile, American Airlines apparently saw the writing on the wall and hired another former Air Force Pilot, David Harris, mentioned later in this paper. Because Green was retroactively awarded a hiring date based on his original application, technically he was the first black pilot *hired* by an airline, even

Things were better in the U.S. military, which was officially desegregated in 1948, so that by the time the Korean War broke out in 1950, black pilots who had flown in segregated units during World War II were now flying and fighting alongside, and even commanding, their white counterparts. This does not mean that racism was absent from the postwar military, far from it. But it *does* mean that the military now provided both a potential source of non-white pilot role models for kids, and also a genuine opportunity for a flying career (outside of the still-segregated airlines) for young African American men to aspire to.¹⁹ However, in terms of actual pilots, the postwar military's direct contribution to private aviation was small. The Air Force and Navy combined trained only 175,000 new pilots during the four decades between 1946 and 1985, compared to a quarter million pilots produced during World War II. In contrast, every year during that same period there were between 100 and 200 *thousand* civilian student pilots working towards their private pilot's license. So most newly-minted postwar private pilots did not come from the military. And if individuals did not learn to fly in the military, then they had for their flight training themselves. This is where the economics of private aviation and the economic legacy of racism in United States history intersect.

though Harris was already flying for American by the time Green began flying for Continental. Allison Grant, "Continental Airlines Honors Its First Black Pilot by Naming New 737 After Him," Plain Dealer (Cleveland, OH), February 10, 2010, http://www.cleveland.com/business/index.ssf/2010/02/continental_airlines_honors_bl.html# (accessed October 1, 2012).

¹⁹ No branch of the U.S. military allowed women (regardless of race) to fly until the mid-1970s. The Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP, trained about 1,000 women civilian pilots to fly military aircraft for non-combat operations within the continental United States during World War II. However, despite the fact that they wore military-style uniforms, these women were in fact government contractors and not members of the uniformed military services. Members of the WASP program were finally granted official military veteran status by an Act of Congress in 1977. Deborah G. Douglas, *American Women and Flight Since 1940* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 97-103, 186-187, 189,192-194.

Private flying is expensive. Today one can expect to spend about \$10,000 to become a private pilot, and after that it takes around \$7,500 per year just to keep flying. And this figure assumes that an individual only flies about 50 hours each year. Pilots have always complained about the rising costs of private aviation. But adjusting for inflation reveals that that private flying has *always* been uncomfortably expensive.²⁰ Nonwhite minorities have historically earned less than their white counterparts.²¹ With private flying so expensive that well-to-do white pilots were constantly complaining about the cost, this means that an even smaller proportion of black families would have been able to shoulder the expenses involved.

Combined, these factors help to explain why throughout the 1970s and 80s, Roosevelt Lewis, Jessie Lee Brown, and Leon Johnson kept running into people who simply assumed that they were not pilots on account of their race. And as they themselves explained this state of affairs, since there weren't many black pilots, people simply weren't used to seeing black pilots.

Pilot Experiences

It might be tempting to stop here: after all, we already have several practical explanations for the low number of black pilots. However, the story of race in private aviation is a bit more complicated than this. For instance, first-hand observations by and about black pilots recorded in contemporary aviation magazine articles, letters to the editor, and autobiographies provide some

²⁰ For a detailed historical perspective on the costs associated with postwar private flying, see Alan D. Meyer, Chapter 4, "Cost: The Personal Economics of Private Flying," in "Why Fly? A Social and Cultural History of Private Aviation in Post-World War II America: 1945-1985," doctoral dissertation, University of Delaware, Spring 2009, 252-314.

²¹ For example, see Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, *Youth Indicators 1996: Trends in the Well-Being of American Youth*, "Indicator 16. Median Family Income, by Race/Ethnicity: 1950-1993," table and chart, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/yi/yi16.pdf> (accessed September 7, 2012), chart.

intriguing clues regarding what black pilots actually experienced throughout the postwar era. We know, for instance, that none of the Tuskegee Airmen were able to find work with the airlines. And we know that some flight schools refused to admit black students well into the postwar era.²² But in the scarce written records that I've been found so far, it seems that in many cases, *within* the community of pilots, actually demonstrating that you had the “right stuff” to become a pilot was ultimately more important than the color of your skin. In other words, perhaps skill trumped race, at least amongst other pilots.

Edward Gibbs, who learned to fly and then became an instructor during World War II through the Civilian Pilot Training Program, recalled in 1969 that he had performed “pretty damn sharp” on his final flight test, but received a failing grade after he talked back when the government examiner declared that Gibbs was wasting his time since no one would ever hire a black pilot. A few weeks later Gibbs retook the test with another examiner and again he flew flawlessly. Asked why he had failed the first time, Gibbs, in his own words, “played it cool and said, ‘I don’t know, sir.’” This time, he passed. Gibbs went on to instruct for the Civilian Pilot Training Program, that is, until his white boss got into trouble when government inspectors saw a black man “teaching white girls [to fly].” Clearly this was a case where a black man had crossed several lines involving gender, race, and technological knowhow. After the war Gibbs worked as an instructor on Long Island until the white manager passed him over for promotion and hired an outsider – a white man – to serve as the chief pilot. Gibbs went on to open his own flying service, but described how he was eventually squeezed out by hostile federal officials. In every case, Gibbs insisted he was universally accepted by white students and fellow pilots, and

²² One account reveals that shortly after the war, two enterprising white pilots, Jim Vercillino and Buell Maddux, set up a successful flight school specifically for black veterans who were turned away elsewhere because of their race. Bill Robinet, *By the Skin of My Teeth: A Cropduster’s Story* (Veneta, Oregon: Billville Press, 1997), 59.

explained that airport managers and government officials who were his main source of frustration.²³ With some noteworthy exceptions (including those that ultimately drove him out of aviation), Gibbs's experiences suggest that skill as a pilot could indeed trump race.

That's one perspective. Here's another. In 1970 – two decades after Gibbs's wartime experiences – James Fisher of Philadelphia wrote a letter to the editor of an aviation magazine to praise the operators of four airports across the Deep South for the “exceptionally courteous service” he had received while flying his private plane to and from a convention in Arkansas. Although Fisher noted partway through the letter that “In all my flying in the South, I've never had any indignation applied to me,” only in the last sentence did he reveal to readers: “I'm a black man.”²⁴

A few years later, in 1973, aviation journalist Gordon Baxter flew to Muskogee, Oklahoma on assignment for *Flying* magazine. After landing, Baxter, who was white, was surprised to discover that the airport was managed by a black man, Nathan Sams, who had learned to fly before World War II, then served as a civilian instructor for the military during the war, and had operated Sams Flying Service ever since. When Baxter asked white pilots in the area what they thought of this situation, they replied with comments like “Mr. Sams is a great pilot, one of the best instructors; never thought of him any other way...” and “People come from miles away for the quality of work he does in his radio shop...” Baxter took this as proof of what he called “the little-known Southern tradition that if a black man can overcome the almost

²³ Keith Connes, “Can a Black Man Fly?” *Flying*, July 1969, 54-55.

²⁴ James P. Fisher, “Southern FBOs Draw Praise,” *VOX Pilot*, *AOPA Pilot* 13, no. 4 (April 1970): 22.

insurmountable odds and ever get his head above the water, then the acceptance and respect are automatic.”²⁵

In this and other cases, it seems that being a pilot may have trumped being black, and that white pilots were willing to accept African-Americans as pilots...assuming that they had adequately demonstrated they had the “right stuff.” But this by no means proves that flying had become truly colorblind even decades after racism had forced Gibbs out of business. For instance, Baxter’s conclusions represent one white man’s assessment, and he neglected to consider how Mr. Sams might be received by pilots hundreds of miles away from Muskogee, Oklahoma. Nor is it clear whether any of the white pilots who praised Nathan Sims would be eager to invite a black man – even a respected pilot – into their homes for dinner.²⁶

David Harris broke the color barrier to the cockpit in 1964 when he became the first black pilot hired by American Airlines. When an interviewer asked Harris in 1969 whether his Air Force instructors had ever treated him differently in the late 1950s because he was the only

²⁵ Gordon Baxter, “Muskogee, Oklahoma: Of Song and Story,” *Flying*, December 1973, 71-72.

²⁶ Baxter also seems to have overlooked the fact that Nathan Sams routinely dealt with visiting pilots who were just as surprised as Baxter to find a black airport operator. Although his comments suggest that he was not overtly racist, Baxter earned a reputation over the years for making insensitive or downright insulting comments about, and to, women and nonwhite minorities. In this instance, Baxter gleefully admitted that just before he learned that the owner of Sams Flying Service was a black man, he had almost jokingly asked the “fine-looking black lineman” [airport attendant] who was servicing his plane “Are you Sam’s spade?” [Note: “black as the ace of spades” was not an uncommon term at the time; even Dave Harris, a self-described light-skinned black man who earned the distinction of becoming the first black pilot to fly for a major U.S. airline, used this phrase in 1969 to describe a fellow black pilot. See Connes, “Can a Black Man Fly?” 57.] It turned out that this “fine-looking black lineman” was Nathan Sams’s grown son Clarence, an accomplished multiengine commercial pilot who was working on a degree in biochemistry at Rice University. Baxter, “Muskogee, Oklahoma: Of Song and Story,” 71-72. A few years later, in a completely unrelated incident that illustrates his penchant for offending others, Baxter reported (again, clearly without regret) that he managed to get himself thrown into a hotel swimming pool by his audience of women pilots after he had joked, “some of my best friends are women pilots.” Gordon Baxter, “The Airperson’s World,” *Bax Seat, Flying*, March 1982, 74-75.

black pilot in his class, he responded, “No, I don’t think so. But this was on my back all the time. I was constantly thinking: now am I going to have to perform better than my white counterparts?”²⁷ Thus, Harris was haunted by the specter of racism even when he wasn’t actually experiencing it.

And at least *some* white pilots *were* openly hostile to their black counterparts. For example, after *Flying* magazine described the persistence of racial prejudice in aviation in a 1969 article titled “Can a Black Man Fly?” several white pilots immediately wrote angry letters to the editor to cancel their subscriptions.²⁸ Far more common, however, were incidents of more subtle racially-influenced snubs, intentional or not, such as the three cases of mistaken identity described at the beginning of this paper. And Gordon Baxter’s reaction to discovering that a black man ran the airport, which led Baxter to question other (white) pilots how they felt about this state of affairs, indicates that black pilots were also under close scrutiny to determine whether or not they measured up. In short, they remained “black pilots,” an exception to the rule that the term “pilot” was reserved for white men only.

Lived Experience, Popular Culture, and Public Perceptions

I’d like to close with a few nascent thoughts about the role of both lived experience and popular culture in perpetuating widespread assumptions that the label of “pilot” belonged almost exclusively to white men. For lack of a better term, I call this a self-reinforcing cultural feedback loop. Put simply, since the vast majority of pilots – both real and fictional – were white men, and

²⁷ Connes, “Can a Black Man Fly?” 54-55.

²⁸ “Black Pilots,” *Flying Mail*, *Flying*, September 1969, 7, 86; “Black Pilots,” *Flying Mail*, “*Flying*, October 1969, 6-7. Most of these letters from both white and black readers were highly supportive, but a few terminated their subscriptions because of this article, indicating that not *all* white pilots were ready to welcome minorities at “their” airports.

always had been, no one expected a black man to be a pilot. Which brings us back full-circle to the experiences of Roosevelt Lewis, Jessie Lee Brown, and Leon Johnson related at the start of this paper. Since no one expected to meet a black pilot, everyone assumed that these men had to be something other than a pilot.

Young white boys grew up surrounded by images of white male pilots. If they happened to fly on an airline, through the mid-1960s they would have never seen a black pilot in the cockpit; after that nonwhite pilots remained a tiny minority. Most private pilots who these boys might encounter were also white men, whether they met them while visiting the local airport or as a result of having family members, neighbors, or friends of their parents who flew personal planes. In a case where art simultaneously imitated and reinforced reality, Hollywood and television throughout the Cold War era depicted flying as the exclusive domain of white men, with an occasional white woman thrown in as a trusty sidekick or love interest. As a result, it was relatively easy for young white boys to imagine growing up to become pilots.

The opposite would have been true for anyone who was *not* going to grow up to look like the pilots they saw in fact or fiction. The result? A kind of self-reinforcing cultural feedback loop wherein people who were not expected to become pilots would choose not to pursue pathways that led to the cockpit. An instance where something interrupted this feedback loop – a case where the exception proves the rule, if you will – provides strong support for this argument. A 1986 study on young women who chose traditionally male-dominated careers in aviation found that a significant proportion had personally known and been encouraged to fly by real pilots during their childhood. These young women also reported that most of the pilots who

encouraged them to pursue this nontraditional career path were men.²⁹ With so few pilots – private or professional – in the black community, and widespread informal racial separation limiting interactions between blacks and whites in American society long after formal segregation was outlawed, young black men and women would have had a far smaller chance of personally knowing a pilot who could serve as a role model, mentor, and cheerleader.³⁰

Popular culture tended to reinforce this feedback loop throughout most of the postwar era. The first mainstream Hollywood film to depict a black man in the cockpit is the 1980 movie *Airplane*, which cast professional basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as the copilot. On the one hand, throughout his career Mr. Abdul-Jabbar consistently presented a positive role model to young African Americans, especially boys, through his actions both on and off the basketball court. However, *Airplane!* was a slapstick comedy, which meant that audiences were not supposed to take it seriously. Furthermore, in the movie, Mr. Abdul-Jabbar played himself with a fictional twist – a famous professional basketball player who held a part-time job moonlighting as an airline copilot – which only made the premise of a black pilot seem even less believable. And since Abdul-Jabbar (along with the rest of the flight crew) is stricken with food poisoning early in the story, his potential prowess as a pilot plays no role in saving the day.³¹

²⁹ Charles L. Rodriguez, “A Descriptive Study of Females Preparing for a Nontraditional Career in Aviation,” MS thesis, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, December, 1986. See also Gary Eiff (project director) and Charles Rodriguez, Mary Ann Aiff, and William Milton (researchers), “Eliminating Sexual Bias in Aviation Occupations,” funded by the Illinois Board of Education: Department of Adult, Vocational, and Technical Education, in cooperation with the Aviation Technologies School of Technical Careers, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, June, 1986.

³⁰ “Informal racial separation” includes a continued tendency for church congregations to organize along racial lines, neighborhood demographics to be “mostly white” or “mostly black” (or Hispanic, etc.) to a degree not entirely explained by income disparities, and the like.

³¹ *Airplane!*, directed by David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and Jerry Zucker (Paramount Pictures, 1980).

Not counting *Soul Plane* (2004), a comedy starring rap music icon Snoop Dogg about a black-owned and operated airline (described by Rotten Tomatoes as “A raunchy sendup of *Airplane!* that never really takes off”), and a made-for television fictionalized docudrama titled *Tuskegee Airmen* starring Laurence Fishburne that chronicled the all-black 99th Flying Pursuit Squadron of World War II, there were few popular depictions of black pilots during the three decades that followed *Airplane!*³² This continued dearth spawned controversy over the Hollywood movie *Red Tails* (2012), also about the Tuskegee Airmen. When producer George Lucas of *Star Wars* fame could not secure financial backing for a full-length fictionalized feature about the real-life accomplishments of the during World War II, Lucas put up more than 30 million dollars of his own funds to see the project through. After critics panned the movie for its lack of historical context and shallow character development, some African Americans responded that these (mostly white) critics were demonstrating the same type of latent racism exhibited by the (mostly white) Hollywood executives who had refused to take the project seriously in the first place.³³ My purpose of bringing up *Red Tails* is not to debate its historical

³²“Soul Plane,” review, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/soul_plane/ (accessed on October 1, 2012).

³³ Movie review website Rotten Tomatoes summarized the assessments of more than 100 film critics as follows: “Despite a worthy fact-based story and obvious good intentions, *Red Tails* suffers from one-dimensional characters, corny dialogue, and heaps of clichés.” From “*Red Tails*,” review, <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/red-tails/> (accessed on October 1, 2012). For examples of the sometimes heated reactions to film critics assessments of the film, including reactions by people who admitted that they had not yet seen the film but were dismayed, disgusted, or outraged by the negative tone taken by reviewers, see Eric K. Arnold. “Oaklanders Come Out in Doves for *Red Tails* Opening.” *Oakland Local*, January 24, 2012, <http://oaklandlocal.com/article/oaklanders-comes-out-doves-%E2%80%9Cred-tails%E2%80%9D-opening> (accessed on October 1, 2012); seventy seven reader comments appended to Jeremy Kirk, “George Lucas’ ‘Red Tails’ Poorly Commemorates Real Heroes,” review, FirstShowing.Net, January 20, 2012, <http://www.firstshowing.net/2012/review-george-lucas-red-tails-poorly-commemorates-real-heroes/> (accessed on October 1, 2012).

accuracy or access other aspects of its execution, but rather to illustrate the continued lack of positive black pilot role models in popular culture up to the present day.³⁴

Parting Thoughts

Lack of widespread access to the three World War II-era programs that laid the demographic foundations for postwar private flying; high monetary costs for individuals who had to pay for their own flying lessons; two decades of limited civilian career opportunities for black professional pilots; and an unbroken cultural feedback loop that reinforced the perception that pilots were white...all of these factors go far to explain why so few people of color became private or professional aviators throughout the postwar era. I am just now starting to explore non-aviation sources, starting with *Ebony* magazine. Thus far I've found only a handful of articles on the topic, so my search for sources on the experiences of black pilots (and perhaps on the perceptions of non-flying members of the black community) continues. As I mentioned at the start, this is a work in progress, so I'll close here, and look forward to any questions and suggestions that you may have.

³⁴ This trend may or may not finally be starting to change. For instance, the movie *Flight*, starring Denzel Washington as a heroic but troubled black airline pilot, is set to open in theaters in late fall 2012.