

WRITING IN THE SKY: BLACK AVIATION IN THE INTERWAR BLACK PRESS

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the history of black aviation from 1921 to 1937 through textual analysis of the black press's, in particular the *Courier* and the *Defender's*, coverage of black aviation, including texts submitted to the newspapers by black aviators themselves. The thesis focuses on the symbiotic development of black aviation and the black press in their efforts to present black America's technological capability – embodied in what is here termed “the goodwill message of black aviation” – as well as on the black newspapers' role in promoting aviation in the African American community as a civil rights and economic cause. The thesis further explores the anxiety expressed in black newspapers for black pilots to be included in the United States Air Service and later Air Corps as the aviation campaign in black papers emphasized not only the civilian and economic aspect of aviation, but also its military dimension.

The thesis thus presents black aviation as a well-developed phenomenon in the black press long before black pilots became famous through the involvement of the Tuskegee airmen in WW2. The text emphasizes the fact that Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York were hubs of black aviation well before the establishment of a civilian-pilot training facility at Tuskegee and other historically black colleges and universities in late 1930s and early 1940s. It demonstrates that black aviation – similarly to baseball integration, improved housing conditions, and criminal justice reform – was among the causes widely discussed and advocated for in the black press, because of its economic and military dimension. Depicting African Americans as technologically and

mechanically skilled and thereby qualified for employment in aviation as well as inclusion in the US military are shown here to have been the primary objectives of the campaign. Finally, black aviation is defined as a civil-rights cause well before the much-covered Tuskegee airmen's struggle for civil rights.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the Czech Educational Foundation, which provided me with the opportunity to study at Texas A&M University through the William J. Hlavinka Fellowship.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Black Aviation and the Representation of Race in Technology	7
2. THE BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLACK PRESS AND ITS TWO CRUSADERS.....	12
3. AVIATION’S MESSAGE OF GOODWILL WITH MILITARY THREAT IN THE BLACK PRESS	18
3.1 Origins of Aviation’s Goodwill Message.....	22
3.2 Bessie Coleman: Black Aviation’s Joan of Arc	28
3.3 Joel “Ace” Foreman and Hubert Fauntleroy Julian.....	37
4. WILLIAM J. POWELL AND THE AVIATION CAMPAIGN, 1929-1931	53
4.1. 1930: New Voices and Genres, Old Faces and Problems	70
4.2 1931: The Negro in Aviation, How Shall He Be Portrayed?	82
5. GOING THE DISTANCE: LONG-DISTANCE FLIGHTS, 1932-34.....	94
5.1 Writing the First Transcontinental Flight.....	105
5.2 Forsythe and Anderson’s Goodwill Flights for Interracial Understanding.	114
6. 1933-34: CALIFORNIA AND CHICAGO LEADING THE WAY IN AVIATION EDUCATION.....	130
7. 1935-37: THE MAKING OF AN AVIATION CAMPAIGN HERO	144

7.1 Black Aviation’s Military Displays in Chicago	146
7.2 The Meaning of Ethiopia for Black Aviation.....	148
7.3 The Black Eagle Has Landed: Hubert Julian as John C. Robinson’s Foil ..	162
7.4 John C. Robinson’s Ethiopian Endeavors in the Black Press	168
8. THE ROBINSON EFFECT: THE <i>CHICAGO DEFENDER’S</i> AVIATION CAMPAIGN IN 1936-37.....	187
8.1 Not Tuskegee: Robinson’s New Aviation School.....	195
8.2 Robinson’s New Mission	202
8.3 Networking in the South: Schools and Air Lines.....	206
9. CONCLUSION: BLACK AVIATION AS COMMON OCCURRENCE	212
REFERENCES.....	215

1. INTRODUCTION

On September 16, 1939, the *Pittsburgh Courier* announced in an exalted tone that “a seven-leagued stride in *The Courier*’s fight for greater recognition for the American Negro in his nation’s armed forces was realized Monday when the Civil Aeronautics Authority named two Negro colleges [...] to participate in the civilian pilot training program” (“Select Two Race Colleges”). In a similar tone, the *Chicago Defender* praised its own efforts three months later, when, on a visit to the West Virginia State Air Pilots Program facilities, the paper’s reporter observed that “the successful launching of the collegiate flight training marks the attainment of one more objective in the Defender’s long fight to give Race youth their opportunity in the skies” (“Defender Sports Editor Inspects”). Indeed, the fall of 1939 marked a milestone in the concerted efforts of the black press and political leaders to secure a federally-funded air-pilot training program – the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) – on the eve of the upcoming world war. True to its reputation and history as a fierce advocate of various community causes as well as social changes at large, the black press – in particular the *Courier* and the *Defender* – promoted the active participation of African Americans in the development of initially civilian and later military aviation as its main cause in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s.

Stories of black pilots, pioneer aviators, and calls for allowing African Americans to join the United States Air Service and later the Air Corps, however, featured on the pages of the two newspapers long before events in Europe announced the

coming of another world-wide armed conflict. Even though Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, authors of the seminal monograph *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen*, and Enoch P. Waters, an influential *Defender* journalist and aviation advocate, suggest that the *Courier* and the *Defender*, respectively, only took up the aviation cause in 1936, the research presented here demonstrates that articles on black aviation can be discovered in both papers much earlier. In an editorial from March 1939, for example, the *Courier* dated its own calls for inclusion of black soldiers into all branches of the army, including aviation units, to 1929. George S. Schuyler, *Courier*'s famous columnist, however, had written a short piece on the issue as early as 1925. In fact, the two newspapers began to cover black aviation in detail from 1921 onwards. Both papers published regular articles on local and national progress in aviation, snippets that announced new aviation students, pilots, air shows, promotional and lamenting editorials, and letters from readers; as well as hundreds of photographs in their respective feature sections. In other words, the *Courier* and the *Defender* had tried to make black America air-minded through an aviation campaign long before 1938.

The fact that the two newspapers heavily covered black aviation well before it became a widely discussed civil-rights issue is crucial for a number of reasons. First, the coverage as presented in this thesis decentralizes Tuskegee Institute's primacy in the development of black aviation, both spatially and temporally. As the texts published in the *Courier* and the *Defender* indicate, black aviation was in vogue before the CPTP began at Tuskegee – Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York were the main hubs of black aviation in the 1920s and 1930s, and scores of other local black flyers were trying to

promote the field across the country. Black aviation was a phenomenon well-advertised and written about nationally in the black press, represented here by the two newspapers, before 1938.

Black newspapers championed aviation just like they did the integration of baseball, the automotive industry and its opportunities for African Americans, as well as other social causes such as housing conditions or criminal justice reform. The progress of black aviation was partially a result of the influx of black migrants into the industrial cities in the North and West as skilled mechanics educated in black vocational schools sought employment. Aviation was also portrayed as a means of uplift and, although it was mostly represented by the African American middle class, the black press sought to engage lower-income classes in the field. Black newspapers employed sensationalism, propaganda, pride, and an eye for attractive stories and characters in their aviation campaign – the way black aviation was discussed is a reflection of the black press’s practices as well as the success of black aviators. The gradual transformation of the campaign from one-dimensional celebration of individual successes and decrying lack of financial support in the 1920s to the extensive coverage in the 1930s of long-distance flights and eventual campaigning for the inclusion of black aviators in the CPTP which would – so it was hoped – result in the inclusion of pilots of color in the US military can all be traced through the pages of the *Courier* and the *Defender*. In other words, the campaign grew from depicting racial crusaders to reporting on full-fledged flyers who had transformed aviation into a civil rights issue well before the events of 1938.

Thus, while the years 1938 and 1939 represent a stepping stone to the Double V campaign and the coverage of the Tuskegee airmen by the *Courier* and the *Defender* in the 1940s, the era preceding it should be explored closely, too. Examination of the period from 1921 – when Bessie Coleman, the first African American pilot with an international license, started touring the country – to 1937, at the end of which the campaign in the *Courier* and the *Defender* intensified and doubled the number of articles concerning black aviation, provides a complex image of the discourse on aviation within the African American community. Focus on technological lag behind mainstream white America, lack of educational opportunities in technical fields, and the increasingly military dimension of aviation all formed a part of the discourse and are discussed in this thesis.

As Jessi M. Snider points out in her ground-breaking work on black aviation in the early 1920s, after the Tulsa race riot of 1921 during which planes were employed to bomb what was hailed as “The Black Wall Street,” aviation became associated in the minds of African Americans with modern warfare – as well as with the dehumanization of people of color through the remoteness of technology, i.e. of bombing via airplanes, typical of colonial powers’ utilization of modern weaponry in Africa and India. In the forefront of the discussion was the fact that African Americans hardly participated in aviation and thus could not protect themselves or retaliate in case of a vicious air attack such as the one in Tulsa. Garveyites and other nationalists, according to Snider, sought to prepare for a future race war that would be fought in the air, while moderate journalists, though aware of the destructive potential of planes, saw opportunities for

African Americans in the budding industry. At the same time, what seems to be at the heart of Snider's text is the realization on the part of the black population that while white Americans could – in the period of the Roaring Twenties rife with technological progress, increasing mechanization, and rising purchasing power – individually purchase a plane and potentially attack a black community as the semi-professional flyers in Tulsa had done, African Americans did not know how to fly and were barred from learning to fly. In other words, they lacked access to (learning) technology, i.e. aviation, and thus lacked access to power, which was, in aviation's case, both civilian – in other words, economic – and military.

While Snider's analysis ends with the year 1927, the discourse in the black press continued and did not end until 1938, when it morphed into a campaign for the inclusion of black pilots in a government-funded civilian training program, the CPTP. One of the aims of this thesis is to complement and expand Snider's research to demonstrate that black aviation and the black press operated in a symbiotic relationship throughout the 1920s and the 1930s as black newspapers, represented here on the case studies of the *Courier* and the *Defender*, facilitated and directed the ongoing discussion on the meaning of aviation for the black community. It also seeks to expand on the numerous pieces written on Bessie Coleman, Scott and Womack's monograph, along with Samuel L. Broadnax's *Blues Skies*, *Black Wings*, and Robert A. Jakeman's *The Divided Skies*, which all present the main participants, events, and organizations in the discussion between the nationalist and moderate camps, and also provide a timeline and context for the culmination of all African American efforts in aviation in the first half of the 20th

century: the Tuskegee Airmen's successful participation in WW2, and the subsequent integration of armed forces in 1948.

Overall, this thesis seeks to provide answers to questions that are implicitly raised in the aforementioned monographs and Snider's research: if black aviation was in its infancy in the early 1920s and had to be quickly develop to counter the widening racial technological – and thereby economic – gap between black and white America, in what ways was the new field presented in the black press, namely in the *Courier* and the *Defender*? Moreover, what were the arguments put forward in promoting black aviation among the populace – or, in other words, what was the overall message of black aviation conveyed in the two newspapers? Conversely, how did aviation's black representatives – both successful and infamous pilots – impact the way newspapers covered the aviation cause? In answering these and other related questions, this thesis seeks to trace the history of black aviation from 1921 to 1937 through textual analysis of the *Courier* and the *Defender*'s coverage of aviation – including texts submitted to the newspapers by black aviators themselves. The thesis focuses on, first, the symbiotic development of black aviation and the black press in their efforts to present black America's technological capability and, second, on the showcasing of black aviators' ambition to connect people of color (trans)nationally, demonstrated here on the case studies of the Pan-American goodwill flight of 1934 and John Charles Robinson's involvement in the Italo-Ethiopian conflict in 1935/36. All newspaper articles discussed here have been accessed using the *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* Database.

1.1 Black Aviation and the Representation of Race in Technology

“[I want to] cause the Negro to change Uncle Tom’s cabin into a hangar,” explained Bessie Coleman her motives in promoting black aviation to a French reporter in 1922 (“Bessie Coleman Famous Aviatrix”). One can hardly identify a more apt metaphor than Coleman’s to formulate what the aviation coverage in the black press sought to achieve in the 1920s and the 1930s. In essence, the objective of black pioneer pilots and the journalists reporting on them was to make black America air-minded – in other words, to convince African Americans to take up aviation by applying themselves to technical and mechanical education, which would conversely lead to employment in the fast-growing field. Although this objective may sound as if formulated by Booker T. Washington – after all, two of the most influential black pioneer pilots were graduates of Tuskegee – because of the specter of aviation’s military dimension, early black aviators and the black press – working in symbiosis – sought to channel achievements by black aviators into expansion of civil rights, improved interracial relationships, and into calls for the inclusion of black pilots, and soldiers in general, in the country’s military. Black aviation and its promotional campaign in the black press was, in other words, a movement predicated on demonstrating black America’s technological prowess to achieve more respect and inclusion.

As early as 1848, African American political leaders registered that the black population in the US was viewed as technically inept. Frederick Douglass, for example, explained to Harriet Beecher Stowe that “we must become mechanics – we must build, as well as live in houses – we must make, as well as use furniture – we must construct

bridges, as well as pass over them – before we can properly live, or be respected by our fellow men” (quoted in Sinclair 7). The same was true for aviation seven decades later – if African Americans wanted to protect themselves against future airplane attacks, join the US military, and learn to fly, they had to begin learning how to build, service, and fly airplanes. Indeed, this was easier said than done. As Bruce Sinclair points out, “defining African Americans as technically incompetent and then – in a kind of double curse – denying them access to education, control over complex machinery, or the power of patent rights lay at the heart of the distinctions drawn between black and white people in this country” (2). Transferring from Uncle Tom’s cabin to Uncle Sam’s hangar was, therefore, a Gargantuan task as African Americans would have to develop a segregated system of black aviation schools, instructors, and airports or find ways to learn from white institutions and educators. This, too, is part of the narrative of early black aviation’s development in the black press.

The aviation campaign in the *Courier* and the *Defender* was, ultimately, a matter of black aviators’ self-presentation and aviation’s representation. As Sinclair explains, African Americans “believed in the regenerative powers of technology” (10). Black pioneer aviators were invested in their technology’s regenerative power, too, hoping to win the historic struggle “for blacks to represent themselves as technically competent” (10). However, rather than being a “contributionist” effort, to borrow Orlando

Patterson's term,¹ the case study of black aviation presented here is not a unidirectional one. Black aviators did not merely seek to prove themselves to the white population, but, instead, aimed to promote their community's pride in technological achievements by African American pilots and, conversely, to foster better interracial relationships. Even though black pilots emulated white aviators' goodwill flights and spreading of the gospel of aviation,² their efforts were directed both outward to present themselves to the white community as technically capable and inward to showcase to black America its progress. All-black air shows, aviation schools, and long-distance flights intended to convey the importance of technology and technical education for communities of color, were not meant merely for white, but rather black gaze. Finally, it must be noted that once African Americans registered that black aviators had achieved parity with allegedly technologically superior flyers – and in the important case of John C. Robinson also the best air force in the world – the aura of white supremacy in technological fields and skills began to crack.

That is why this thesis explores and investigates the ways in which the black press in cooperation with black pilots presented early black aviation to black America. After briefly addressing the role of the *Courier* and the *Defender* as advocates for various causes in their local black communities as well as nationally, the thesis briefly

¹ Contributionism is a school of Black historical thought which is primarily concerned with the Black man's contributions to "civilization." Older members of this tradition "tended to limit their considerations to the contributions of the Black man to American civilization" (Patterson 304).

² This term is borrowed from Joseph J. Corn's *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950* (1983).

outlines the discourse in the black press after the Tulsa race riot, which caused newspapers to register the specter of aviation and its military utilization. The following chapter, which discusses Bessie Coleman, Joel “Ace” Foreman, and Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, traces how technical and mechanical education – or lack thereof – and pleas for financial and moral support for black aviation had gradually become the building elements of what is here termed the goodwill message of aviation. Occupational opportunities in aviation, its military dimension,, as well as aviation’s potential to erase geographical boundaries are highlighted as parts of the goodwill message as well. At the same time, the chapter explores the ways in which the three aforementioned pilots are depicted in the black press as crusaders and martyrs for their race, trying to educate black communities about the importance of taking up technological education and aviation as a means of countering a widening racial technological gap, which had, as the Tulsa race riot indicates, also military consequences.

Chapters 3 and 4, which primarily deal with the emergence of William J. Powell as the leading aviation advocate as well as with the gradual rise of Los Angeles and Chicago as black aviation’s hubs, also address the direct involvement of black aviators as authors of texts in the black press advocating black aviation. Tracing individual achievements and brief stories of progress in the field by black students and other pioneers is also highlighted as part of the aviation coverage, because it is argued that since white individuals were able to purchase planes and potentially attack neighboring black communities like they did in Tulsa, images of and articles about African Americans taking up aviation and buying or constructing their own planes fostered an

image of a growing black aviation community, potentially capable of protection against aerial attacks. Also, these individual stories presented technological progress to the newspapers' readership.

Chapter 5 addressed the representation of black flyers in black press' aviation campaign by contrasting the coverage of William J. Powell, Charles E. James, and Hubert Julian, while noting the emergence of John C. Robinson. Chapter 6 discusses how successful long-distance flights gradually transform the goodwill message of aviation from a local one to an inter- and trans-national one, thus shifting the imagery of aviation crusaders from being viewed as mere promoters of technical education to becoming civil rights fighters. Chapter 7 analyzes the emergence of John C. Robinson as a leading figure of black aviation, while Chapter 8 explores how Robinson transposed his aviation and Pan-African activities in Chicago into a direct involvement in aerial warfare in Ethiopia against Italy's allegedly technologically superior air force. The chapter also highlights the ways in which the black press depicts Robinson as a Pan-African war hero and, subsequently, employs him in an unprecedented campaign to promote aviation and aviation education as a way of bridging the racial technological gap and acquiring military-level aviation skills. The concluding remarks briefly address Robinson's impact on the intensified aviation campaign focused on black pilots' inclusion in the US armed forces which launched in the black press in 1938.

2. THE BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLACK PRESS AND ITS TWO CRUSADERS

The history of the black press dates to the early 1800s. The first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, a weekly, was established in 1827 by John B. Russwurm and Samuel Cornish (Washburn 17). Although it was published by two black men, the paper seems to have been aimed at a white readership. Other short-lived publications, around forty of them, followed until the Civil War, all of them focusing on protesting injustices to the race. After 1865, the black press divided between those who continued to crusade for more civil rights and those who saw potential for profit rather than social change (Wolseley 24-6). One of the major figures in the development of crusading black newspapers was Frederick Douglass, who, during his career as a journalist, established several different papers. In 1847, he started the *North Star*, which later merged with the *Liberty Party Paper* into *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. Aiding Douglass in these pioneering efforts was Martin R. Delany, a journalist often considered the original black nationalist. Douglass later continued with *Douglass' Monthly* and the *New National Era* in the Reconstruction period (30-37).

As the black population in the postbellum period was becoming more educated and communities along with churches were able to provide financial support to various papers and serve as its audience, the number of black newspaper publications soared. Although there were then no national newspapers such as the *Courier* or the *Defender*, state-based and local newspapers flourished, with numbers rising from 31 publications in

1880 to 154 by 1890 (Wolseley 39). At the turn of the century, many of the local papers ceased to exist, while the black press became more established in large black communities. Newspapers were now founded as commercial ventures, where social cause may have still dominated, but other news claimed significant space as well. By 1910, there were an estimated 288 black newspapers with a combined circulation of about 500,000 primary readers, with the newspapers typically passing from the purchaser to other people in the community (Washburn 83), thereby multiplying the impact the black press had. *The Philadelphia Tribune* and *The Baltimore Afro-American* as well as Thomas Fortune's *New York Age*, closely associated with Booker T. Washington, and Boston's *Guardian* dominated the national market (43-50) until the rise of Robert S. Abbott's *The Chicago Defender* and Robert L. Vann's *The Pittsburgh Courier* in the second decade of the twentieth century.

As Gunnar Myrdal famously notes in *An American Dilemma*, "The importance of the Negro press for the formation of Negro opinion, for the functioning of all other Negro institutions, for Negro leadership and concerted action generally, is enormous. The Negro press is an educational agency and a power agency" (179). The *Courier* and the *Defender* fit this description perfectly. The two newspapers became a dominant force in the black press by the 1930s, but their beginnings were not easy. Abbott launched the *Defender* in 1905, envisioning the paper as a fighter for the race; hence its title. The paper was barely surviving at first as its militant tone of muckracking, campaigning against prostitution, and for black causes did not seem to attract enough readers (Wolseley 52-3). It was not until Abbott decided to employ yellow journalism, typical of

papers published by William Randolph Hurst and Joseph Pulitzer, that the sales of the *Defender* soared, and by 1915, the paper had reached a circulation of 230,000 (Washburn 83, Wolseley 54). According to Charles A. Simmons, the change in journalistic style brought about a larger number of subscribers to the *Defender*, and also stability and longevity as it “gave notice and recognition that the Negro press no longer could be brushed aside by authorities as merely an incidental medium (27).

The *Defender* became a crusading newspaper. This was especially true once Abbott decided to sensationalize and highlight in red-color headlines the living conditions of African Americans still living in the South and launched a campaign in 1917 for “the Great Northern Drive.” The *Defender* provided information on how to best leave the South for Chicago and other large cities in the North, and helped migrants with train fare. The campaign became so successful that not only did some Southern states outlaw the distribution of the *Defender*, but the paper’s circulation had reached 283,571 by 1920 (Simmons 30-5). In this way, the *Defender* followed the tradition of advocating for a social cause, albeit in a sensationalist manner; strikingly dissimilar to anti-slavery and anti-lynching campaigns in pioneering black papers. According to Wolseley, the *Defender* later modified its militancy and became more moderate. Its circulation plummeted during the Great Depression to 73,000 by 1935 (52), when it was surpassed by the *Courier* as the major black newspaper, which covered the Ethiopian crisis and the rise of Joe Louis.

The beginnings of the *Pittsburgh Courier* were not easy, either. Robert L. Vann took over the *Courier*, a struggling Pittsburgh newspaper, in 1910. Despite the early

struggles in circulation Vann did not consider adopting yellow journalism as a way of promoting the paper – in the first decade, he managed to make the paper solvent, though by the early 1920s, sensationalism began to appear in the paper, too (Washburn 129-32). It was during the Great Migration, fueled by the *Defender*, that Vann realized where the *Courier*'s potential lay: the newspaper became “an organ of social force by calling attention to various neighborhood problems,” often caused by the newcomers from the South (Simmons 45). Vann also stressed the importance of education for the black community, and advertised employment opportunities – which feature heavily in the *Courier*'s coverage of aviation throughout the interwar period.

Vann had a clear plan on how to transform the *Courier* into a respectable newspaper. Throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, he worked on solidifying the newspaper's reputation and financial situation as he hired George S. Schuyler, whose “Aframerica Today” series increased the paper's circulation from 40,000 to 50,000, as well as Ira F. Lewis, Floyd J. Calvin, Percival L. Prattis, and J.A. Rogers, who gave credibility and a strong, distinctive voice to the conservative paper, and brought advertisers (Wolesley 68, Buni 42, Washburn 133). As a result, the *Courier* was declared “the best colored newspaper published” by H.L. Mencken in 1930 (quoted in Washburn 133). Due to the *Courier*'s coverage of the rise of legendary boxer Joe Louis as well as the Italo-Ethiopian crisis in the mid-1930s, *Courier*'s circulation reached 250,000 by 1937 and, although the circulation dropped to 180,000 for the rest of the decade (133), the paper's campaign for civilian pilot training managed to keep readers interested and

propelled it into the 1940s, when the *Courier* became the most prominent black newspaper with circulation peaking at 357,212 in May 1947 (Buni 325).

The post-WW1 period was one of growth for the black press. In 1933, there were approximately 150 black papers with a circulation of 600,000, and by 1940, the numbers increased to 210 papers and 1,276,000 subscribers, respectively, with the *Courier* and the *Defender* being the two most prominent black papers. However, as Patrick Scott Washburn points out, “before the war, more than a third of the country’s black families subscribed to a black paper, and during the war, between 3-5 million and 6 million of the nation’s 13 million blacks read the paper every week,” with the *Courier* expanding to 14 national editions (140). Why did the black press become so popular? Because, as Simmons puts it, the *Courier* and the *Defender* as the leading papers of their era “eventually established [themselves] as a vital force willing to fight for the causes of the Negro community” (49). Vann himself proclaimed that “racial achievements shall be heralded far and wide, that others, perhaps too easily despaired, may take heart for renewed effort” (Buni 78). In other words, the black press fostered racial pride, highlighted any and every achievement by the community, and, “virtually everything [...] was propaganda for a cause, a practice inherent in protest” (Wolesley 202) against the white press, which virtually ignored black achievements.

In short, the *Courier* and the *Defender* were crusaders. The *Courier*, for example, made its name by campaigning against a racist radio program called *Amos 'n' Andy*, fighting for ending the color line in baseball, and recognition of African Americans in the armed forces, while the *Defender* facilitated the Great Migration and campaigned

against prostitution, as well as for inclusion of blacks in the armed forces. As will be discussed further in this thesis, the two papers also popularized, advertised, and made public pioneering achievements in black aviation – there are hundreds of photographs, short reports, celebratory articles, and promotional editorials and letters documenting the race’s progress in aviation, from receiving solo licenses and carrying out successful flights to graduations from aeronautics schools and participation in or attendance at an air circus. While national newspapers followed the success stories of numerous white aviators and aviatrixes, the black press reported mainly on black aviators, thereby satisfying the African American community’s demand for racial role models in an era of rapid progress in aviation. Black aviation became one of the newspapers’ crusades. The following section addresses the ways in which the two papers formulated and carried out their campaigns for promoting black aviation by formulating what is here referred to as the “goodwill message of aviation.”

3. AVIATION'S MESSAGE OF GOODWILL WITH MILITARY THREAT IN THE BLACK PRESS

Two goodwill flights, which perfectly capture the aspirations as well as difficulties that symbolize the history of black aviation prior to WW2, were carried out by black pilots in mid-1939. Alfred Anderson, the first black commercial pilot's license holder and future flight instructor for the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) at Howard University and Tuskegee Institute (Gubert, Sawyer, Fannin 9), flew from Philadelphia to Cuba and Haiti to promote aviation and cordial relationships between the US and the two Caribbean nations ("Philadelphian Pilot on Goodwill Flight to Haiti"). The National Airmen's Association's (N.A.A.) Dr. Earl W. Renfroe, a commercial pilot and pioneering dentist³, Dale L. White, private pilot, and Chauncey Spencer, parachute jumper and navigator ("Prepare for Flight") planned a tour of about a dozen cities around the country in order to draw attention to and advocate for African American inclusion in a Congress bill proposing the establishment of a Civilian Pilot Training Program; virtually a program to train reserve pilots in case of a war.

Both flights served primarily as messengers of goodwill. The former flight showed that the best of black pilots could safely navigate the airways over the United States and the Gulf of Mexico and arrive safely at the planned destinations without mechanical or financial trouble, thus spreading the aviation gospel to people of color

³ Renfroe's multifaceted career is best depicted in *Essays on Earl Renfroe: A Man of Firsts* (2001).

outside of the US. The latter exposed long-term problems with African Americans' concerted efforts to blaze a trail in aviation. Renfroe withdrew from the flight along with his plane, leaving White and Spencer scrambling for funds – which they obtained from a family of successful black entrepreneurs (Scott, Womack 91) – only to stop thirty minutes into the flight due to technical difficulties on their rented plane (“Flyers Are Grounded by Motor Fault”). In other words, while Anderson’s flight was a testament to the abilities and achievements of black pilots and entrepreneurs, the N.A.A. flight threatened to become a major setback in the efforts of the organization and the *Defender* in campaigning for the inclusion of African American aviators in CPTP, i.e. federally-funded college education for black students with focus on aeronautics. Despite initial setbacks, however, both flights succeeded, becoming an even stronger testament to the skills and resources that black pilots and mechanics had learned to wield after almost two decades of pioneering work.

Most goodwill flights in the interwar period were conceived to promote interest in aviation among African Americans and draw their attention to opportunities in the field – education and increasing demand for skilled factory, garage, and airport jobs, as well as aviation’s future potential, were the staple of the goodwill message in the newspaper coverage of the flights – and, often, to foster inter- and intra-racial relationships, both in the US and abroad. The two flights mentioned above fit the mold perfectly. The objective of Anderson’s flight was to bring “a message of goodwill from members of the Race in America to Haitians” (“Goodwill Flyers Safe in Haiti”) and demonstrate the abilities of race flyers in long flights. The *Defender* and N.A.A.’s flight

from Chicago to nine other cities was, on the other hand, envisioned to “arouse interest of aviators in other cities in a nationwide meeting to be held [in Chicago] in August and to thank congressmen and federal officials for helping include Negroes in the government air training program” (“Chicago Pilots Plan a 3,000 Mile Flight”).

Moreover, the flight was to promote Cornelius Coffey and his aviation school. Coffey, who had by 1938 quietly surpassed John C. Robinson and William J. Powell as the leader of black aviation, founded the N.A.A., owned a flying school in Chicago, and was hoping for his institution to become part of the federally-funded CPTP, which would provide funding also for non-college aviation schools such as Coffey’s. White and Spencer’s flight was thus also designed to promote aviation education, predicated on meticulous ground coursework as well as actual flying experience at a government - licensed all-black airport in Chicago. The *Defender* played an essential role in promoting the flight as it devoted almost an entire page on May 20, 1939 to short reports and three large photographs to documenting the success of the newspaper-sponsored goodwill flight. Later in 1939, the *Defender* reminded its readers of the flight when it claimed that White and Spencer had inspired the West Virginia State College Institute to apply for inclusion in the CPTP (“*Defender’s* Goodwill Flyers Inspired”).

However, the two goodwill flights also carried with them an implicit understanding that piloting skills and mechanical abilities had military value. While Anderson’s hop was designed to bring a peaceful message to Haitians, it also demonstrated the technological gap between Haiti, Cuba, and the United States in the same way that the Tulsa riot of 1921 revealed it to African Americans. The flight

involved a symbolic message of showing technological superiority by a nation that had occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and had shown its military power in Cuba before. The N.A.A. flight was tied to the military potential of aviation as well due to its connection to the National Defense Appropriation Bill that had just passed through the Congress, and to the subsequent CPTP Bill. Although civilian in name, the proposed pilot training program was military in spirit, and White and Spencer's flight demonstrated not only the willingness, but also the desire of African American pilots to take a worthy part in the upcoming war.

The two 1939 flights were harbingers of the ways in which the black press would campaign for the inclusion of African American aviators in the CPTP and later for the double victory abroad and at home – the legendary Double V campaign. The two flights were also a reification of the vision that pioneering aviators, newspapers, and political leaders began to formulate as early as 1921. The fact that the two flights succeeded and, especially in the case of White and Spencer's flight, were also heavily covered by black newspapers was the result of a two-decade-long campaign in which the black press in cooperation with black aviators had constantly sought to convey the importance of aviation for the black community and formulate a message – of job opportunities, education, and the military importance that had become increasingly visible. The first attempts at expressing a vision of black aviation began in 1921 with the emergence of Bessie Coleman, whose contributions are discussed in the following section.

3.1 Origins of Aviation's Goodwill Message

Few goodwill flights in early black aviation history delivered what they were set out to do; or were carried out at all. The goodwill flights planned and attempted by Bessie Coleman, Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, and Ace Foreman in the 1920s often suffered from lack of funding, organizational support, and/or inadequate flying ability. Even though the black press provided vigorous campaigning in the form of articles, photographs, advertisement space, and even financial backing to some of the goodwill flights and accompanying events, results were often disappointing, and paying attendees were sometimes left disillusioned.

Nonetheless, the 1920s, when Coleman, Foreman, and Julian promoted and attempted their flights, were a period during which the black press began to shape aviation's goodwill message. Also, journalists and political leaders expressed their fear about the military potential of aviation and urged the race, even more so than the goodwill messengers, to take up aviation, thereby imbuing the goodwill message with ever-present dimension of upcoming air war. This section explains and analyzes the origins of aviation's goodwill message with strong military dimension on the cases of the black press coverage of and reactions to the Tulsa Race Riot, the emergence of Bessie Coleman as a nationwide aviation crusader, Ace Foreman's attempts at replicating Coleman's successes, and Hubert Julian, who exploited the black community's anxiety over aviation's military threat for his personal enrichment and fame. The section ends with an analysis of newspaper editorials' commentary on

developments in black aviation, and their contribution to formulating aviation's message of goodwill and military threat.

Aviation as Military Threat: The Tulsa Race Riot and Marcus Garvey's *Negro World*

The growing field of aviation was associated in the black press with warfare from early on. In 1913, for example, the *Defender* reported on the use of airplanes in battle in the Balkan wars ("Airships Used in Balkans"). Later, Jessi M. Snider observes, during WW1 black journalists began to pay more attention to aviation as reports on the use of airplanes over European battlefields began to make the pages of white newspapers and magazines (41). After the race riot in Tulsa in 1921, however, the reality of modern warfare was brought closer to home. In the ground and aerial attack on the predominantly black Greenwood community, 300 people were killed, 35 blocks of the "Black Wall Street" district were destroyed by incendiary bombs, over 800 people were admitted to hospitals, and 6,000 were detained by the police (Hirsch 28). While the riot was no doubt brutal and bloody, the black press heavily focused on the fact that airplanes and air bombs were used during the assault. James Weldon Johnson, for instance, stated that "there was no more hellish passion loosed against the Germans in the late war than was loosed by these white citizens of Tulsa against their colored fellow citizens" (quoted in Snider 65). In their descriptions of the scenes in Tulsa, black papers thus adopted "martial language" and began writing of a race war (Snider 65).

The race war, it seemed, would be fought in the air. Despite the coverage of WW1 in the black press, it was not until Tulsa, argues Snider, that "the presence of these

latest machines of war [airplanes] in Greenwood brought this aspect of war alive for black Tulsans” (67) and, conversely, for the African American community at large. Battlefields were no longer clearly defined and even civilians could now be attacked, while having no way to defend themselves. Moreover, the presence of airplanes over Tulsa highlighted the technological advancements of the white population – and the “racial technology gap” (70-71). When the *Defender* and other papers published a short report in June 1921 on the establishment of The Knights of the Air, which included around 700 members of the United States Air Service and was organized by William J. Simmons, the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (“Current Events”), the revealed technological and skill gap between the black and white population became a dominant issue in the coverage of aviation for the next two decades, permeating the otherwise goodwill message of aviation as progress.

Race leaders’ reactions to Tulsa focused on aviation as well. Marcus Garvey, for example, had predicted the race war, which was invoked in the newspaper coverage on Tulsa, as early as 1919. As Snider demonstrates, Garvey “stressed the need [for African countries] to achieve economic and military power” to be able to fight “on the African battlefield, where the great war of races would be played out” (79); a development that finally took place in the Italo-Ethiopian war, in which Italian mastery of the air prevailed over Ethiopian mettle. As Takaki observes, “technology was perceived as the means by which people of color [...] were to be subordinated” (quoted in Sinclair 5). Garvey thus saw modern military technology as crucial for the development of people of color’s power and, even though he mainly espoused naval technologies as they held a symbolic

significance for the descendants of slaves⁴, airplanes gradually became part of UNIA's plans (82-83). Indeed, the Tulsa riot "engendered a new appreciation of the airplane's role in racial relations" and speakers at various UNIA branches began to elaborate on the importance of airplanes for the organization's plans (85-86). Garvey himself inserted a message of aviation's military potential into his speeches, observing, for example, that white colonists in South Africa had used planes against the local Bondelzwarts people (88).

Speeches quickly turned to plans of action as the Brooklyn branch of UNIA proposed to purchase an airplane for the organization's African Legion – the plane was to be piloted by Capt. Edison McVey, "an attaché in the Universal African Royal Guards, a Legion division" (Snider 89). Fundraising immediately began. McVey would later stunt-fly with Hubert Julian, who became member of the UNIA in January 1922 (91) and would propose to Richard E. Norman to make a race film about flying, which later materialized in *The Flying Ace* (1926) (Lupack 162-5). When the UNIA held its Third International Convention in August 1922, Julian parachuted over Harlem and thrilled thousands of spectators and reminded them of the exciting, albeit horrifying, spectacle of aviation. Garvey later introduced Julian as a hero to the convention's crowd of 10,000 (Snider 92).

A few days later, Bessie Coleman, home from her second trip to France, appeared at the convention, too, inspiring the members, according to Snider, to formally

⁴ See Snider 80-86 for a more detailed discussion of Garvey's views on the supremacy of ships over airplanes.

establish a bureau of aeronautics, which was tasked with opening a flying school (Snider 93-4). Developing a stable of airplanes and training of skilled aviators thus became an integral part of UNIA's race war message and overall mission, especially with the Black Eagle Flying Corps, headed by Julian, joining the already existing Black Starship Line, the Universal African Motor Corps, and the Universal African Legion, a makeshift army (Womack 29, Jakeman 59).

Consequently, between 1922 and 1925, Garvey and his newspaper, *The Negro World*, continued to develop and shape its message on the military use of aviation. Even though Garvey was inspired by the martial language employed in the black press coverage of the Tulsa riot, it was his newspaper that began concerted efforts in creating an aviation message that served UNIA's purpose of presenting itself as the leading organization that was preparing the Africa-descended people for the upcoming race war. The racial technological gap was constantly reiterated as *The Negro World* – with an estimated circulation of 200,000 – published numerous articles on the ways colonial powers were employing airplanes in their efforts to subdue local populations. For example, the paper condemned Italy's use of air attacks in Southwest Africa in 1924, the British for bombing civilians in the Middle East, and the French for dropping bombs in Morocco and Syria between 1922 and 1926 (Snider 96-97). In other words, Garvey and his organization's mouthpiece saw aviation and the colonial powers' ability to master the air as already threatening local populations in Africa and was quick to warn of similar developments in the United States, especially after Tulsa.

However, as will be shown next, the black press began to slowly emphasize aviation's civilian dimension – a goodwill message of aviation that stressed employment and participation in America's economic and technological developments. As Garvey's Pan-African message of race war and African exceptionalism gradually lost traction and its main voice when Garvey was banished from the United States in November 1927, aviation's goodwill message filled the vacated space in the black press. Nevertheless, despite becoming the dominant philosophy in the discourse on aviation, goodwill would sometimes still be accompanied with reminiscences of the military potential of airplanes, and, more increasingly, with calls for inclusion of African Americans in the US armed forces, including the Aviation Service and the Air Corps. A perfect example of this mixed goodwill message is a *Defender* editorial from September 1925, which, while celebrating Bessie Coleman, Hubert Julian, and Ace Foreman by stating that “we are inching along,” also warned readers that “the next war will be fought in the air” and urged them to become pilots (“The Week” About Aviation”). The notion that black aviators should, too, be trained in air warfare never truly disappeared from the newspaper coverage of black aviation – especially with regular reminders to the readership of Bessie Coleman and her sacrifice – and would become a cause of its own when John C. Robinson became the head of Ethiopia's Royal Air Force. The combination of goodwill and military message of aviation would then drive the campaign for inclusion of black students in CPTP from 1938 onwards.

3.2 Bessie Coleman: Black Aviation's Joan of Arc

Although it was the events in Tulsa and the black press's reaction that defined the beginning of aviation coverage in black newspapers, it was Bessie Coleman who became the face of black aviation and would symbolize it until the emergence of the Tuskegee Airmen. As Snider points out, "Coleman recognized the importance of newspapers in reaching and maintaining a relationship with the public, and upon her arrival she made them a vehicle for publicizing her aims" (152). In taking up aviation as a racial cause with military dimension, Bessie Coleman personified early aviation goodwill message that would later be used as a reminder whenever the *Courier* and the *Defender* wanted to emphasize their point about the importance of studying and advancing aviation in the black community.

Coleman, born in Texas in 1892, was the first major African American pilot known to the black public. Although Eugene Bullard had flown for the Lafayette Flying Corps during WW1, little information about the recipient of the French Croix de Guerre made it to the black American public until later in the 1920s, when the *Defender* mentioned the military hero in several of its articles about expats living in Paris⁵. Coleman studied at the Colored Agricultural and Normal University in Langston, Oklahoma, and in 1915 moved to Chicago, where she worked as a manicurist at the White Sox Barber Shop and owned a chili parlor. Coleman's brothers, John and Walter,

⁵ There are two reputable monographs on Bullard: *The Black Swallow of Death* (1972) and *Eugene Bullard, Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris* (2006). Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora* also mentions Bullard (pgs. 4, 63, and 66).

would tell stories about French women flying airplanes and the war planes they had seen during their service overseas (Rich 26), presenting their sister with the image of aviation as a hobby as well as a military proposition. One day, Coleman made up her mind to learn to fly a plane herself.

Since she was rejected at aviation schools in Chicago, Coleman decided in November 1920 to take Robert Abbott's advice and try her luck in France (Gubert, Sawyer, Fannin 78). Abbott's *Defender* reported on Coleman's return from France with an international pilot license in October 1921, announcing that the aviatrix would give exhibitions "in the hope of inspiring others with the desire to fly" ("Chicago Girl Is a Full-Fledged Aviatrix Now"). One week later, the newspaper carried a short article about Coleman's warm reception by the cast of *Shuffle Along* ("Shuffle Along Company Gives Fair Flyer Cup"), one of the era's most popular all-black Broadway musicals starring Josephine Baker, who was the aviatrix's longtime friend (Freydberg 76)⁶. The *Defender* then accompanied its coverage of Coleman's arrival with a cartoon, titled "They Can't Keep Us Down," depicting a plane with a flag announcing "Miss Bessie Coleman - Black's First Aviatrix."

Coleman had quickly become the face of black aviation. Although it is unclear if and how much she was informed about the events in Tulsa, the celebratory cartoon and the overall raving coverage that Coleman was receiving, would indicate that the African American community had been seeking and had found the person who would lead its

⁶ Later in the 1930s, Baker would promote aviation on the pages of the *Defender* herself.

progress in aviation now that the field had become essential to survival. In the first interview after her return from France in 1921, a few months after Tulsa, Coleman explained to a *Defender* reporter that “because I knew we had no aviators, neither men nor women, and I knew the Race needed to be represented along this most important line, I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviation and to encourage flying among men and women of the Race who are so behind the white men in this special line.” In France, Coleman had walked nine miles to school every day for ten months, and in interviews she did not forget to mention that her flying school was near Rouen, the city where the English had imprisoned Joan of Arc (“Aviatrix Must Sign Away Life to Learn Trade”). Coleman, with enthusiastic help from the black press, thus presented herself as a crusader for the race and its future in aviation. The aviatrix’s dedication to advancing her race in the field, her anxiety over the racial technological gap, and the fact that she had studied under the tutelage of a WW1 ace who had shot down thirty-one airplanes during the war came to form the basis of aviation’s goodwill message with a palpable military undertone.

The essential aspect of Coleman’s goodwill message, as evidenced in her dedication to schooling in France, was an appeal to the black community to pursue aviation, in other words technical and mechanical education. In February 1922, Coleman left for further flying instruction in France and Germany, explaining to the *Defender* readers that she wanted to purchase a plane in Paris for her aviation school, which she seemed to have planned to open upon her return in New York City to “all who want to fly” (“Bessie Coleman Leaves New York for France”). During her stay in Europe,

Coleman received another license, this time in Germany, becoming “the first of her race to [be] a full licensed flyer,” according to a short report in the July 1922 issue of *The Washington Post*. The paper noted that the aviatrix was planning to open a flying school in Chicago, and, presumably for that reason, had refused an offer “from Moscow to teach flying by women” (“Negress an Air Pilot”). An article in the *Defender* later explained that it was “Soviet disturbances” that prevented the aviatrix from teaching in Moscow (“Bessie to Fly Over Gotham”). Upon her second return from Europe, the aviatrix sought funds to open a school – hence her visit to the UNIA convention mentioned in the previous section.

Coleman’s arrival also spurred black press to initiate its own crusade for inclusion of African Americans in the US armed forces. In an article informing white readers about the aviatrix’s successes in Europe, *The New York Times* mentioned that Coleman had piloted a 220-horsepower Benz-motored L.F.G. plane while in Germany, “the largest plane ever flown by a woman” (“Negro Aviatrix Arrives”). A May 1924 article in the *Defender*, however, also mentions that the aviatrix had piloted a Fokker bomber plane during her visit to Germany in 1922 (“Dutch Aviator Will Teach Race to Fly”), which would explain why the UNIA members, preparing for a race war to break out soon, were so ecstatic when Coleman paid them a visit upon her return; the story of her flight in the Dutch-German bomber must have preceded her. News about Coleman’s skills may also have been why the *Defender* asserted in an editorial from May 1922 that “we should have representation in the aerial service and proper steps should be taken to secure it” (“Let Us Fly”). Now that the race had a skilled pilot in its ranks, it was time

for more African Americans, especially the WW1 veterans, to join the nation's air forces.

Once Coleman was back stateside, she fully focused on spreading her message of goodwill, seeking to draw attention to aviation and recruit sponsors and students for her future school. In September 1922, she was to perform her first US flight in Long Island under the auspices of the *Defender*. Dubbed "Queen of the Air" by the newspaper, Coleman explained that while in Germany, she had flown for Pathé films over prominent sites in Berlin – the film would later be used in the aviatrix's promotional tour – and was also planning to bring in European experts to help her teach the race to fly. In the meantime, Coleman planned to travel around the United States and "the pan-American countries" ("Bessie to Fly Over Gotham"). In wanting to take her exhibition flights and promotion of aviation beyond the borders of the United States – to countries inhabited mainly by people of color – Coleman enriched her goodwill message. She was planning to promote black aviation internationally, urging people of color to take it up as a cause. The shift from teaching in Chicago to flying around the Americas – or teaching in Moscow – added a new geographical and ideological dimension to aviation's goodwill message. Even though Coleman's own plans for spreading the gospel of aviation abroad never materialized – which is how the story of international flights by black pilots would go until 1933 – international and transnational outlook as well as the recognition of erasure of borders through aviation became an indispensable component in the coverage of black aviation by the black press.

Coleman also highlighted and exploited aviation's military potential. As Snider observes, the aviatrix "often symbolically portrayed herself in martial terms" (229). In New York in 1922, shortly after her visit with the UNIA, Coleman performed in honor of the 15th New York National Guard Regiment, also known as the Harlem Hellfighters, which had made a name for itself not only for bravery displayed in combat, but also for spreading jazz around Europe through James Reese's marching band. The band performed while Coleman was in the air ("Bessie Gets Away; Does Her Stuff"). In Chicago, one month later, Coleman put on an even more spectacular and militaristic show, when, in honor of the 8th Illinois Infantry, a legendary Civil War unit, the aviatrix showed stunts named after various war aces, and drove the crowd into frenzy during her second flight, when she made the figure eight in the air ("Bessie Coleman Makes Initial Aerial Flight"). While Coleman's flying thus became firmly connected with the military, it must be remembered that it was African American military achievements that Coleman was celebrating. In return, she was recognized as a crusader with the skills of the most famous of war aces – and could thus lead the race in case of a conflict.

Unfortunately, in 1923, Coleman suffered serious injuries while flying in California, but vowed to return. Even from the hospital bed, she continued to propagate aviation, explaining that her injuries proved that "flying in the air is no more dangerous than riding an automobile on the surface" ("Bessie Coleman Says Good Will Come from Hurt"). A tone of criticism, however, also appeared in her message for the first time as she decried lack of funding and cooperation on the part of her race in establishing her aviation school. These problems would prevent Coleman from ever giving up

barnstorming for a teaching career until her premature death in 1926, during yet another exhibition flight to raise funds. Lamenting the lack of funding and interest in aviation in general would, however, become another ever-present feature of aviation's goodwill message until 1939, especially in editorials.⁷

Recuperating from serious injuries, however, did not stop Coleman from presenting herself in martial and also Pan-African context. Before a planned exhibition in Chicago in September 1923, Coleman's plane was exhibited at the Eight regiment armory ("No Flight by Bessie Coleman; Rain Interferes"), thereby solidifying the aviatrix's association with the military. Furthermore, although the aviatrix had never joined the UNIA, she had cooperated with Garveyites in preparation for her exhibition in honor of the 15th infantry regiment (Snider 230). While in Paris, Coleman had attended the Pan-African Congress where she had met Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou, a major figure in the Paris African community, who helped foster relationships between African American, Caribbean, and African intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, according to Edwards (85). When Prince Kojo of Dahomey visited Chicago in 1924, as the aviatrix was taking a respite from her crusading career, Coleman spoke at his reception, and was rumored to have been his lover ("Prince Kojo of Dahomey Pays Tribute to Lincoln," Freydberg 92). Although her connections with the Pan-African community loosened over time, Coleman had managed to create an image of herself as a crusader with military-flying skills and transnational connections – previously hinted at through her

⁷ Snider discusses in Chapter 5 of her dissertation this type of tone in the coverage in the context of *the jeremiad*.

connection to Moscow and plans to promote aviation abroad – willing to lead and educate her race, not just African Americans, in aviation.

In the end, it was Coleman’s funeral in 1926 that solidified her image for the following decade as a Joan-of-Arc-like martyr, who died for her race’s aviation progress, and that established her goodwill message as the staple of black aviation discourse in the black press. The May 8 issue of the *Defender* carried a photograph of Coleman’s burning plane and a lengthy description of the accident in which the aviatrix fell out of the plane (“Bessie Coleman, Aviatrix, Killed”). A short obituary likened her to Crispus Attucks and Frederick Douglass, and eulogized her as a “pioneer, first in the air (“The Week: Pioneer”). Both the *Courier* and the *Defender* then devoted significant space to Coleman’s Chicago funeral, with the *Defender* carrying an editorial (“As Americans Should Die”) and *Courier*’s George S. Schuyler, a well-known editor of the Pittsburgh weekly and a Harlem Renaissance author, eulogizing Coleman, who “wanted to be an aviatrix and would not be frustrated by racial barriers” as a role model for the race. He argued that “More and more Negroes are following her example. Many more ought to.” In adding that aviation offers “wonderful possibilities today for Negroes as well as whites” (“Views and Reviews”), Schuyler spread Coleman’s goodwill message on.

More importantly, the newspapers showed to the public that Coleman was being awarded a funeral with military honors – thereby becoming associated with other influential figures in black history – with the casket covered with the American flag, and

six soldiers of the Eight Regiment carrying the dead body. Ida Wells Barnett⁸, Coleman's mentor, delivered the eulogy, while Reverend J.C. Austin, an influential Chicago Garveyite, officiated the ceremonies ("Brilliant Military Honors Accorded Fallen Aviatrix," "Chicago Pays Parting Tribute to Brave Bessie Coleman"). In short, Coleman received a national-hero funeral and extensive press coverage, which emphasized the military aspects of her goodwill message as well as her Pan-African connections. Coleman left a void in the race's aviation efforts.

The *Defender*, in particular, seemed to have realized that Coleman's passing signaled a new era in black aviation with no visible role models. Moreover, the void exacerbated the perception of the racial technological gap discussed by Garvey, Coleman, and the black press throughout the early 1920s. In order to stimulate active participation in aviation after Coleman's death, the *Defender* disseminated Coleman's goodwill message of the need to educate the race in flying and prepare it for the future. In an August 1926 article on the new Ford company airplanes, for example, the paper noted that Ford had the country's defense in mind when it had designed the new machines, and bemoaned the fact that, even though Bessie Coleman "worked tirelessly to quicken the interest of our people in aviation, [...] they seem to ignore [it] in spite of its increasing importance" ("Ford Tells President Plans for Air Force"). The proximity of the next war was also highlighted when the *Defender* noted in 1927 that "aviation authorities, in discussing the rapid advancement of the airplane as an instrument of war,

⁸ Barnett's autobiography, *Crusade for Justice* (1970), unfortunately does not mention Coleman in any way.

are wondering what would be the result if the Chinese army adopted the airplane on a large scale” (“Chinese in Aviation”). The short article echoed the editorial from 1925, in which the next war, fought in the air, was described as pitting against each other the U.S., Europe, and “the aroused hatred of Asia” (“The Week: About Aviation”). Now, the African Americans were lagging in aviation behind all races.

3.3 Joel “Ace” Foreman and Hubert Fauntleroy Julian

Temporarily, the void that Bessie Coleman had left, seemed filled when Joel “Ace” Foreman, Coleman’s contemporary from California, announced a transcontinental flight in 1927. Foreman’s was, as Robert A. Jakeman explains, the “first bona fide attempt at a long-distance flight by a black” (61). Foreman had made a name for himself, according to Snider, as a race car driver and a pilot in California and enjoyed the admiration of local journalists (249). For example, in September 1925, per the *Courier*, the 24-year-old aviator “piloted his plane to 2,000 feet, nose dived, looped the loop, and stood on the wings of his plane in the first of a series of stunts, which were part of his exhibition” in front of a crowd of around 350 spectators (“Race Aviator Flies for Hospital Fund”).

In late February 1927, the *Courier* announced Foreman’s goodwill transcontinental hop, declaring that the proposed feat would launch “a new epoch [...] in the history of the Negro’s achievements.” The paper provided a short biography of Foreman, saying that “the local dailies have been running stories of his life and great interest is being attached to his flight.” Foreman was thus depicted as a showman of considerable piloting skills, poised to take Coleman’s place as the face of black aviation

(“Los Angeles Mayor Sends New York Mayor Letter by Negro Cross Continental Flyer”).⁹

Unfortunately, the epoch announced by the black press never materialized. Even though Foreman declared in the *Courier* that “he will make the trip easily, barring mishap,” the next article in the newspaper noted that upon take-off, the aviator had been flying in a plane that he had secured only a few hours before, and had been sent off by mere 500 spectators (“Los Angeles Mayor Sends New York Mayor Letter by Negro Cross Continental Flyer,” “Transcontinental Flyer Hops Off On First Leg of California-New York Journey”). In a strikingly dissimilar tone to the *Courier*’s, the *Defender* depicted the scene of Foreman’s take-off as “a gala affair [where] everything was ideal for the attempt,” including ten thousand spectators. At the same time, the paper lamented that Foreman and his mechanic, Ace Ward, had met with “little encouragement from the white race and a little more from their own” (“10,000 Cheer Aviators as They Start Their Flight From Coast to Coast”). In an effort to promote the race aviator, yet excoriate the lack of funding on the part of the black community, the *Defender* was spreading a mixed goodwill message of aviation of shaming its readers into supporting black aviators, while hailing the Los Angeles branch of the NAACP and the Negro Business League for funding the historic feat.

⁹ As a goodwill flight seeking to arouse the interest of the race in aviation, Foreman’s hop had another symbolic dimension, too, as the plane would carry a letter from the mayor of Los Angeles to the mayor of New York.

Foreman and Ward hardly managed to reach Chicago. It took them four days to arrive in Salt Lake City, where they were stranded for days due to lack of funds needed to purchase a new motor for their inadequate old plane (“Cross-Country Aviators Down”). The *Defender* carried a series of photographs from the scene of Foreman’s take-off, while informing of the aviator’s technical misfortune (“Flyers Forced Down in Salt Lake”). One week later, the paper explained in detail how Foreman navigated the stalled plane mid-air (“Snowstorm Forces Flyer to Come Down”), showing that, even though the flight would require much more time and funding than expected to reach New York, the two aviators were experts in their field. The *Defender* sought to present Foreman as an expert technic and skillful aviator worth the readership’s time and money. As the *Courier* noted, too, the aviators had to walk four miles from their now motor-less plane to Salt Lake City in snow, and yet wished to continue in their flight anyway (“Cross-Country Flyer to Continue Flight”).

In a similar tone to the *Defender*’s, and following the crusading imagery of Coleman’s goodwill message, the editor of the *California Eagle*, Joseph Bass, depicted Foreman as a hero on an aviation mission for the race. Foreman, according to Bass, was “striving to make his contribution to progress depicting the prowess and genius of a race risking his very life to accomplish the end wholly unmindful of vain glory or any of the colorful things which men sometimes strive for” (quoted in Snider 256-7). Bass’s goodwill message, like texts on Coleman during her career and after her passing, included personal sacrifice, lamentation, and call for the race to take up aviation education by following Foreman’s example.

The message was heard, it seemed, in Chicago. When the two aviators finally arrived in the city, they were welcomed, invited to give talks at churches and social gatherings and to ask for funds. Despite the flight's eventual failure, the *Defender* sensed a good story and published an interview with Foreman, in which the flyer implored the black youth that "they, too, with courage and training, can launch into the field of aviation." "The youth of our group," Foreman further explained, "have too long been led to believe that [...] we have no place in the growing field of commercial aviation" ("Flyers Score Men Who Mock Their Efforts"). In short, his flight sought to awaken in the race the ambition to fly.

Foreman's eloquence was strongly reminiscent of Coleman's. The *Defender* portrayed the young pilot as an unassuming, yet passionate crusader for the race's success in the field of aviation, and, even though Foreman's flight ended in Chicago when his plane was deemed "not airworthy" by aeronautical authorities (Snider 260), the black newspapers seemed to have found a new aviation hero. More importantly, even Foreman expressed his vision of aviation as essential if the race were to survive the upcoming race war: "[B]eing barred in the last war from the aviation service seriously affected [the race's] ambition to learn to fly. This ambition must be awakened," explained Foreman, "if we ever expect to leave the ground and master the air as the other races of the earth have done" ("Flyers Score Men Who Mock Their Efforts"). Having been associated with the *Californian Eagle's* Garveyite editors (Snider 265), Foreman was probably versed in the race-war rhetoric of the UNIA. Although he had not delivered on his promise to make it easily to New York and had to travel back by train to

Los Angeles, where he finally arrived at the end of June – after almost four months – the young pilot did state upon his arrival that “he may take a trip to South America” (“Ace Foreman, Los Angeles Aviator, Back Home Again”). In this way, Foreman echoed Coleman’s intentions when she, too, hit a lull in her endeavors to spread aviation’s message of goodwill.

Foreman followed in Coleman’s footsteps both rhetorically and in terms of ideas after his return to California. In December 1927, he announced the opening of his own flying school, expecting, per the *Courier*, “a considerable number of Negro boys and girls [...] to enroll in the school [...] owing to the world-wide interest in aviation” (“Negro Aviator Starts School”). The school opened in April 1928 (“Race Aviator May Take Part in Air Derby In Fall”). Although, unlike Coleman, Foreman managed to realize his dream of opening a black aviation school, his career was also cut short. In early August, 1929, he was fined and sued by the federal government for \$500 for flying a plane without an identification number (“Aviator Sued”). One week later, he drowned. The *Courier* carried a detailed biographical article on Foreman (“Ace Foreman Lived Eventful Life”), but there was no military funeral held for the young flyer. In a span of three years, the African American community thus prematurely lost two passionate pilots, upon whose deaths the black press was left with a creative, deeply personal narrative of martyrs who implored their fellow men and women to take up aviation as a worthwhile cause for the future of the race.

Unfortunately, the discussion on aviation and its message to the readers – fostered and molded by Coleman, Foreman, and various opinion pieces in the black

press – was picked up, transformed, and discredited by Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, whose escapades filled the pages of the black press until around 1937 and hampered the progress and image of black aviation for years. In 1922, Julian became popular for his parachute stunts in honor of the UNIA and, one month later for the Harlem Hellfighters. By 1923, however, the Trinidad-born parachutist and, as he claimed, doctor with a degree from McGill University in Montreal, as well as fictitious ties to the Canadian Air Force during WW1¹⁰, was on his own, as his black stunt flyer, Edison McVey, “one of the two daredevil aviators of the race,” wrote the *Courier*, was severely injured in a plane accident (“Lieutenant Edison Badly Hurt in Fall”). In the following months, Julian became a headline joke in the black press as his wife, whom he had left in Montreal, called him a “love thief [who] left a trail of broken hearts in his wake” and sued for divorce (“Sued by Wife”).

Julian knew how to attract publicity for himself through aviation. In April 1924, the desperate parachutist travelled to Boston to seek funding for a plane to fly to Africa (“Aviator Seeks \$8,000”). In claiming to want to fly a plane to Africa, Julian exploited the international dimension of Coleman’s and Foreman’s dreams of flying to Pan-American countries and spreading aviation’s goodwill message. Having been a Garveyite, too, Julian must have been well aware of the ways Garvey was publicizing aviation’s military potential in articles about colonial powers’ bombing of various African countries. Unlike the heralded flyers that Coleman and Foreman had been,

¹⁰ According to Snider (107), there were no records showing a black flyer in the Canadian army, nor were there any records of Julian having ever attended the university.

however, Julian could not fly a plane and seemed to have only tried to whet the black public's appetite for black flyers, while discrediting any funding campaigns on his behalf in the process. One month after Julian's trip to Boston, the Boulin Detective Agency, one of the first black detective organizations (Brundage 306), operated by a fellow West Indian, announced in a *Courier* article that Julian "is not an aviator or pilot, but only a parachute jumper." The investigation by Boulin concluded that Julian sought to enrich himself by asking for funds, because, since he was not a licensed pilot, he could not legally take an airplane to Africa or anywhere else ("Herbert Julian Not an Aviator Detectives Say"). Despite his publicized shortcomings and legal troubles, however, Julian began in 1924 his career as aviation's con artist, spreading a message of goodwill on which he did not intend to deliver.

A mere month after the Boulin exposé in the *Courier*, Julian continued to develop his own exaggerated goodwill message, with special emphasis on the international, border-crossing dimension of aviation. In June 1924, he brought a \$8,000 plane to Harlem, where it was supposed to be assembled for a test round-trip to Boston. On July 4, he was planning to hop off on a trip spanning four continents within thirty days, as he planned to visit South America, Haiti, Liberia, West Africa, France, England, Scotland, Iceland, and Canada. Julian's grey plane was dubbed "Ethiopia I.," although the country was not on the destination list, and its tail was painted in red, black, and green, due to Julian's association with Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. The organization, however, distanced itself from Julian's proposed trip

(“Julian Brings \$8,000 Airplane to Harlem”), as it was already infamous for its own scandals.

Julian was a master of form over matter, rhetoric over action. He skillfully exploited Pan-African symbols in naming his plane Ethiopia I., subliminally referring to the biblical quote “Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God,” which represented the black biblical tradition and was reflected in Garveyism and the Rastafari movement (Moses 51). He combined the militant Pan-Africanism of Garvey’s UNIA with Coleman’s vision of international promotional flights, which would bring the gospel of aviation to people of color outside of the United States, into a convoluted message of goodwill, which he could only promote, yet never actually deliver on. Indeed, his 1924 flight ended in disaster, when Julian was pressured into taking off after a Department of Justice official had asked him to prove that he was not embezzling money from his aviation fund. In front of a crowd of 10,000, who were asked to donate even more money so that Julian could repay what he still owed to the plane owners, the parachutist ended in Flushing Bay after a three-minute flight, suffered internal injuries, and became the laughing stock of both black and white press (Snider 116, “Aviator Hurt When Plane Falls”).

Even though Julian would never fly more than several hundred miles during his career, he presented his unrealizable goodwill plans in the black press for another decade. In 1926, he sought funds for another plane to fly to Liberia – the plane was never paid for, the flight never materialized, and yet Julian was called by the *Courier* the only licensed black aviator and received praise (“Julian Pays \$9,000 on New \$15,000

Plane”). In 1928, the parachutist proposed a non-stop flight from NYC to Paris and, this time, managed to acquire sponsorship from Senator A. Spencer Field. In a series of promotional articles, the *Courier* recycled Julian’s old message with a new twist: taking a page from Coleman and Foreman’s book, Julian presented himself as an aviation crusader for the race, stating that “if anything happens, I shall be the only sufferer. [...] While I am sure the outcome will be satisfactory, I have no desire to place the life of another human being in jeopardy” (“To Go Lindy’s Way – Alone!”). Julian’s message was eerily similar to Coleman’s first statements upon her first return from France – as well as Bass’s defense of Foreman in the *California Eagle* – as was the exalting and flowery language in the *Courier* articles describing Julian’s plans. Furthermore, Julian was satisfying the black press readership’s lust for yellow journalism as he toyed with the ever-present imagery of death, closely associated with early aviation attempts as well as Coleman and Foreman’s fate.

More importantly, however, Julian began playing the race-war card, too. In an interview before his proposed flight to Paris, the parachutist explained that if his flight proved to be a success, “the colored man will be recognized in a new light from the standpoint of value to his country. No longer will he be of service only to the Army and Navy. Once he has been granted a license to pilot a machine, he can go into the aviation corps.” Driving his message of military potential of his crusading flight home, Julian echoed Garvey and the black press editorials in stating that “it is certain that if another war comes, it must be fought in the air”. The *Courier* adopted the language of Julian’s bold claims and shifted the tone of its aviation message toward sensationalism, despite

its reputation as a conservative paper devoid of yellow journalism. The paper called Julian the “only blackbird ever to cleave the azure on man-made wings,” working for his race “eager for a Negro to attain a greatness in flying commensurate with that of his brethren in other branches of the arts and sciences.” Again, Coleman and Foreman’s message resurfaced here, but in a more exalted tone, typical of Julian’s self-promoting style, aimed at stirring national and racial pride in the readership. The *Courier*, in fact, went as far as to hail Julian the “Bronze Lindy” and falsely claimed that he had sought to make a transatlantic flight long before Charles Lindbergh and others even considered such a trip (“To Go Lindy’s Way – Alone!).

The *Courier* even provided an extensive biography of the parachutist, including an assertion that Julian was “the only Negro pilot ever licensed by the National Aeronautic Association of the U.S.A.”¹¹ Ever the crusader, “soft-spoken but with eyes sparkling determination,” Julian explained to the *Courier* reporter that he had “no desire for personal aggrandizement [for] the sole purpose of my proposed flight is to stimulate a greater interest in aviation among my own people,” thus echoing Foreman’s confession to the *Defender* upon the failure of his cross-country trip. His success, Julian added, would lead to the founding of aviation schools where “Negroes may be taught the science of flying – free” (“Julian Names Plane Black Eagle”). From personal sacrifice and international aspirations for his flight to calls for establishing aviation schools for the race, Julian thus recreated a complete goodwill message, with implicit criticism of

¹¹ Future reports in the two newspapers would reveal that Julian received his license as late as 1931. One report from the late 1930s even indicated that he was a student’s license holder only.

inadequate funding for pioneer aviators. Only one key component was missing – Julian successfully taking off.

Aviation Editorials in the *Courier* and the *Defender*

Given Julian's antics and unfulfilled promises, as well as Foreman's failure to land in New York, editorials in the black press had gradually shifted their tone towards skepticism. Martyrdom remained the main element of the goodwill message that the black press was conveying, but distrust in aviation and realization that making headway in the field would be a longer journey than expected, also resonated in editorial texts. For example, in light of Lindbergh's recent ground-breaking transcontinental flight, the *Defender* observed in a May 1927 editorial that little had been done since 1926, as "Disaster seems to attend all our efforts in this field, partly because of a lack of interest on our part, and partly because of insufficient preparation on the part of those who are trying." Education opportunities were scant, too, as "We are barred from schools of aviation [...] and lack of funds makes it impossible for us to procure first class equipment for our efforts in aviation" ("Bessie Coleman"). In another text from May 1927, the *Defender* exhorted that "men of your color who pioneer in aviation come the hardest way." Comparing Foreman to Lindbergh, the editorial observed that "no cheering thousands gather when [Foreman and Ward] take off, no checks flow in to reward their work." And yet "their fight is the hardest kind of a fight and their reward is pitiful [and] it takes nerve and courage for the aviators of your color to fly at all" ("The

Week: Nerve and Courage”).¹² The emotional message seemed to be working, however, as a letter reacted to the two May editorials, in which an aviator promised to “keep striving on to the top of the ladder of success” (“From an Aviator”).

Eventually, this skepticism of individual, Sisyphean efforts led the authors of editorials to focus on more organized, group- and systemic-level efforts. For example, in “The Week” from May 1927 – an editorial column on the front page of the *Defender* – the paper shifted its message towards the consequences that the undesirable state of affairs in black aviation had on the race’s civil rights in general. Titled “Heroes of the Air,” the short section of the column first discussed the unsuccessful non-stop transatlantic flight of two French flyers, Nungesser and Coli, explaining the interest of the race in their flight by reminding the readers that France, unlike the U.S., provides “men of your color [...] equal opportunities to achieve honors in all fields.” While the United States attempted its own flight, pilots of color were not wanted, the text pointed

¹² The *Courier* had its own version of deploying the goodwill message of aviation while remaining skeptical. Titled “What Will the Negro Contribute to Aviation,” its June 1927 editorial discussed black aviation in the context of Lindbergh’s successful flight as well as the race’s history of contributing to naval voyages and navigation. It reminded the reader that race pilots often face ridicule and lack of interest in their efforts, but it also struck a hopeful tone in arguing that Lindbergh’s achievements should inspire the race’s youth to “begin a serious apprenticeship in aeronautics [although] the time is not yet favorable for a big adventure in aviation by a race man.” As in the *Defender*’s case, responses to the paper’s message came in the form of letters, indicating that the newspapers’ goodwill message was being read and heard.

out, even though the race had already furnished its own pioneers, namely Bessie Coleman, a “martyr to the progress of aviation.” The column reminded its readership that African Americans had been represented in aviation, but were now invisible – which should be rectified – while in France, where Coleman had studied and was hailed as a wonder by numerous flying aces, men of color flourish. Progress in aviation and civil rights were thus connected, as subsequent coverage in the black press would demonstrate; as would Forsythe and Anderson’s goodwill flight to Pan-American countries.

If advancements in black aviation were vitally connected to the community’s civil rights, so were they to the hopes of inclusion of black soldiers in the US military aviation units. In a September 1927 editorial, while the *Defender* called “the few attempts made at flying by our people [...] feeble and disorganized,” and Bessie Coleman “valorous,” of “indomitable courage and will,” and reminded its readers of the aviatrix’s intentions to start an aviation school – thereby invoking her spirit and urging the race to take up aviation – the Chicago paper again connected aviation with the lack of representation of the race in the military. It declared that black soldiers have been “a part of every modern achievement. We have taken part in every conflict in which America has been engaged since its inception,” and asked “Shall the mighty spirit of Bessie Coleman die?” (“Bessie Coleman’s Spirit Must Live”). The reference to Coleman’s spirit seems to have been designed to evoke in the readership memories of the late aviatrix’s flying skills, which were comparable to those of WW1 flying aces, as well as memories of her celebration of black veterans. After all, Coleman was a martyr

in the vein of Joan of Arc, and was therefore always associated with heavy military symbolism.

Invoking Coleman's legacy worked, as the answer that the *Defender* received one week later was encouraging. Frederick W. Smith of the 8th Illinois Infantry – the regiment Coleman flew in celebration of in 1922 – related that there were 25 high school graduates in the regiment “who are at the present time clamoring ineffectively for training in aviation [...] but our struggle for recognition is a feeble one because no man of power in our Race supports the youth in such endeavors.” Smith proposed that politicians should be lobbied to establish a black air squadron in the Illinois National Guard (ING), as it had been done for the white soldiers (“Letter to the Editor: National Guard Aviation”). However, the idea would not come to pass until the early 1930s, when John C. Robinson and Cornelius Coffey established the first black squadron in the ING. Another military officer responded to the *Defender*'s challenge when Lieut. H.D. Meadows, a WW1 veteran, proposed a school named after Coleman, which would teach the race's youth in aviation, as the field offered unlimited job opportunities (“Youths Must Prepare for Aviation Age”). In this way, Coleman's message, with its military aspects, was being vigorously debated.

The *Defender*, perhaps due to Abbott's connection to Coleman, was in the forefront of early campaigns for the inclusion of African Americans in all branches of the armed forces. And, mainly, it focused on inclusion in the aviation service. In February, in “Give Us a Chance,” the paper argued that “the government owes it to us to give us this chance [and] let down the bars in our [...] aviation service, and we will

prove what real service and real loyalty mean.” In September, both the *Courier* and the *Defender* reported on Captain Henson Cutley, an American citizen and a military instructor of the Liberian Frontier Forces, who had to travel to Germany to study aviation as he had been rejected from the U.S. army aviation school on account of his skin color (“Liberian Army Trainer Takes Aviation Course”). While the newspapers did not rejoice over the fact that a black man from Africa, and in the military, was planning to become licensed to fly, they did draw conclusions from the case as to their own future in the nation’s aviation service and air corps. The *Defender* carried a photograph of Cutley in Germany (“Aviation School Draws Line”) and, more importantly, published an editorial, arguing that “perfection of militarism is not the chief aim of a country that is supposed to be second to none,” and the consequence of barring black applicants from army aviation schools may be, according to the paper, decreased loyalty on the part of active soldiers and future recruits of color to fight for the nation (“The Week: Debarring Aviators”). Aviation was here depicted as a case study of segregation in the US military, and it was directly tied to advancements in civil rights – the right to serve in one’s nation’s army.

The editorials from 1927 and 1928 indicate the ways in which the black press was gradually reformulating the content and tone of its aviation coverage. The exciting narratives as well as the tragic fates of Bessie Coleman and Joel Foreman, along with Hubert Julian’s escapades, gave rise to the original goodwill message of aviation. Education, crossing boundaries, and closing the racial technological gap were all essential components of what these pioneer aviators were crusading for. As their

individual attempts, for whatever reasons, failed, however, the black press reshaped its mostly positive and enthusiastic narrative of the race's future in aviation towards a more skeptical message and tone, which highlighted that black aviation could probably be salvaged if only the US military accepted black soldiers in its aviation branch.

The combination of celebrating individual martyr-like efforts of black pioneer pilots, decrying lack of financial support of and interest in aviation on the part of the black community, and calls for the US military to let black pilots in would, from the late 1920s onwards, become the recurring themes of aviation coverage in the black press. It was a goodwill message of hope mixed with constant anxiety over the racial technological gap, symbolized by aviation, which was only exacerbated by the lack of black representation in the armed forces. It was also a message that clearly indicates that the *Courier* and the *Defender* launched a concerted effort to promote black aviation. As the goodwill message of aviation slowly developed throughout the 1920s, black newspapers adopted aviation as a cause and deployed a distinctive force and voice in their coverage of the race's advancements in the field.

4. WILLIAM J. POWELL AND THE AVIATION CAMPAIGN, 1929-1931

While Hubert Julian's escapades – such as a proposed non-stop flight to India, allegedly heading the Ethiopian Royal Air Force, and changing his citizenship from British to Italian in order to try and assassinate Mussolini – remained on the pages of the black press until 1937, actual pilots and their bona fide endeavors actually began to gradually appear in the black press, too. Even during the years when Foreman and Julian shone in the spotlight did the *Courier* and the *Defender* report on other pioneering aviators, usually providing a photograph and a short biographic profile along with it: In 1927, for example, the *Defender* published a photograph of Jesse S. Samuels, who was hoping to join the United States air mail service (“Future Flyer”), which, however, remained closed to race aviators until 1938, when another Illinois-based pilot, Grover C. Nash delivered mail during the National Air Mail Week (“Race Aviator Flies U.S. Air Mail Route”).

The *Courier* also reported on Clarence E. Martin and Walter E. Swagerty¹³, who attempted to sign up for a non-stop-flight race to Hawaii in 1927 (“Black American Aviators to Enter \$35,000 Non-Stop Hawaiian Flight”). Swagerty appeared on the pages of the *Courier* again in September 1929 in an article on four air races in Los Angeles, where he demonstrated a “monocoupe, a pilot and passenger plane of small proportions” for the Velle Motor company. The article explained that Swagerty did not possess an

¹³ According to Jakeman, Swagerty claimed to have invented a “heavier than air machine” back in 1911 (54).

aviator's license ("Aviator Takes Part in Four California Races"). Jesse Boland made headlines in October 1927, when he flew a plane he had built himself over the city of Roanoke, Va. For several hours ("Roanoke Youth"). Technically-skilled youngsters around the country were thus trying to pave the way for African Americans in aviation, too.

Then, in 1928, the *Courier* and the *Defender* introduced their readers to aviators and aviation enthusiasts who would later become instrumental in the campaign that the two papers launched in 1929. Both papers reported on Dr. A. Porter Davis, a Kansas City-based pioneer aviator, who, following the example of Coleman and Foreman, said that he was planning to found a local aviation school ("Kansas City Physician Purchases Airplane"). Per the *Defender*, Davis, a well-off physician, had also been discriminated against when he had wanted to store his plane at a local airport on the Kansas side of the city, but was rejected by white pilots who objected to him being allowed on the field, asserting that "his presence greatly harmed the property's development." Davis had previously been rejected by white-owned airports on the Missouri side as well ("Kansas Aviation Field Bars Physician's Plane").

The *Defender* published numerous texts on Charles Lindbergh's transcontinental flight and other activities, too. Between May 1927 and February 1928, the newspaper ran thirteen articles on the national hero aviator, including one editorial. To honor Lindbergh's achievement the paper then ran a syndicated comic strip "The Conquest of the Air" by Nicholas Afonsky from June 2, 1928 to May 4, 1929 – 45 installments altogether. In mourning Bessie Coleman's passing, the newspaper seems to have turned

to Lindbergh and would sometimes use him in subsequent years as a measuring stick for African Americans' achievements in aviation. The *Courier* reminded its readers of Bessie Coleman's message and achievements in a series of articles about Reverend J.C. Austin of the Pilgrim Baptist Church in the heart of Chicago's Bronzeville, who devoted his sermons, among other things, to collecting funds to erect a monument for the intrepid aviatrix. The monument was eventually unveiled in June 1928, with several thousand Chicagoans in attendance. Hubert Julian had been scheduled to parachute over Coleman's grave, but he never made his appearance ("Throngs Hear Rev. Austin in Brilliant Sermon," "Monument to Bessie Coleman Unveiled in Chicago"). Despite Julian's unreliability, Austin took a plane ride with the parachutist in 1931, thereby cementing his position as one of the most vocal supporters of black aviation in Chicago ("Rev. Austin Takes Airplane Ride with Col. Hubert Julian").

Finally, on October 27, 1928, the *Courier* published an inauspicious photograph with the headline "Form Flying Club," showing the charter members of the Los Angeles branch of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club, organized by William J. Powell, the club's national president. While Hubert Julian was about to postpone his proposed non-stop flight from NYC to Paris, thereby disappointing the black newspaper readership hungry for new aviation heroes, the October article in the *Courier* marked the beginning of a crucial shift in the increasingly symbiotic relationship between black aviators and the black press. From 1929 onwards, black pilots, inspired by Powell's leadership, would take initiative in directly forming black aviation's image in the black press. Although their timing could not have been more unfortunate with the onset of the Great

Depression, black aviators and aviatrixes began to write letters to the editor, articles on their flying experiences, the physical reality of flying, the history of black aviation, and one of them, Powell, even published a book, thus securing his position as the creator and leader of a nation-wide campaign for aviation in the black press.

Powell's close relationship with the *Courier*, which developed in early 1929, also slightly modified the existing goodwill message formed by Coleman, Foreman, Julian and the black press prior to 1929, as it was now the pilots – William J. Powells, Herman Banning, James Holt Peck, and, with the onset of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis, also Janet Waterford, John C. Robinson, and Willa Brown cooperating with the *Defender* – who directly influenced and shaped the message sent out to the readership. Even more emphasis was put in black newspapers' editorials and articles on promoting aviation and mechanical education, and active participation in aviation events in the form of editorials. Furthermore, the aviators/journalists also began to call for institutional structures to be built so as to secure continuous development of black aviation. Finally, while calls for the inclusion of African American pilots in the country's aviation service remained a staple of the coverage of black aviation, several pioneers set out to establish their own (para)military organizations, which sought to bridge the racial technological gap and teach black students to fly. In short, in coordination with the *Courier* and the *Defender*, black aviators launched a re-shaped and intensified goodwill campaign with a military undertone.

Consequently, this section discusses a myriad of elements in the newspaper coverage of aviation between 1929 and 1935. While the campaign mounted in the black

press to promote black aviation was becoming increasingly concerted, it still consisted mostly of reports on and photographs of individual achievements. What distinguishes this period from the early 1920s, however, is the gradual emergence of group efforts – especially those by William J. Powell in California and Rupert A. Simmons in Chicago. Furthermore, while education and job opportunities offered by the budding industry – as well as the military purpose of aviation – remained at the forefront of the goodwill message of aviation on the pages of the black press, new aviators, aviatrixes, new voices, and new genres gradually appeared in the *Courier* and the *Defender*, too: namely poems and essays on aviation. It is also at this time that George S. Schuyler, *Courier*'s preeminent columnist, becomes an important aviation advocate, in particular, for his criticism of Hubert Julian and attempts at presenting aviation as a worthwhile and serious undertaking. Schuyler's is not the only critical voice that resonated throughout the *Courier* and the *Defender*, however, as criticism of Powell and other aviation crusaders would begin to appear on the pages of the two papers. Jealousy and hurt ego seemed to spur some black aviators to smear their colleagues in the press and cause setback to their endeavors. Overall, the beginnings of a concerted, full-fledged aviation campaign in the black press were wide-ranging as is shown below.

If editorials and letters to the editor prior to 1929 sounded more like a jeremiad, as Snider claims (247) – lamenting the misfortunes of crusading black aviators, while hoping for brighter future – the year 1929 brought new hopes, voices, and tones to the existing goodwill message that had become increasingly skeptical. In February 1929, the *Defender* carried a photograph of, Edward F. Smith, a young Cincinnati aviator, who had

recently co-piloted air-mail, becoming the first of his race to have done so (“Would Pilot Air Mail”). He later performed as a parachutist in Columbus alongside a wing-walker Harry Irvin – an aviator who had responded to the *Defender*’s editorial on Coleman in May 1927. Also, the newspaper published a photograph of black students at the All American Aviation association, which had established branches in Chicago, Kansas City, and Los Angeles (“Future Flyers”).

The *Courier* did not stay behind in terms of positive coverage. It started 1929 off with an editorial “Opportunities in Aviation,” providing statistical evidence of rapid progress in aviation and encouraging its readers to take up aviation. The text argued that “tuition fees are not prohibitive, and those who are not physically fit to become pilots can make themselves eligible for well-paying jobs on the ground.” It also opined that “there ought to be more Negroes in this field,” because schools outside of the South were admitting race applicants, and it challenged the black community to take up the cause: “a good way to get a number of our folks in this new and prosperous industry is for various local organizations to establish scholarships for that purpose. What Negro community will be the first to do this?,” asked the paper.¹⁴

As was the case with previous editorials, an answer came immediately, but this time it would change the outlook of aviation coverage in the black press for years. The *Courier* had published a piece in February 1929, reporting that “the first Good-will tour

¹⁴ As a follow-up, the *Courier* published an interview with Amelia Earhart, where the aviatrix declared her faith in the African Americans’ “ability to do the worthwhile things” (“Amelia Earhart Discusses the Negro”), which provided further encouragement for would-be pilots.

by Negro flyers in the history of aviation” was to take place in June. The flyers would start from Los Angeles and stop at “200 of the most important cities” with the object of interesting the race “in aviation in general and its possibilities” (“Girl Flyer to Head Flight”). Although the article did not specify the name of the organization proposing the tour, the endeavor gained clearer contours in a letter in early March in response to *Courier’s* “Opportunities in Aviation” editorial. William J. Powell wrote to the paper about his excitement to see “our greatest weekly paper *starting a campaign* to interest the Negro in this new field [of aviation] (emphasis mine).” He announced that his organization was planning to tour the country in July, visiting 100 cities “In the Interest for Negroes in Aviation,” and hoping to open branches in each of the cities. His five planes would be piloted by students who were to be “licensed by the Department of Commerce very shortly.” Finally, Powell explained that he was starting an advertising campaign and hoped that the *Courier* would publish an article on aviation by him every week in both local and national editions of the weekly (“Letter to the Editor”).

Powell’s letter is remarkable for several reasons. The director of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club took it upon himself to promote aviation among African Americans and was willing to invest his own money, hoping to gradually find other financial support. In this way, Powell established himself and his organization as the leader in the field and gave a voice and credentials to the cause of black aviation. Furthermore, Powell, like Coleman and Julian, understood that the black press was the most efficient way of entering black households and propagating aviation. Having noticed that the *Courier* had engaged in encouraging its readership to seize the opportunities that the

field offered, Powell sought to associate himself with the medium that would give him reach. His plan to have a weekly article appear in the black press also materialized as the *Courier* carried almost twenty articles and editorials dealing with aviation in the rest of 1929. In other words, there was to be no escape for the black readership from Powell and the *Courier's* aviation campaign, if the new aviation crusader were to have it his way.

The *Courier* continued its campaign in March with an editorial which asserted that the time was ripe for the race to take up aviation like it did the auto industry. In fact, as Kathleen Franz points out, black newspapers had also “mounted a [...] campaign for auto citizenship: they produced counter images of black drivers as inventive and respectable [and] as technologically skilled and socially responsible” (139). The *Courier's* piece, serves as a perfect example of the way the aviation campaign was advertising job opportunities in skilled positions as one of aviation's main attractions. In “Wanted: Aviators and Mechanics,” the paper pointed out that “there is unlimited opportunity for capable pilots and mechanics regardless of race, color or creed. Young Negroes should awake to this opportunity. There are plenty of schools scattered around the country where they can obtain the necessary knowledge to qualify for such positions.” Vocational education was also emphasized in the process. Echoing the early 1920s call for African Americans to take up education by studying at aviation schools, the text explained that now, more than ever, “the machine dominates the world today and will continue to do so.” Finally, reacting to a long-perceived technological lag on the part of the black community, the text argued that “the man who is skilled in handling, repairing and overhauling the machine will be an important personage so long as the

machine age lasts.” If black drivers and mechanics had succeeded with cars, they should be able to learn to operate and repair planes, too, argued the text. Mastery of technology and mechanics was here highlighted as not merely a form of emulating white America’s technological prowess, but was considered a life-long benefit for the entire black community.

In the following months, the *Courier* filled its pages with reports on Powell and his aero club. In April 1929, it commended Powell on using a “group method” of learning aviation by establishing local branches of his organization, which would “open a way for the Negroes to get in on the ground floor of this promising industry” (“Opportunity to Learn Aviation”). It is understandable that the black press would notice Powell’s modern educational approach. As Coleman, Foreman, and other pilots on the pages of black newspapers had evidenced, individual effort was to be appreciated, but would often fail in bringing about advances in the field. Powell’s group method held a promise of change as it aimed to be more efficient and less costly. The paper also ran a photograph of Miss Beatrice Reeves, “the only Negro girl in America today completing her course in aeronautics” under Powell. Address and further details were provided for the readers to support Powell’s efforts (“Pilot”). In early May, a long piece again commended Powell’s affordable group method and his fund-raising efforts to provide each branch with its own plane. The text offered Powell’s first biographic profile, informing readers that the aero club director had spent a year learning to fly at the Warren School of Aeronautics, was a University of Illinois graduate, lieutenant with the 317th Engineers during WW1, and the first black man to have completed a course in

aerial navigation. Finally, the text devoted two paragraphs to spreading Powell's goodwill message about educating pilots and mechanics ("Aero Club to Buy 100 Planes").¹⁵

Even though coverage of Powell's endeavors now dominated the black press aviation campaign, the Pittsburgh weekly did still report on other individual efforts in aviation. It reported on a Jacksonville girl, who, having been inspired by Bessie Coleman, wished to pursue aviation and had recently won a city-wide competition to join the local Girls' Flying Club, but was being denied entry on account of her race ("Girl Wins Place in White Flying Club"). Another sign of nation-wide interest in aviation was an article about the National Association for Advancement of Aviation Among the Colored Race, whose purpose, the piece informed, was "creating a better understanding between races, through a mutuality of interest in the newest science, aeronautics." The organization planned to provide scholarships for students to be sent to existing aviation schools and then take place in the budding field of aviation. It also eventually sought to establish its own school and hold exhibition flights and air-shows ("Organize Aviation Association in N.Y."). It seemed that Powell was not the only one crusading for his race in aviation and that the campaign's goodwill message with emphasis on education and subsequent entrance into the industry was reaching its objectives. More importantly, the article marked another instance of an aviation organization being established. The field and interest in it seemed to be growing.

¹⁵ Powell's complete profile can be found in *Distinguished African Americans in Aviation and Space Science* (2002) as well as Phil Scott's "The Blackbirds Take Wing."

It may thus come as no surprise that the year 1929 also brought the first attempt at establishing a black aviation school with an overtly military purpose. In June, the *Defender* published a photograph with the title “Chicago Goes Air-Minded,” depicting “Major Simmons,” the head of the American Aviation School on Indiana Ave, with his students. In a somewhat derisive tone, the paper added that “if learning to fly depends upon the ground work, this group ought to be expert aviators in a short while,” as the group of students “is shown working on a model plane.” The paper was missing an important point here, however. As Powell, Simmons, and Robinson’s subsequent educational activities would show, ground work – in other words, technical and mechanical skills – were a prerequisite to becoming a successful aviator during the era of segregation. Black pilots could only rely on their own skills to repair and make functional their planes. In fact, it was ground work first, flying practice second what Powell had been preaching all along.

Despite the mocking tone of the newspaper, however, Simmons turned out to be a true pioneer of aviation in Chicago after Coleman’s death and a follower of Coleman’s deployment of overt military symbols to highlight the importance of aviation. According to *Distinguished African Americans in Aviation and Space Science*, Major Rupert A. Simmons sponsored the first “colored” air show in August 1929 (180), because he wanted to showcase Dr. Davis from Kansas City – discussed above – and promote his own Chicago school. The *Defender* later changed its tone, when Simmons announced the proposed August air meet. The paper ran a celebratory article, likening Simmons and the black instructors at the other two aviation schools in Chicago to the crusading Bessie

Coleman, and declared that “never has the public shown such a keen interest in the progress of aviation as it is doing today” (“Big Aerial Meet to Draw Cream of Aces to Chicago”). The paper also carried a large photograph of Simmons’s students in front of a plane, all lined up as soldiers, clad in uniforms (“Plan Big Aerial Exhibit”).

Simmons’s American Aviation School was military in style, as the photograph in the Chicago weekly indicates. According to Enoch P. Waters, the school was part of the Illinois Air Commerce Reserves and “employed an ex-army pilot as an instructor in aviator mechanics and flying.” At one point, claims Waters, “membership in the organization reached 60, and out of the group came three licensed flyers” (“Black Wings Over America”). Simmons later became an aviation promoter and helped establish Willie “Suicide” Jones as one of the best parachutists in the world. On the occasion of Jones’ world-record leap in September 1939, the *Defender* ran a brief profile on Simmons with two photographs from 1929, where the Major is depicted with his students in military uniforms of the Illinois Air Commerce Reserves, which he had founded independently of any military organization (“Pioneers Who Made Chicagoans Air-Minded”) Simmons thus added a strong martial aspect to his endeavors in aviation education. Given the atmosphere and events concerning aviation in 1939, the reminder that there had been a military-style aviation school in Chicago in 1929 only served to strengthen the resolve of the African American community to lobby further to be included in CPTP.

At this point in time, Chicago and California, especially Los Angeles and San Diego, were the hubs of black aviation group activities.¹⁶ While Chicago was going air-minded – military-style – Powell was pushing forward with his proposed tour. His home branch in Los Angeles bought a new Swallow training plane in May 1929, photograph of which was published in the *Courier* (“Bessie Coleman Clubs Get New Training Plane”). In local news, the newspaper ran an announcement that the local Bluebird Aero Club of Pittsburgh had applied to join Powell’s organization (“Bluebird Aero Club”). In July, even though the proposed tour had not started, the *Courier* reported that one of the aero club’s planes would be christened “Oscar DePriest” to honor the African American congressman from Chicago (“To Christen Plane Oscar DePriest”). The *Defender*, too, picked up Powell’s announcements about the proposed tour in late June. In “Bessie Coleman Aero Club Planes to Tour,” the paper summarized Powell’s goodwill message, provided a profile, and listed all the participating pilots. In its section “California News” from June 29, the Chicago weekly added that on July 1, Powell’s group would hold exhibition flights around San Diego and then set off on a trans-continental flight, which none of *Courier*’s reports or Powell’s texts had mentioned.

Powell’s endeavors, however, were not always received with and discussed in positive terms – which only added to his aura of an aviation crusader. The *Defender* published a letter by Powell in mid-September, in which the aviation campaign leader

¹⁶ Most of my research suggests that the two areas were crucial in the beginnings of black aviation. However, black aviation in New York, and Harlem in particular, seems to be an underresearched area worth exploring, especially given the involvement of the *New York Amsterdam News* in aviation activities.

had to defend himself against accusations that he had hoodwinked the gullible black public with his campaign when his Blackbirds did not perform at the Universal Association air meet – organized by Major Simmons – at Checkerboard Field, Chicago, in mid-August. Powell’s flyers, however, had never been scheduled to participate in the event, the director insisted. Similarly to Coleman, Foreman, and the black press editorials, Powell accused those who had spread false news about his aero club of “shatter[ing] the confidence of our people in the thing that is foremost before the world today, aviation.” Though disappointed, Powell expressed confidence in his endeavors when he announced that there were only eight black aviators in the country at that moment, seven of whom, however, belonged to his organization. Their objective was to perfect themselves in flying and quietly prepare “to carry aviation to the Negro by the Negro.” Unlike others, Powell was implicitly informing the readership that he did not intend to profit from the goodwill tour, but, at the same time, did not want to present an unfinished product to the public. He implored “the Negro of America not to lose confidence in the Negro’s ability to fly before they really enter the field, for aviation industry opens unlimited possibilities and jobs to the Negro” (“Eight Licensed Pilots”), staying on his goodwill message and presenting himself and his group as toiling crusaders, who would deliver aviation to the race. Martyrdom, as in Coleman’s case, was part of Powell’s modus operandi.

The Checkerboard Field event on August 17-18 was not without its own controversy, either, which only highlighted the emergence in the black press of voices critical of some aviation pioneers as well as the lack of interest in aviation. In an

editorial, “Progress in Aviation,” from August 24, the *Defender* raved about the air meet, which had featured performers of all races. The event proved that “the possibilities of the world’s youngest industry are unlimited with anyone with grit, wit, and determination,” echoing *Courier*’s ecstatic editorials from earlier in the year. The editorial asserted that “anything can be done” in the field of aviation. However, the text never mentioned the event’s organizer, Major Rupert A. Simmons.

In a letter published the following week, Lucile Childress related her experience at the air meet, arguing that it was not until a group of black spectators voiced their protest against the organizers not allowing two black pilots to perform, that existing racial barriers at the event had been lifted. Dr. Davis – who had had an accident en route to the event (“Skillful Piloting Prevents Death”) – had named his plane “Inspiration,” and later performed alongside a Mr. Miller (“At Checkerboard Field”). While Childress does not say anything specific about Miller, it may be assumed that, since Simmons organized the air meet, it was Robert Miller, one of Simmons’ students and later the “mayor” of Bronzeville (“Pioneers Who Made Chicagoans Air-Minded”), who performed alongside the intrepid doctor. Throughout her letter, Childress excoriates the black spectators who would pay money to see white pilots perform and not support their licensed compatriots (“At Checkerboard Field”).

Meanwhile, Powell’s goodwill tour still had not started – in fact, it would never materialize in the way it was advertised, nor would it be very successful – although it did help raise awareness about aviation. On October 11, Powell’s group managed to christen their plane as planned and then took DePriest in the namesake plane for an air tour over

Los Angeles (“DePriest Takes Ride in Airplane”). The plane was piloted by Herman Banning, one of the first licensed black aviators¹⁷. Optimism still prevailed in newspaper coverage of aviation, as the *Defender* reported on a licensed aviatrix in Washington, D.C. (“Girl, A Year Out of School, Is Plane Pilot”), and some on the *Courier*’s staff ventured to take their first plane rides, thereby again promoting aviation and pronouncing it safe for the readers, too (“Calvin Makes First Flight in Airplane”). Powell was still crusading for aviation, but his projects were becoming increasingly harder to carry out with the onset of the Great Depression.

Finally, Powell’s endeavors made headlines in October with a story of an unsuccessful and accidentally international flight. According to the *Courier* and the *Defender*, Powell and Banning had been on a cross-country flight when they lost track of where they were flying and ended up crashing south of the Mexican border. Having spent four days without food, the two aviators wandered across the desert and beaches and finally came upon the village of San Felipe, where the villagers fed them and took them to a hospital in Mexicali. From there Powell and Banning made their way back home (“Pilots Wander Four Days without Food,” “Lost in Cross Country Trip”). The two men thus lost their plane, but managed to survive, registering the first, albeit unofficial, international flight by a black pilot, and gaining coverage by the black press, including their biographical information, details about the aero club, and photographs. In December, the *Courier* advertised Powell’s efforts again, adding that a Phoenix branch

¹⁷ The *Defender* had reported on Banning in 1928, entitling his photograph “Air Conqueror.”

of the aero club was being organized and that Powell would soon be in San Antonio (“Experienced Rare Thrill”).

The first year in the full-fledged aviation campaign closed with two editorials, which summarized the black community’s efforts in promoting aviation and tried to instill optimism in their readership, despite Powell’s unsuccessful goodwill tour. “Slowly but surely the Negroes are taking to the air,” the *Courier* announced and reminded readers that “there are news reports of young Negroes here and there graduating from aviation schools and flying their planes about the country.” Based on these developments, the editorial shifted the usual goodwill message towards even more hopeful future by arguing that “those who get in the game now will be on top ten years from now, and probably sooner.” Finally, in exclaiming that “we are finally becoming air-minded” (“We’re Up in the Air”), the text painted a rosy picture of black aviation and its future after a year of intensive campaign. However, the Great Depression had just begun and the campaign would lose some traction in the following year. The year’s coverage ended with a note in the *Courier* on the establishment of The Eagle Aerial Corporation and a ground training school in Baltimore (“Commercial News”), reminding the paper’s readers that 1929 had indeed been a year during which new aviation schools – Coleman and Foreman’s dream – and new aviation organizations had been established.

The *Defender*, perhaps owing to the way aviation education was being organized in Chicago under Major Simmons, devoted its last aviation editorial to the armed forces issue. One year after the paper argued that barring an officer in the Liberian Frontier Forces from a US army aviation school may lead to decreased loyalty of the nation’s

units consisting of soldiers of color, the November 30 editorial reiterated *Defender's* views on the color bar in the armed forces. The text asserted that the U.S. military and naval authorities seemed to believe that African Americans “seek to serve our country on the battlefields in time of war,” but it is in fact in peace time as well, the paper declared, that black soldiers want to serve and be effectively trained. That is why African Americans “must be trained in every department of military and naval science. We must get into the aviation schools so that we can learn, experiment, sacrifice our time and resources and even die for our country.” Connecting civil rights with aviation and representation of black soldiers in the military again, the editorial finally declared that “We want all the rights or none” (“Patriotism”). As aviation was gaining traction among the black public, and as several aviators had shown their skills in Chicago and elsewhere, there was no reason why army aviation schools should be only for whites, opined the Chicago weekly.

4.1. 1930: New Voices and Genres, Old Faces and Problems

If the year 1929 effectively served for the launching of a full-fledged aviation campaign in the black press, the two subsequent years should be viewed as a gradual crystallization of who the black aviation leaders were. In 1930, the *Courier* continued in its coverage of aviation, whereas the *Defender* lagged behind; though it did publish several important texts as well.¹⁸ The most important developments in the overall

¹⁸ The *Defender* reminded its readers of Bessie Coleman and her legacy in May 1930, four years after her untimely death, when it published a photograph of the aviatrix along with a short biographical profile and statement that it was the Chicago weekly, which first informed of her death, distributing extra bulletins throughout the city (“Aviatrix”).

campaign, however, involved the introduction of new names of aviators – advocates for aviation education and employment – who would remain on the pages of the black press for years to come, the emergence of George S. Schuyler as one of aviation’s fiercest advocates, and the employment of a new genre within the campaign: a personal account of aviation from a black expert.

Individual achievements remained an important element of the aviation coverage in the black press, especially in the *Courier*, and the year 1930 provided a number of opportunities for the readership to rejoice in the successes of new pioneer aviators. In this way, the black press continued its efforts in informing readers about the African American population’s air-mindedness and individuals’ technical prowess. For example, in February, the *Courier* carried a report on a youthful aviator from Chicago named Johnnie Robinson, who ended up in hospital with his arms and legs frozen after flying over Chicago’s South Side (“Youthful Aviator Makes Flight”). This seems to be the first mention in either of the two newspapers of John C. Robinson, future head of the Ethiopian Royal Air Force and inspiration for at least two generations of black pilots during the 1930s and 1940s. Robinson did not only fly and skirmish in Ethiopia, but also wrote about his experiences in the country and with warfare for the black press between 1935-36; thereby becoming another member of the writing pilots.

One month later, in a more ecstatic tone than usual, the *Courier* reported on a local youth, Irvin Lee McEnheimer, who had just received a private pilot’s license in California, where he had studied under T.C. Ryan, the constructor of Lindbergh’s “Spirit of St. Louis” plane. The young pilot claimed that he had been inspired by Bessie

Coleman and wanted to pursue aviation in Pittsburgh, but was denied because of his skin color (“Local Youth Wins Pilot’s License”). The newspaper carried an advertisement for McEnheimer’s upcoming show as well, and on October 18 published an article, along with a photograph of McEnheimer in full gear, in which it invited its readers to the “brown-skinned Lindy’s” show and the “youth to enter aviation field” (“McEnhimer [sic] to Stage Air Show at Butler Airport Oct. 30”). In a report on the show itself, the *Courier* quoted the white commandant at the air field as saying that “McEnheimer is a credit to aviation and his people should be doubly proud of him, considering the handicaps he had to overcome to secure his training and credentials.” Over 300 spectators came to see the show on a fair-weather day and the paper had reportedly received dozens of letters expressing pride in the pilot (“McEnheimer’s Air Show Proves Big Thriller, Gay Crowd”). Pittsburgh, too, was becoming air-minded, no doubt owing to the aviation coverage provided by the *Courier*.

Employment in aviation continued to be one of the points of emphasis in aviation’s goodwill message in the black press. On June 28, 1930, for example, Edward F. Smith, the parachutist, reappeared in the *Courier*, when the paper reported on Smith’s representation of the Irwin Air Chute company at Curtiss Field, N.Y., where the black parachutist demonstrated his skills to parachuting experts and a host of white journalists (“Big Air Chute Company Employs Colored Expert”). Noting that Smith was working as a salesman for an English parachute producer, the *Courier* was delighted with Smith’s comportment, and one week later added a photograph of the young parachutist with the title “Daring!” The newspaper also reported on Smith’s planned leap in October of the

following year (“To Make Leap”). It seemed that there, indeed, were jobs in the aviation industry and that the hopeful goodwill message communicated in the black press had merit. Also, Smith’s employment in such a dangerous position must have been a testament to his technical and mechanical skills – testing a parachute was no longer a hobby, but a serious occupation which required technical expertise.

Aviation education – another essential component of aviation’s goodwill message – did not go unreported in 1930, either, as a new duo of black aviators, Marie Daugherty and Charles E. James, provided an example of how aviation education can lead to employment in the field. In April 1930, the American Aviation School opened its branch in Harlem, promising “no discrimination in its classes” and affordable rates (“The American Aviation School”). The director was Mr. William Dougherty, who reportedly “saw flying service in the Army” and whose wife was “the only race woman in the world now flying” (“Want Race Students to Learn Flying,” “The American Aviation School”). Dougherty’s military experience must have been an alluring piece of information, tying aviation education to potential involvement in the US aviation service, because, as the *Courier* covered the gala opening of the Harlem branch in mid-May, it reported that 40 students had enrolled in classes (“Aviation School Opens”). The newspaper also ran an advertisement for the school in its sports section (“Negro Aviation School”). Mrs. Daugherty charmed Harlemites one week later with a parachute jump – having reportedly performed many times around the country – and announced that the school was planning to buy its own field as white air fields did not let black students practice at them (“Woman Dives 2,000 Feet From Plane”).

In September, Daughtry performed another parachute jump from a plane piloted by Charles E. James. He had recently become the official pilot for the *New York Amsterdam News* (“Aviatrix Thrills Elks”), which had bought a plane with the objective of opening “the door of aviation to [black] people” (“Amsterdam News Purchases Plane”). The 24-year old pilot had made headlines in the *Defender* back in May, when he flew in his “Miss Harlem” plane. When asked why he wanted to be a pilot, the aviator answered that he wanted “to teach my people to fly” (“Aviator James Has Sunday Air Circus”). As in Bessie Coleman’s case in the early 1920s, Daughtry and James’s performances were caught on film in 1930 by Bilmore Studio. As reported in the *Courier*, the Bilmore News Review showed the footage around the country, “providing a program of educational value and of racial interest” (“History-Making is Seen in Newsreel”). The black aviation community had thus added a pilot and a parachutist, as well as another black newspaper invested in the future of black aviation, that promoted aviation education and did not hesitate to voice their opinions on the need of the African American community to learn to fly in order to bridge the racial technological gap.

As in 1929, however, not all group and individual efforts were received with praise only, and criticism again resurfaced on the pages of the black press. In October, the *Defender* published an intriguing account of Powell’s enterprise, which cast a negative light on the aviation crusader. It was reported that Powell had raised money from Los Angeles residents, having painted “gaudy pictures of quick wealth to investors and immediate fame to youngsters who took up aviation.” Having crashed in Mexico, Powell had never come back to California, and allegedly founded an aviation school in

Arizona, even though “it is said he cannot fly a ship himself.” Now he was “somewhere in Texas” while investors were waiting and “aviation among our group in the West had suffered a serious setback” (“Los Angeles Residents Lose Money in Effort to Aid Aviation Among Our Race”). The article did not include the name of its author or its source. The fact that the article was published in October 1930, almost one year after the accident in Mexico, is curious. A letter to the editor was published in the *Courier* in November 1930, in which a stockholder in the Bessie Coleman organization excoriated the newspaper for publishing false, yet damaging information about Powell, who had flown in Los Angeles in September in front of a crowd of six or seven thousand (“Letters to the Editor”). This written reaction to the rumors seems to confirm the aero club’s director’s own account of the events. According to Powell, it was Thomas Allen – one of the “Flying Hobos” who would make the first transcontinental trip in 1932 – and Oliver Betts who spread a report around Los Angeles that Powell had run away with people’s money and was not coming back (*Black Wings* 91).

At any rate, Powell had been having a busy year even before the *Defender* article, trying to make headway promoting black aviation nationwide. In January, he and Banning were in Phoenix, turning the city’s black school teachers and professional men air-minded (“Arizona”). In May, the *Courier* reprinted a section of the *Bessie Coleman Aero News*, a brand new monthly edited by Powell (“Commercial News”)¹⁹, titled “Who’s Who in Aviation,” in which Powell’s club advertised its flyers as pioneers in

¹⁹ In 1936, Powell would publish another aviation-focused magazine, the *Craftsmen Aero-News*, thus providing outlet for his obvious writing needs and to inform the public about all things aviatric.

almost every category imaginable. It also listed Bessie Coleman, Joel Foreman, Edward F. Smith, and Dr. A. Porter Davis, thereby contextualizing the aero club's achievements in black aviation history and highlighting its leading role. However, criticism of Powell's promotional activities again caused controversy. Artis N. Ward, Ace Foreman's mechanic from the failed cross-country flight of 1927, sent a letter to the *Courier* editor in June, in which he corrected Powell's magazine's statement that Bessie Coleman had been the first American woman licensed to fly. Also, it was he, rather than Ace Foreman, who had been the first "Negro licensed airplane engine and airplane mechanic" ("Letter to the Editor"). In attacking Powell's credentials, Ward seems to have misunderstood Powell's attempts at promoting black aviation and may have endangered Powell's mission.

In July, the *Courier* and the *Defender* published identical articles on Powell and Banning's flying exhibition in Abilene, Texas ("Aviators Land in Abilene, Texas," "Race Flyers in Texas Give Exhibitions"). In August, the *Defender* summarized the aviators' achievements in preparation for an air show in Fort Worth, Texas. The article listed ten North Texas cities where Powell and Banning had already given exhibition flights, and eight more where they were scheduled to take place before Labor Day ("Gives Aviation Show in Texas"). Powell and Banning were serious and busy with delivering on what they had promised in multiple letters and articles published in the black press. In September, per the *Courier*, the aero club was establishing a coast-to-coast Ladies' Flying club "with the hope of interesting the fair sex in aviation," already attracting "the names of leading society favorites in many of the large cities" ("Ladies'

Flying Club Drawing National Attention”). Not only were Powell and his branches busy – they were becoming ever more creative despite criticism from their detractors.

The year 1930 also saw the emergence of another voice critical of the state of black aviation: George S. Schuyler. The columnist for the *Courier*, however, did not target Powell – whom he would gradually grow to admire – but rather Hubert Julian, the impostor who had appeared in numerous articles in the black press due to his recent visit to Ethiopia, where he had destroyed Emperor Selassie’s new plane. Having been excommunicated from the country, Julian returned to the United States in an Ethiopian-army uniform, claiming that he was to raise funds to buy airplanes for Ethiopia. His claims were then refuted by Malaku E. Bayen – the emperor’s relative, who had recruited Julian to come to Ethiopia and would later recommend John C. Robinson to Selassie²⁰. In his November 8 column, Schuyler called Julian’s career a “sad commentary on the gullibility of most people,” as the parachutist’s name had been nowhere to be found on the lists of licensed pilots. Dubbing Julian the “Garvey of the air,” Schuyler lamented that “people like him can get applause and money while worthier individuals are practically starving to death” (“Views and Reviews”).

In his column, Schuyler identified one of the main issues plaguing the coverage of black aviation in the black press. His assessment of Julian and the publicity he had garnered contextualizes Powell and Banning’s valiant efforts which had been criticized

²⁰ In November 1930, for example, the *Courier* published a half-page interview with Julian, along with several large photographs of the parachutist and his brand new plane. Despite its sarcastic tone, the article provided much-needed publicity for the Trinidadian, who would later be honored in Harlem by gullible supporters (“Ethiopia Banishes Julian After Plane Crash,” “All Harlem in Tribute to Julian”).

and denigrated by jealous colleagues. Occasionally, the *Courier* and the *Defender* would not differentiate between honest, yet failed efforts to promote black aviation and con artists such as Julian. Harsh, critical, if not sarcastic tone would sometimes accompany reports, thereby casting a negative light on aviation crusaders, despite existing evidence of their honesty; whereas Julian's dishonesty would bring him constant access to journalists. Schuyler was, however, becoming an aviation advocate as he urged his readers in a September column to realize that "this is the age of aeronautics. The columnist argued that "there are probably any number of wealthy men now beginning to buy private planes who would not be averse to employing Negro aviators." Schuyler believed that "any Negro who knows how to condition and repair an airplane motor will not remain long among the unemployed" ("Views and Reviews"). In espousing technical and mechanical education, employment in the growing industry, and honest work, Schuyler was gradually becoming a strong voice in the campaign.

Apart from more critical voices and new aviators joining the ranks of black aviation crusaders, the year 1930 saw another new development in aviation campaigning. In June, the *Courier* imbued its goodwill campaign with a renewed genre – a cartoon, which it had last used for aviation purposes in 1922 to celebrate Bessie Coleman's achievements – accompanied with a poem. Entitled "Where There's A Will," the cartoon depicted a black male student with a parachute labeled "Training," running towards an airplane labeled "Pluck" and "Brains." In the distance, a large cloud in the form of a beautiful white woman labeled "Success" was looming. The black student is depicted as saying "Huh - can't I? Watch me." The accompanying poem reads:

With bold resolve and heads held high
The youngsters leave their classes;
To them Success seems very nigh
Without the aid of glasses.
Old folks may smile but Youth is right,
Training makes their chances greater;
With Pluck and Brains to aid their flight
They'll surely overtake her.

The poem's message showcased the *Courier's* commitment to the aviation cause by expressing encouragement, especially for the paper's younger readership, in pursuing technical and mechanical education. The fact that the student's parachute, rather than the plane, is defined as "training" points to the aviation campaign's continuous emphasis on ground work first, flying second. After all, as both the cartoon and the poem indicate, classes do come before practical flying exercise.

Along with experimenting with new genres, the black papers were also adding new voices to speak on aviation. That seems to be why, in April, the *Courier* published a column by Alice Dunbar Nelson, a Harlem Renaissance author, in which the poet and journalist described her first experience with flying aboard a plane ("Alice Takes to the Air," "So It Seems"). In this way, the newspaper introduced the personal essay on aviation – a genre, which it would consequently expand on in August, as the paper advertised an upcoming column by James Peck ("Air-Minded") to be serialized during September. Peck's texts offered personal musings on the nature of aviation, piloting, as

well as on discrimination in the field and the hard work that was required to succeed. The essays provided space for an actual aviator to relate his experiences with and observations on aviation outside of the traditional and constricted genre of articles, reports, editorials, and letters to the editor.

Crucially, Peck's last essay asserted that "a flyer is a free man, with unlimited territory" ("Aviation"). Until 1933, no black flyer would succeed in crossing US borders in a plane, but, at least, Peck suggested in his writings that such an opportunity existed and that aviation offered not only economic opportunities and military use, but also connection with foreign lands. Peck was studying aviation on the side, but would later join the Republican side in the Spanish Civil war as a pilot, write a series of essays on aviation in 1938 and 1939 as *Courier's* campaign for inclusion in CPTP was culminating, author two acclaimed books on aviation in the early 1940s, and numerous magazine articles on aeronautics in the 1950s.²¹ In his first writings for the newspaper, however, Peck demonstrated that the newspaper and a few individual crusaders were taking the aviation campaign seriously and would devote time and resources to its success. The *Courier* would run several similar essay articles by Herman Banning in 1932 to celebrate his successful transcontinental flight.

Finally, the discussion of aviation and its military context also appeared on the pages of black newspapers in 1930. As in 1929, the year ended with an editorial in the *Defender* discussing the military employment of airplanes. Each year, the paper's views

²¹ *Distinguished African Americans in Aviation and Space Science* has a profile on Peck as does George Edward Barbour's "Early Black Flyers of Western Pennsylvania, 1906-1945."

and predictions seemed to be becoming all too real. In “The New Order,” the Chicago weekly observed that “this is an era in which distance has begun to succumb to the repeated onslaughts of speed. A fleet of planes, flying at [182 miles/hour] can transport an army from Boston to New Orleans in less than a day: can leave St. Louis at noon and destroy Montreal before midnight, and refuel in Detroit for the return trip.” It was because of this dangerous shortening of distances through progress in aviation, the editorial argued, that Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, which is 250 miles from the sea, “shut off by Italy and France,” had taken up aviation. Reportedly, “he owns a fleet of planes and is training young students in European schools in the latest methods of handling aircraft.” Such precautions could allow the Ethiopian kingdom to prevent any foreign fleet from landing near Ethiopia in case of an invasion, the text concluded.²²

While reports on and from Ethiopia had appeared regularly in both the *Courier* and the *Defender*, aviation in connection with the east-African country would be hardly ever mentioned – with the exception of Hubert Julian’s fiasco of a visit in 1930 – until 1934 and 1935, when Selassie and Bayen accepted John C. Robinson’s proposal to lead the kingdom’s fledgling air force. It is unclear from which source the *Defender* acquired its information on Selassie investing heavily into training his troops in aviation – perhaps from Julian – but the fact that the two colonial powers were presented as predators preventing Ethiopia from efficiently protecting itself served as a first among many

²² In fact, as Tucker (102) explains, Selassie was using military aviation against his local opponent, having realized aerial warfare’s potential in the late 1920s.

pieces that were to document Ethiopia's fight for survival against colonial powers and their use of modern weaponry. It seems clear that *Defender's* reporters were painfully aware that a war was brewing in Ethiopia's vicinity and that it would involve airplanes – as Garvey had predicted almost a decade before. This developing situation only underscored the ever-increasing racial technological gap and, consequently, the need for further development and support of black aviation.

4.2 1931: The Negro in Aviation, How Shall He Be Portrayed?

Reports on aviation education, individual achievements, and criticism of the army air service again formed the backbone of aviation coverage in the *Courier* and the *Defender* in 1931. An aviation school was being opened in San Diego (“San Diego to Get Aviation School”). At least four new aviators appeared in the black press: Billy Donaldson, who claimed Bessie Coleman as her inspiration (“Aviatrix?”), Thomas Perry Jones from Kansas City with more 120 hours of solo flying to his credit (“Kansas City Boy in Solo Flight”)²³, Thomas R. Ross (“Breaks Record”), and Rollins Ross, a former student at MIT on a Guggenheim Fellowship, who earned a commercial pilot license in September (“Gets Pilot's License”).

The *Defender* also reported on an ex-slave in San Diego, who took the first plane ride of her life at the age of 103, thereby fulfilling her birthday wish (“Ex-Slave, 103, Takes Joyride in Plane”). The *Courier* published another poem on aviation, called “Call of the Wings,” in which Harry Levette, a California-based journalist for the Associated

²³ The aviator, the great grandson of Frederick Douglass, however, died in an airplane accident in January 1932 (“Aviator Dies in Crash,” “Daring Kansas City Aviator”).

Negro Press, implored readers to “listen to the call of the wings,” and reminded them that “A mere girl pioneered for the Race // But our men let her sacrifice fail.” The poem prompted a response in the form of a letter, in which its author proposed setting up an aviation fund under the auspices of the Tuskegee Institute (“Call of the Wings - letter”). Finally, three editorials in the *Courier* touched upon the topic of African American soldiers being barred from aviation units in the US military (“Colored Army Units,” “Our Regiments,” “Let’s Not Forget”).

Now that the campaign was, in essence, a full-fledged one, attention seemed to have turned to discussing who should be the role-model aviator to represent the African American community. There were two narratives of aviators competing for the interest and support of the black press readership and financial backers: Hubert Julian’s flamboyant style and rhetoric, and William J. Powell and Charles E. James’s understated crusade to educate the black public about aviation. Julian dominated the newspapers in 1931 as he travelled the country, giving parachuting and flying exhibitions to raise money for several of his proposed transatlantic flights. Powell was still planning to organize an air circus to show off the flyers from his Los Angeles-based group. Gradually, however, James was also becoming a rising star in the world of black aviation, and black journalists as well as readers of the black press, could not but compare the three pilots and voice their opinions on who should represent the race.

Powell and his organization did not feature in the black press very often in 1931. The *Defender* announced in June that a Los Angeles branch of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club had just had its second meeting and “has a big project in view to make

aviation history for the race” (“Bessie Coleman Aero Club”). Consequently, in September, the paper carried a short article about an air circus in Los Angeles held by Powell’s organization. It commended Powell on his organization skills, briefly described the happenings at the event, and announced that “the financial benefit [from the circus] will be used to defray the expenses of 50 young men and women who desire to become licensed aviators” (“Give Air Circus as a Tribute to Bessie Coleman”). Neither the Chicago weekly, nor the *Courier* informed about the event in advance or celebrated its taking place afterwards. Powell did not celebrate the air circus very much in *Black Wings*, either. As he explains in Chapter 9, he had lost most contacts for journalists due to his disagreements with Thomas Allen and Oliver Betts, former members of his flying group, who had helped advertise most of Powell’s events and flights.

By barely reporting on the air circus, the black press had missed out on informing about the most successful all-black flying event to that date. In Powell’s words, “on Labor Day 15,000 people turned out to see an exhibition which astonished everyone. [...] The show went off exactly as scheduled. There were no accidents and the people were well satisfied” (*Black Wings* 96). The show was a success that Powell had been waiting for. It also inspired him into organizing yet another large event in December 1931. Although the *Courier* and the *Defender* again ignored Powell himself in their reports on the upcoming air meet,²⁴ they did mention it in passing as they carried a photograph of Irvin E. Wells, a member of Powell’s group, who was supposed to fly “in

²⁴ The *Courier* did publish two brief reports in its “California News” section in December 1931 and February 1932.

a gigantic air circus in the Angel City December 6 for the benefit of the city's Unemployment Relief Fund" ("Expected to Feature in Big Air Circus," "Going Up For Charity"). According to Powell, 40,000 people came to see the show, which was also the first time "that seven Negro pilots were in the air together" (102). The show also "featured" Hubert Julian ("Col. Julian in California to Show Them How to Fly") – who had lost his way during the flight, according to Powell's account – whose photograph in front of a large billboard announcing the show features in many publications on black aviation history and is part of the Black Wings exhibition at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. Powell, without much advertising, was fulfilling his ambition of making black Americans air-minded.

Charles James was becoming popular with the black press, too, since his goals were aligned with that of the aviation campaign and William Powell. In September 1931, along with publishing three aforementioned editorials on segregation in the military, the *Courier* reported that "as there are no units in the Air Corps composed of colored men, no provision has been made for their enlistment or training at the present time," directly quoting from a letter from the War Department. Units in the army composed of soldiers of color were being dismantled, too, and their members were being "distributed" into other units ("War Department Bars Negroes from Air Corps"). This was a setback to the aviation campaign.

Next to the article and its large headline, however, the Pittsburgh weekly carried a photograph of Charles E. James, announcing that he had become "the second Negro to qualify for a pilot's license." Both the *Courier* and the *Defender* also informed that the

aviator was planning an air tour of “the Negro camps, colleges, and fairs in the South” to “encourage the flying art among young college students” (“Second to Get Pilot’s License,” “To Make Air Tour”). James’s “educational tour” seemed to have captured the two papers’ attention, because they both published another article about the aviator’s plans to tour the South and give an exhibition in Atlanta (“Negro Aviator to Fly over Atlanta,” “Florida Aviator to Tour Southland”). James fit the profile of an aviation crusader who wanted to inform, educate, and was not interested in self-promotion and fame. He seemed to be perfect for what the black press was trying to do in its campaign and, in 1932, James would hold some of the most successful flying events in black aviation history.

Hubert Julian’s activities and rhetoric were the exact opposite of Powell and James’s humility – but they brought him much attention from the black press. In 1931, the *Courier* and the *Defender* published at least 15 articles on Julian combined. The aviator was planning another transatlantic flight, hoping to fly to Ethiopia (“Black Eagle to Make Ocean Try Again, is Claim,” “If Hubert Julian Can Hop Three Ifs Then He’ll Hop Ocean,” “3,000 See Julian in Stunt Flying”) or India (“Julian Starts First of His Exhibition Flights”) or Rome, Italy (“Plans Long Air Voyage”). He was touring the country, seeking funds (“Julian Seeks Funds for Fine Plane”), but never buying any plane as he was never able to raise enough funds. But not only did he never raise enough funds – he also forfeited the money he had raised as a deposit for the numerous planes he had hoped to buy over the years. Although Julian did perform several exhibitions in front of considerable crowds, he neither bought a plane, nor flew outside of the United States;

let alone across the ocean. In seeking funds, Julian used the power of the black press when he took a *Courier* writer, and a supporter of his, Floyd J. Calvin, up in the air (“Calvin Taken for a Ride”). And he did not hesitate to ask churchgoers to ask for money, either, exploiting Chicago’s reverend J.C. Austin’s goodwill and interest in aviation (“Rev. Austin Takes Airplane Ride with Col. Hubert Julian”).

Although the tone of the newspaper coverage was somewhat mocking towards Julian, the *Courier* and the *Defender* constantly reported on Julian and his plans. Perhaps, they were hoping to finally have a black pilot who would lead the race’s aviation progress. But also, Julian was a master of the goodwill message of aviation, which he had helped form in the 1920s. In August, he received a commercial pilot license (“Col. Julian Passes Test for Pilot Rank”), having been a holder of an international pilot’s license since 1924 (“Lieut. Herbert Julian Finally Receives His U.S. Aviator’s License”). On the occasion of his solo flight to receive the new license, Julian provided an explanation – one of many, according to the various articles from 1930 and 1931 – of what had happened in Ethiopia, from which he had been banished. Julian claimed that he had been asked to protect the emperor against rebellious tribes, since the French flyers present in Ethiopia at that time were only allowed to instruct. In reality, however, Julian’s quote that he had “assured [Malaku E. Bayen, the emperor’s envoy] that he had no compunctions about bombing anybody,” rather points to the fact that Selassie had employed aviation in an attempt to overpower opposition forces (“Col. Julian Passes Test for Pilot Rank,” Tucker 184). At any rate, in presenting himself as the emperor’s protector – and thereby a protector of the race that Ras Tafari represented –

Julian was trying to thrill the black public and its desire for a black pilot skilled in combat. A pilot, who would finally erase the technological gap in aerial warfare.

In this way, Julian reminded the black press's readership that any black pilot's achievements had military connotations. One week after having received his license, he added that he wanted to "bring to the Negroes of the world the importance of aviation. [...] In time of war, we proved our worth in every branch of fighting except in aviation." Therefore, "in case of another war I should like to see them prepared for the emergency" ("Julian Starts First of His Exhibition Flights"). Julian's message was a combination of the Garveyite rhetoric of a race war and the racial technological gap, typical of the early aviation coverage in the black press. It was also decidedly transnational. Given his travels and experience in Ethiopia, Julian presented himself in black newspapers as the one pilot who had his race's best interests at heart, and who was willing to take his skills abroad and teach other people of color to fly and defend themselves. The fact that he was willing to bomb other people of color – as the colonial powers had been doing since the Great War – did not contradict his message of spreading the military gospel of aviation, but may have rather strengthened Julian's position as an aviator on par with white pilots skilled in combat. After all, it was the Ethiopian emperor, who had chosen him as an aerial bodyguard.

Although having Hubert Julian on the front pages of black newspapers may have been attractive for most readers, the reactions that the *Courier* received from some of its readers in 1931 suggest that Julian's message, as well as the newspaper's coverage of aviation, was not always received in kind and was, by some, considered unprofessional;

verging on yellow journalism. In October, John W. Greene, a Boston-based pilot who later flew at several air meets in the mid-1930s, wrote a letter to the editor, in which he expressed doubts about Julian's claims, made in his interviews since 1924, that the Trinidadian had been the first to receive a pilot's license. Greene also added that when the *Courier* reported on Charles E. James as the second pilot to receive a license, the newspaper did not clarify what kind of license it was and what the word "second" stood for. Greene challenged the way that the *Courier* was reporting its aviation news. To rectify the situation, he suggested that the newspaper carried a regular aviation column "with the senior pilot as editor" ("On Negro Pilots"). Although Greene²⁵ thus acknowledged that the *Courier* was trying to run an aviation campaign, he sought for the paper to find a more accurate and effective way.

Other readers of the *Courier* also took issue with the way the newspaper had been informing on aviation, and on Hubert Julian in particular. An unidentified "transport pilot" wrote a letter to the editor in November, in which he directly attacked Floyd J. Calvin, one of the newspaper's most famous journalists, for being biased in favor of Julian. Calvin had written a number of articles about Julian since 1924 and was perhaps the only journalist who had always promoted, rather than mocked, Julian's piloting skills and bold claims. The transport pilot explained in his letter that Julian's skills, as reported by Calvin, were negligible compared to many other black pilots, who had not received as much attention as Julian. The letter called Julian a "ground flyer"

²⁵ In June, Greene sent another letter to the editor enumerating the initial investment he had had to put into learning to fly ("High Cost of Flying").

and asserted that Calvin's preference for the inept Julian is an "injustice to the other pilots of your race, who are making the grade." Let's hear of this guy," ended the letter, "when he learns how!" ("On Julian").

A reaction to the letter came the following week, in which another reader opined that Julian had been "deceiving race folks by the simple expedient of taking advantage of our ignorance of things connected with aviation." He also suggested that "it behooves us to rid ourselves, once and for all, of this unnecessary evil, and this reflection of our intelligence" and asked for a senior pilot of color to write to the paper and explain how much of an impostor Julian was ("Another on Julian"). It seems that while the black public was willing to learn more about aviation and to celebrate black aviator's achievements, it also desired its newspapers to be more conscientious and serious about the way they reported on the field. Finally, black aviators such as Greene and the mysterious transport pilot were taking it upon themselves – as had Powell – to address the black press directly and shape aviation's goodwill message.

The *Courier's* readers were joined by George S. Schuyler, who presented the newspaper's readership with a choice between an impostor such as Julian, and a real aviation crusader, Charles E. James. First, in reaction to the news that Julian had finally received a pilot's license, Schuyler quipped that "Julian should have done this years ago instead of going around fooling Negroes and white folks into backing him with coin of the republic." Then, Schuyler reminded his readers that he had exposed Julian's scam in the 1920s and expressed doubts whether Julian, newly licensed, would be able to fly to Abyssinia – over 6,000 miles away – when the world's distance record was 5,000 miles

(“Views and Reviews”). In a column from early October, Schuyler again mocked Julian’s claims that he would fly to India and then compared Julian’s posturing with Charles E. James’s achievements. He commended James’s efforts to raise money through lecturing at schools in the South and giving exhibition flights, and criticized Julian for refusing to “start at the bottom (like Lindbergh) and work slowly to the top” like James. Targeting his own paper, Schuyler ended his column with asserting that “Julian will make a better newspaper copy and get more notoriety than James, but I’ll wager the latter goes farther in aviation” (“Views and Reviews”). The columnist thus denounced yellow journalism and espoused hard work represented by James. Schuyler was becoming a voice of reason in aviation coverage. Perhaps as a result, Julian virtually disappeared from newspaper coverage in 1932.

Charles E. James, on the other hand, surpassed both Powell and Julian in aviation coverage in 1932 and, for a short while became the designated leader of black aviation progress. In January 1932, the *Courier* announced that James was back from his tour around the South and that he was planning an aviation show in Atlanta (“Negro Aviator Returns to Atlanta,” “Plan Big Aviation Carnival in Atlanta”). The show took place on two consecutive Sundays in January, drawing a crowd as large as 12,000 spectators. As with James’s previous exhibition in New York with Mrs. Daugherty, the event had been captured on film, which was to be screened in movie theaters around the country (“Mrs. John Hope is Taken for a Ride”). James was thus using print and visual media to send out a goodwill message of aviation. The *Defender* later reported that he had even opened an aviation school in Atlanta, but no other articles – not even in the *Atlanta Daily World*

which informed its readers about James very often – corroborate the claim (“Flyer Burns to Death in Plane Crash”). The *Daily World* reported of another exhibition in Macon, Georgia, where James performed in front of 18,000 spectators (“18,000 See Two Aces of the Air in Flying Show”). In May, James received a new plane from William H. Davis, the owner of the *New York Amsterdam News* to perform at exhibitions in Florida (“Aviator James Gets New Plane”). He was touring the country, educating the black community in the South about aviation – in other words, he was fulfilling Schuyler’s prophecy and vision.

James also attempted an international flight, it seems, which would have made him the first black aviator to have done so. The Atlanta newspaper reported on James’s flight to Cuba in July, explaining to its readers that James and his partner, Alexander Nelson, were missing, probably having lost their way. There do not seem to be any further reports on James’s flight to Cuba in the Atlanta paper or the two black papers analyzed here – but the article in the *Daily World* was written in Key West, Florida, from where the two flyers had reportedly taken off towards Cuba. The trip to Cuba was supposed to have been a “climax” to James’s Southern tour and Havana had already been preparing a gala reception for the flyers (“Believe Plane of Negro Flyers was Fixed before Hop for Cuba”). At any rate, James then performed in Brunswick, Georgia in front of 2,000 people in June (“N.Y. Aviators Give Stunt Exhibition”) and in Gary, Indiana in August, where his successful and pioneering career came to a tragic end. James died in a burning plane after having fallen from 800 feet (“Aviator Dies in Crash,” “Aviator James Buried”). An editorial in the *Daily World* proclaimed James a “self-

appointed martyr of a cause,” reminded its readers that the late aviator “dreamed of aviation as a cure for the Negro economic plight,” and explained the myriad of possibilities that aviation was offering (“Charles James: Pioneer). James died as yet another one of aviation’s martyrs, having won the symbolic contest of who should represent black aviation.

5. GOING THE DISTANCE: LONG-DISTANCE FLIGHTS, 1932-34

Although the rapidly advancing black aviation lost one of its most inspiring leaders in 1932, the year, and, incidentally, James's death brought to the forefront another crucial figure in the history of black aviation and its coverage in the black press: John C. Robinson. The *Atlanta Daily World* interviewed Robinson on the occasion of James's death in September. Robinson explained to the paper that James was unique in his plans to spread the goodwill message of aviation: unlike Julian, James had toiled and rented a plane for many of his exhibitions, paying back from the exhibitions' returns. Robinson showed off his technical expertise in the article, which introduced him as "the Tuskegee graduate who broke the color line at Curtiss Wright school" in Chicago ("James, Dead Flyer, Had Nerve"). Robinson was, in fact, the only instructor of color at the Curtis Wright school and had his own group of students of color, who would later become some of the leading figures in black aviation in the late 1930s.

Robinson's expertise as a pilot, aviation instructor, and a new inspiring pioneer was on full display in the *Defender* throughout 1932. In January, the paper carried a photograph of Robinson and one of his students in front of a plane ("Just Landed"). It also added an article, titled "Seamstress Gives up Her Duties to Become Aviatrix," echoing the first major article on Bessie Coleman in the same paper in 1922. The school in which Robinson was the instructor, the article explained, was the first "school of its grade to open complete courses as required by the United States government to all persons, regardless of color." The paper thus suggested that not only was there an

experienced African American educator working at the institution, but also the school was open to students of color. More importantly, it must be pointed out that by having become an instructor at a branch of one of the leading aviation schools in the country, Robinson was following in Coleman, Foreman, and James's vision, educating black aviation students and spreading the goodwill message of aviation.

The year 1932 was also a year of the emergence of women aviatrices. William Powell, based on his book and newspaper articles, had several female flyers in his group – including Marie Dickerson. Dickerson's photo was featured in the *Defender* in April, when the paper announced that the aviatrix, having been inspired by Bessie Coleman, had obtained her license ("Licensed Air Pilot"). The *Courier* published an interview with Dickerson in May, in which the pilot explained how aviation had become her hobby and complained about the high price of flying, especially during the Great Depression ("Costs of Flying Has Reached High Altitude, Says California Aviatrix").

Robinson's group in Chicago also included female students. In fact, the Challenger Aero Club was established by Janet Harmon Waterford, one of Robinson's students at Curtis Wright, and the author of *Soaring above Setbacks* (1996), which serves as one of the essential sources of black aviation history. Owing to Waterford's leadership and ownership of a plane, Robinson's group of students had been able to rent a flying field in an "all-Negro town" of Robbins, Illinois, and train there. This was the first Department of Commerce-accredited black airfield (Tucker xiv).²⁶

²⁶ Previously, Robinson had established the Aero Study Club, later called the Brown Eagle Aero Club in 1927 (Tucker 31).

Waterford was the face of the organization in the initial stages. The *Courier* carried a photograph of Waterford with the headline “Queen of the Air,” explaining that the aviatrix had purchased a three-passenger airplane, which was being used by the Challenger club. In June, Waterford gave a speech at Bessie Coleman’s grave in Chicago, while Robinson dropped a bouquet of roses from Waterford’s plane (“Future Aces at Grave of Bess Coleman”). The group, led by an aviation educator and a woman pilot, was thus making a name for itself, honoring Coleman’s legacy of female leadership in black aviation. Later in the summer, the *Defender* featured a photograph of Waterford and Dorothy Darby, another one of Robinson’s students, and announced that the two were preparing to give an exhibition flight in Cleveland (“Air Exhibition Planned”). Darby later injured herself during a parachute jump in October (“Girl Flyer is Injured as She Leaps from Plane,” “Aviatrix Hurt”).²⁷ In September, Waterford and Robinson flew to Cleveland to show off in front of Oscar DePriest (“Trio Fly to Cleveland to Attend Air Races”) and in December, the organization held its second annual bridge and dance party for aviation students of all races (“Beautiful Dancing Party of Challenger Aero Club”). New aviation leaders were emerging in Chicago, spreading the goodwill of aviation through traditional newspaper channels, but also new means.

Indeed, along with reports on new group efforts and aviatrixes making headway, the *Courier* and the *Defender* did not fail to inform their readers about

²⁷ Darby recovered in 1933, when she planned a series of parachute jumps (“Ready to Fly Again”) and eventually performed in Hillside, Illinois in September (“Plenty of Thrills Here”).

individual achievements and aviation education. The Pittsburgh paper reported ceremoniously on plans for the establishment of one of the “best and largest [aviation] schools of its kind in the world” near Washington. The institution would be equipped with a large library of aviation texts, dormitories, and would be able to teach and house up to 500 students. Most importantly, the school would have its own employment department so that, upon completing their degree, students would “find a position [...] in aviation” (“Work Started on Big Aviation School in East”). The establishment of such an aviation institute would have been a crucial step in the advancement of aviation among African Americans, but the newspaper never reported on the school again. However, the *Courier* did inform on Alfred Anderson, “the only authorized Negro transport pilot in the country,” who was teaching aviation to students in color in Atlantic City. Anderson had passed the transport pilot’s license test in February 1932 (“Philly’s First Transport Pilot,” “Teaches Air-Minded”).

While aviation education, through Robinson, Anderson, and reports on various schools being gradually established around the country, remained a recurring component in aviation coverage, the black press slowly began to shift attention towards achievements beyond the local. Between 1932 and 1934, long-distance, transcontinental, and international flights intended to spread a goodwill message became the main focus of the aviation campaign, as black aviation was advancing. This section of the thesis discusses black aviation’s first successful transcontinental and international flights.

Even though it was not until 1932 that a black aviator carried out a transcontinental and international flight, visions and promises of long-distance flights

were part of black flyers' rhetoric from very early on. Bessie Coleman was planning to fly to Pan-American countries, while Ace Foreman attempted a transcontinental flight from Los Angeles to New York, but failed to finish it. Charles E. James reportedly tried to fly to Cuba. And Hubert Julian never stopped promising to undertake a transatlantic flight for the sake of his race. George S. Schuyler reprimanded Julian in one of his columns in 1932, opining that "it will be easier to believe this fledgling pilot can hop to the distant African country [of Ethiopia] if he will first fly from New York to Chicago or across the continent" ("Views and Reviews").

As of early 1932, no black flyer had flown across the continent, let alone to another country – although William Powell and Herman Banning had flown to Mexico by accident. But now that new schools were springing around the country and the African American community had its own educators, students, and aviation shows, it was high time a black aviator had flown across the continent or abroad. Such a feat would represent the literal breaking of another geographical and racial barrier as the black aviation community would prove to the rest of the United States that it, too, could participate in aviation progress. Also, such a feat would considerably narrow the racial technological gap between white and black aviation.

Hubert Julian, owing to his reputation, announced two long-distance flights in 1932. He had attended William Powell's air circus in December 1931 and, perhaps realizing how much attention Powell was still receiving from the press and how much a successful transcontinental flight would mean for the propagation of black aviation and himself, the Trinidadian proposed a transcontinental flight with Powell in February

(“Extra: Plan Transatlantic Flight”). In April, Julian proposed a transatlantic flight to India, with Powell as a navigator: he was hoping to bring a bale of cheese cloth with him as a gift for Mahatma Gandhi (“Col. Julian and Partner Plan Flight to India”). The latter article provided biographical information on both flyers, stating that Powell was a “War Vet.” Julian was again proving his promotional skills: not only did he propose a flight to a country with a colored population, but he also planned to meet a famous world leader of color – thereby presenting himself as a messenger of goodwill and aviation’s apostle – and prove that black veterans could now fly long-distance and challenge their white colleagues. He had also christened one of his planes “Pgh. Courier” to assure newspaper coverage (“Julian to Name Plane Phg. Courier”). As previously with Julian, however, no flight ever took place.

William Powell, on the other hand, was hard at work, trying to achieve what Julian was only promising. Powell was never quoted in the two articles on Julian’s proposed flight and his book does not discuss Julian beyond the December air circus. The California-based aviator, however, was preparing his own long-distance flight in August. At first, the *Courier* incorrectly informed that Powell, along with Irvin E. Wells, was on his way to Pittsburgh in a cross-country flight that would take him from Los Angeles to New York City. It also stated that Powell was “an associate of Hubert Julian, a well-known aviator” (“Wells and Powell on Long Flight; to Visit Pittsburgh”). The situation was cleared up a week later when the paper announced that Powell and Wells had, in fact, entered the prestigious Air Derby along with 56 white flyers. The destination was Cleveland, 2,639 miles away from Los Angeles – this meant that Powell

and Wells were the first black flyers ever to compete in a long flight. According to the article – corroborated in Powell’s book – the duo was among the race’s leaders when it arrived in El Paso, Texas. The text also explained that Powell had had an argument with Julian about the proposed transatlantic flight and had given the parachutist a “thorough trouncing” (“Race Aviators Flying to Cleveland”). Powell’s flight ended in Texas, however, after he had crashed the plane due to engine trouble (“Powell Fails to Land in Cleveland,” “Reporter Tells of Powell Flight,” “Where Trail of Plane Ended”). The privilege of successfully finishing a long-distance flight was left to others.

In the end, it was a Haiti-born aviator, previously unknown to the readers of the *Courier* and the *Defender*, who advanced black aviation with an international long-distance flight. The *Courier* announced Leon D.F. Paris’s²⁸ flight from New York to Haiti in mid-March with a photograph of the pilot in full gear and an article explaining that the aviator had been hand-picked by William H. Davis, the owner of the *New York Amsterdam News*. The text by Floyd J. Calvin described Paris’s credentials and the technical details of his plane, and mentioned that Davis was insisting that Paris first undertook a test flight from New York to Washington and to Pittsburgh (“Harlem Publisher Backs Cross-Country Hop”). Davis had previously sponsored Charles E. James’s career and had bought a plane for his newspaper. Since James had gone a different route – touring the country with exhibition flights and lectures – Davis had to invest in another flyer. Paris began his hop on April 6 and reached Cuba probably on

²⁸ Spelling of the name varies across newspapers and monographs: it can be Paris, Parris, or Parrish.

April 24 or 25 (“Paris Reaches Cuba in Flight to Haiti”). He then reached Port-Au-Prince at the end of the month and Haiti declared a three-day national holiday in honor of the historic accomplishment (“Aviator Arrives in Haiti”). Since Paris’s journey had been planned to span 2,626 miles, the Haitian became the first successful long-distance and international black aviator in history.

Haitians were closely connected with New York, especially with Harlem and its residents of color. As Mary A. Renda points out, Arthur Schomburg, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Katherine Dunham, Jacob Lawrence, Zora Neale Hurston and other artists “mined the riches of Haitian culture and history for their work” (20) during the Harlem Renaissance. Although little is known about the volume of Haitians’ immigration to the United States prior to 1932, according to Michel S. Laguerre “the first significant group of Haitian migrants, about 500 upper-class urban families, came to the United States in the 1920s (23). Between 1932 and 1950, only 5,544 Haitians immigrated to the US (Levinson, Ember 228). The Haitian community, residing mainly in New York, was thus very small, especially compared to the other groups of West Indian immigrants. By 1924, when the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act came into effect, “U.S. residents of West Indian birth or derivation numbered more than 300,000 (Parker 100). Despite their low numbers, Haitians were active in organizing clubs, groups, and businesses such as the Haitian Afro-American Chamber of Commerce, Utilities d’Haiti, or the Haitian-American Craftsman Club, Inc. (“Haitian Treasury Secretary Honored by Harlem Leaders,” “Expect Big Crowd at Paris Meeting”). Haitians thus played an integral part in the social and political life in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s, because as

the support of various Harlem-based organizations, such as the Elks, for Paris' flight indicates, the cooperation between the West Indian and African American communities was alive and well.

Analysis of the *New York Amsterdam News* indicates that Paris had been a well-known figure in New York aviation and West Indian circles even before his groundbreaking flight. The paper had first reported on Paris and another Haitian student of aviation in April 1930. Paris explained in the article that flying was “just as safe as anything else” and announced that he wanted to make a nonstop flight to his homeland once he had finished his studies at the Institute of Aeronautics and the Roosevelt Flying School, in which Charles E. James had also studied. Paris spoke like a true aviation crusader when he added that he was ready “to die in the attempt” to fly to Haiti (“Two Young Haitians Take to Air in Attempts to Earn Pilots’ Licenses”). He earned his license in August 1930 (“Haitian Passes U.S. Tests for License to Fly Plane”). Fourteen months later, he featured in an air circus along with Marie Dickerson, a member of Powell’s group, Alexander Nelson, a parachutist who had flown exhibitions with Charles E. James, and Marie Daughtry, who had opened an aviation school in Harlem with her husband in 1930 (“2,000 View Circus Staged at Airport”). In this way, Paris was gaining experience and practice for his hop to Haiti.

Unlike Hubert Julian, another West Indian pilot, Paris was serious about his flight. In March 1932, he was quoted in the *New York Amsterdam News* as saying “I won’t say much; I won’t promise anything – but all I know is that you can depend on me” (“Group Lauds Paris for Proposed Hop”). In December 1931, Paris had helped

establish the International Colored Aero Association along with Leon F. Desportes, who would later become member of the Committee for Ethiopia, led by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., in 1935; thereby demonstrating the connections and cooperation between people of African descent in the United States (“Ethiopia Seeks Negro Doctors”). The ICAA’s objective was to “encourage men and women to play a part in aviation as navigators, pilots, mechanics and instructors.” The group also planned to establish scholarships to help aviation students. Paris was hoping that with the help of the organization, “a commercial air transportation company” consisting of black staff could be eventually established. Most importantly, however, the group’s primary ambition was to back Paris’s flight to Haiti (“Aero Organization Begins at Meeting”). The Haitian was thus a true aviation crusader in the vein of Powell, Robinson, and others, and was rectifying the reputation that Julian had given to West Indian aviators.

Even though Paris’s flight to Haiti had historic significance for black aviation, the *Courier* and the *Defender* did not provide much commentary on the historic feat, despite the fact that Paris’s narrative was rife with symbolism. According to the *Defender*, Paris’s ambition was to “establish friendly relations between this country and Haiti” and he also “wished to demonstrate the performance value of trained race pilots” (“Hail New York Flyer on Good Will Trip to Haiti”). This was especially necessary given the sensationalist and exoticizing discourse of Haiti in the US due to the American occupation of the country (Renda 21). But Paris did more than that. He had named his plane Toussaint L’Ouverture after the leader of the Haitian Revolution against the French colonial powers at the end of the 18th century (“N.Y. Aviator Plans Haiti Hop”).

In naming his plane so, Paris was displaying strong national sentiments for Haiti, famous among people of color for its fight against the French, as well as his black pride. This was perhaps no surprise as his flight was backed by, among others, the *Negro World*, the still-influential mouthpiece of Pan-African nationalists. More importantly, he was styling himself as a conqueror and liberator of the air and of a technology previously associated with and dominated by white aviators. He was thus bringing to his homeland the gospel of aviation as well as its military potential.

Most importantly, Paris was also carrying his flight out at a time when the United States were still occupying his homeland, wielding strong military power. Haiti had been, as Edward O. Guerrant puts it, a “protectorate” of the United States since 1915 and, although Herbert Hoover “sent a special mission [in 1930] to investigate the possibility of withdrawing the marines earlier than the scheduled date of 1936,” the country remained a protectorate until 1934. The Haitians, writes Guerrant, “impatient for full independence, were embittered by the delay” (9). It was thus no coincidence that, upon his arrival, Paris was welcomed by “the chef de guerre” and other dignitaries – after all, the flyer did want to demonstrate what a trained black aviator could do. Paris later became a lieutenant at the local *École Militaire* and in 1935 was named “director of the Haitian Military Aviation School” (“Aviator Paris Will Come Back to United States,” “Heads Flyers,” “Airman Returns”).²⁹ In successfully landing in Port-Au-Prince, Paris thus not only finished the first international flight by a black pilot, but also

²⁹ Given Paris’ position at the military school, it should be explored what role the aviator played in training the four Haitian airmen who would join the Tuskegee Airmen in 1943.

demonstrated that any black aviator's achievement would resonate with a strong military undertone.

In covering Leon Paris's flight, the *Defender* introduced a new term in its aviation coverage and one that would become a catchphrase for any future *bona fide* flights by black pilots: the goodwill flight. While it was during the 1920s and early 1930s that the goodwill message of aviation in the black press had been formed, the term goodwill flight seems to have been used first in reports on Paris; perhaps because of Paris's success. Indeed, it was not an original term, as Charles Lindbergh has used it for his famous tour in 1927. At any rate, black good will flights were an extension of what has been termed a good will message in this thesis – in essence, these flights were intended to spread the message of the importance of aviation education and job opportunities opening in the field to people of color around the United States and, possibly, abroad. Once Paris had succeeded and thus defined what a goodwill flight was, and demonstrated what type of effect and reaction it may engender, the black press would label all successful flights by black pilots as good will ones until 1940.

5.1 Writing the First Transcontinental Flight

The first transcontinental flight by black aviators was also called a goodwill one by the black press – more importantly, though, it received considerably more coverage in the *Courier* than Paris's hop and filled newspapers with ecstatic articles and essays on African Americans' future in aviation. On September 21, James Herman Banning, pilot, and Thomas C. Allen, mechanic, took off from Los Angeles – and landed nineteen days later at Roosevelt Field, Long Island (Jakeman 665, Broadnax 18, Scott and Womack

37-8).³⁰ The city edition of the *Courier* did not announce the beginning of the flight until October 1, when it briefly informed on page four that Banning and Allen were attempting to “scan the country in record time” (“Fliers Heads East on Record Hop”). One week later, however, in “Daring Aviators Near Goal,” the paper reported on the flight with two large photographs, all-capital headlines, and a long article. According to the text, the aviators were flying 75m/h and were backed by no organization. The *Courier*’s reporter, accompanied by Robert L. Vann, the paper’s owner, nicknamed Banning and Allen the “sun-tanned editions of the Lindy of yesteryear” as well as the “glorious hoboes of the uncharted skies.” Hence the flyers’ nickname “The Flying Hobos.” The following week’s front page included another large photograph of the two flyers and a large headline “Aviators End First Cross-Country Flight.” The *Courier* informed that the hop had spanned 3,613 miles, 41 hours and 27 minutes of actual flying time and that, upon landing, the aviators received “the conqueror’s welcome.” In short, the flyers made history and the *Courier* was ecstatic with praise and superlatives.

Banning and Allen would be featured on the pages of the *Courier* until March 1933³¹ as the newspaper hoped to take advantage of the historic feat and draw in more readers than the *Defender*, which severely lagged in the coverage of the first

³⁰ Although neither the *Courier* nor the *Defender* pointed it out, it is crucial to note that the Roosevelt Field at Valley Stream, also known as Curtiss Flying Field, was a site of numerous pioneer flight in black and white aviation history. It was used by the US Air Service during WW1. Charles Lindbergh took off from the airport for his transatlantic flight in 1927 and Amelia Earhart formed the Ninety Nines, the first chartered group of licensed women pilots, there in 1929. More importantly, Bessie Coleman performed at the airport in 1922, and Charles E. James and Leon Paris trained and gave exhibitions there.

³¹ Lonnie Bunch claims that the aviators wrote their texts for the paper for nine weeks. Rather, evidence suggests that texts about the aviators *as well as* their serial featured in the *Courier* for nine weeks.

transcontinental flight. The *Courier*'s theater and screen page, for example, provided a list of the events that Banning and Allen had attended in Harlem, the people they had met, and the praise that had been heaped upon them. Among others, they had met Captain Edison McVey, Hubert Julian's former pilot and member of UNIA's flying corps, William H. Davis of the *New York Amsterdam News*, and Cab Calloway ("Newsy Newsettes"). Floyd J. Calvin celebrated the flight by exclaiming that "it is certainly wholesome and stimulating to know that we have heroes who have come to light in the very worst of times" ("Calvin's Digest"), thereby underscoring the fact that Banning and Allen had had to rely on other, often white people's generosity in providing them with fuel and food on their journey; in particular, at a trying period such as the Great Depression.

To capitalize even more on the image of the two heroes that the paper itself had been fostering and to provide the flyer's old plane with a new engine, the *Courier* invited the aviators to perform in Pittsburgh in November ("Noted Aviators in Exhibition at Bettis Airport"). The performance was successful, the refurbished airplane was named "The Spirit of the *Pittsburgh Courier*" in reference to Charles Lindbergh's legendary plane, and some of the paper's staff even ventured to take a plane ride in an effort to promote aviation ("Banning, Allen to Fly Courier Plane at Game," "Coast to Coast Aviator Thrills Hundreds," "Up in the Air").

More importantly, though, the *Courier* saw an opportunity to bolster its sales and promote black aviation even further when it announced that on October 22, the paper would begin publishing an exclusive serialized account of the "epochal flight"

(“Advertisement”). In other words, along with giving interviews for articles about their flight, Banning and Allen would also become writers of aviation for a short period of time, taking the baton from Powell and Peck, and would shape the goodwill message of aviation directly. The four-part serial “Coast-to-Coast, Via the Aerial Highways” assumed a similar tone and purpose as James Holt Peck’s three essays in 1930: relating the beauty and thrill of flying to the reader. Banning and Allen began each text by welcoming its readers, inviting them into the cockpit, and then proceeded to describe individual parts of the trip in first person as if they had been explaining it to a co-passenger onboard of the plane. The four texts presented flying as a safe and enjoyable activity, which required training. In the end, though, it was worth it, Banning and Allen seemed to be saying. More importantly, however, the narrative showcased the flyers’ technical, mechanical, as well as flying skills. Despite numerous forced landings and technical difficulties, the flyers’ ingenuity and creativity allowed them to continue and eventually finish their flight.³²

The essays must have been a success – reaching perhaps as many as quarter of a million black readers (Scott and Womack 37). As a result, the *Courier* commissioned Banning to write two more pieces for the paper later in November and December, again advertising the texts’ exclusivity (“The Day I Sprouted Wings Advertisement”). Banning’s December essay on his early flying days was an exciting short story of trials and errors before he could fly solo (“The Day I Sprouted Wings”). His “The Negro and

³² Jack Lynn rewrote the story into *Hallelujah Flight* (1989), based on Thomas C. Allen’s personal account as well as various newspaper clippings.

the Airplane,” however, assumed a much more critical tone than in the essays he had co-authored with Allen. Likening his profession to African American soldiers, scientists, and laborers, Banning presented aviation as a serious endeavor and explained that aviation constituted yet another step in the rapid development of transportation. With only ten licensed pilots, Banning said, the position of the African American community “in the new industry [is] relegated to the rear.” Most importantly, he exhorted his readers to decide whether they were going to “match [black aviators’] skills with our dollars or [...] joke at the efforts.” In conclusion, he asked “Are our pilot going to fly crates or airplanes?” In berating his readers for lack of support of their community’s progress, Banning was deploying one of the oldest tropes in black press’ coverage of aviation: decrying lack of funding. Written at the end of November, the essay’s pointed critique was perhaps the result of Banning and Allen’s unfortunate end in Pittsburgh. The two flyers had crashed their refurbished plane and had had to take the bus back to California (“Flying Hoboes Start Back,” “In Crash Now,” Bunch 102).

It is important to note that in their coverage of Banning and Allen’s flight, the *Courier* and the *Defender* did not only celebrate the two flyers and the advancement of black aviation, but also indirectly challenged Hubert Julian, his self-presentation, and, somewhat shockingly, their own yellow journalism. In an article for the *Defender*, for example, Banning explained that Allen and he had “left Los Angeles without any publicity, and we arrived in New York minus the ballyhoo. We did not name our plane, or state our intentions.” Although one of the reasons why this was so had been the lack of funding on the two flyers’ part and the lack of interest, at first, on the black

community's part, Banning was indirectly objecting to the fact that the black press preferred to provide space for Hubert Julian's claims and bold plans, rather than follow the everyday toiling of honest black aviators. "[T]oo often individuals tend to make announcements and then fall down. We preferred to do the stunt, and then let the others herald it," Banning added. The interviewer herself described Banning and Allen as sincere, unheralded ("Two Fly from Coast to Coast in Old Airplane").

Floyd J. Calvin, Hubert Julian's main supporter in the *Courier*, noted, too, that Banning and Allen were "of a serious and studious turn of mind. They are quiet and unobtrusive, not flashy and gay. They look like what you would expect fliers to look like" ("Calvin's Digest"). In this way, not only did Banning and Allen manage to represent aviation – in both successful flying and writing – as a serious profession and transform the image of black aviators, but they also disabused the black press' readership of the notion that Julian and his flamboyant style represented black aviation. Unlike Julian, then, Banning and Allen achieved a historic feat, and were rewarded with deserved publicity.

Importantly, the aftermath of Banning and Allen's successful flight and extensive coverage had also military dimension – after all, the two flyers, and Leon Paris before them, had just reached a crucial milestone and thus narrowed the racial technological gap in aviation. The *Courier* published an article in January 1933 by a student from the West Virginia State College, an institution that would be among the first to participate in the Civilian Pilot Training Program in 1939. Entitled "Man Sprouts Wings," the text was "published with the hope of advancing the cause of aviation." The

Negro youth of today is becoming air-minded,” argued the paper, “and what with the epochal cross-country flight of Banning and Allen, this article is deemed extremely timely.” In other words, the newspaper was adding yet another piece to its growing aviation campaign. More importantly, while the article provided a truncated history of aviation in the first third of the text, the rest discussed the impact of aviation on warfare. It described the employment of planes in the Balkan war of 1911-12 and World War I, implying that the rapid progress of civil aviation that was being witnessed was accompanied with similar advancements in aerial warfare. Implicitly, then, the article and the editor’s note accompanying it tied the progress in black aviation, symbolized by Banning and Allen’s flight, to hopes of having black military pilots in the future. As previously, black aviation milestones were associated with the military.

The outlook of black aviation was thus hopeful at the end of 1932 and beginning of 1933. As Robert J. Jakeman puts it, “the Banning-Allen flight ushered in a new era in black aviation” (66). Unfortunately, as with Charles E. James, the hopes invested into Banning’s future leadership in the field were short-lived. On February 5, Banning died in a plane crash when piloted by an inexperienced white student-pilot. The *Courier* devoted a large portion of its front page on February 11 to an article on Banning’s successes, the description of the accident, and an interview with two white men in charge of the Bettis airport in Pittsburgh who commended on the late flyer’s skills (“Banning Dies in Air Crash,” “Loses Pal,” “Local Airport Officials Pay Flyer Fine Tribute”).

The news, as Scott and Womack observe, was viewed as “similar in many ways to that of Bessie Coleman [...] and with a similar sense of loss” (39). As with Coleman,

the *Courier* carried an article explaining that Banning's death was the white pilot's fault and that Banning, like Coleman, could not have done anything to save his life ("Blame White Flier in Quiz of Banning's Death"). The news was so shocking for the African American community that the *Courier* even published a short article relating how "ill and destitute" Banning's wife was ("Mourned Aviator's Wife is Destitute"). In a report from Banning's funeral, the paper informed that the flyer's friends, led by William J. Powell, were planning to purchase a monument for the late aviator ("Plan Monument to Banning").

Although Banning had not carried or presented himself as an aviation crusader – the same way that other black aviation pioneers had before him – did not stop the black press from portraying him as one. The *Courier* printed a cartoon on February 11 entitled "May His Spirit Never Die!" in which Banning's ghost is hovering over a wrecked plane labeled "For the Advancement of Negroes in Aviation." Along with it, an editorial titled "J. Herman Banning" called the pilot's transcontinental trip a "goodwill" one and pointed out that Banning had helped distribute flyers for the Roosevelt campaign while travelling the East coast. The text portrayed Banning as fearless, intelligent, and as a trailblazer.

Two weeks later, Harry Levette, an Associated Negro Press reporter and author of numerous articles on aviation in California as well as the poem "Call of the Wings," wrote "Herman Banning: An Ode to a Great Aviator," in which Banning's transcontinental flight was described as a "race against time [and] the scoffers [and] race prejudices." Banning was depicted as a martyr and Levette exhorted his readers to "put

black men in the great Pullmans of the air; black men flying the US mail; black men piloting the myriad busy ships of commerce [...] for his sake and for Bessie Coleman's sake." Finally, the *Defender* reminded its readers in an editorial that the African American community needed to provide more support for martyrs such as Banning and other young men and women who were trying to make it as aviators. "Somehow," asserted the text, "we have not yet learned to profit by our mistakes and the mistakes of others" ("Our Duty to Aviation").

Fortunately for the future of black aviation, Banning's death – as well as the coverage of black aviation in the black press which gave space for aviators to promote their field and depicted successful aviators as crusaders – provided inspiration and impetus for new aviators. In response to the *Courier's* editorial on Banning's passing, Dr. A.E. Forsythe wrote a letter to the editor, in which he praised the paper's treatment of aviation: "I wish to highly commend your paper upon the stand it has taken on Negro aviation in the past and especially for the way your paper handled the recent unfortunate Banning incident. In both your news and editorial column you have made every aviation enthusiast [...] feel that yours is the most air-minded publication in the country." A pilot's-license holder himself, Forsythe explained that even successful flyers of the past were struggling to make ends meet during the economic crisis. It was therefore crucial that the *Courier* was informing the African American community on the hardships that black aviators had to experience trying to advance black aviation ("An Ode to Banning"). Inspired by Banning's success and the *Courier's* devotion to technical

progress and aviation, Forsythe would become a source of headlines in aviation coverage for the following two years.

Having provided extensive coverage for the first transcontinental flight, the *Courier* established itself, as Albert E. Forsythe observed, as the major advocate for and supporter of black aviation. Nowhere was this more visible than in its coverage of the next two long-distance flights, carried out by Forsythe and his co-pilot, Alfred Anderson, the first black licensed transport pilot. Although the newspaper continued publicizing Hubert Julian's proposed flights, such as another "non-stop solo flight from New York to Paris" ("Famed Flyer Hopes to Cut Time Made by Lindy in Half"), it was the successful goodwill flights by other flyers that gradually pushed Julian out of black press's coverage of aviation.

5.2 Forsythe and Anderson's Goodwill Flights for Interracial Understanding

In early July, the *Courier* published Forsythe's plea for funds for a transcontinental round-trip. The flight was being backed by the Atlantic City Board of Trade, as Forsythe, according to his nephew's account in *Black Flight*, wanted to engage Atlantic City's white community in the project because he felt that "we won't accomplish anything if only the coloreds are involved" (166). At the same time, Forsythe established the National Negro Aeronautical Society, which would sponsor the flight. The organization was asking for \$2,000, assuring the public through Forsythe that "this is nothing like that fake Harlem flight to Liberia," thus distancing itself from Hubert Julian's notorious efforts ("Seek Support for Airplane Project").

Forsythe's organization raised the necessary funds, the cross-country flight became another successful story of black aviators, and the *Defender*, probably sensing a shift in black aviation's luck joined the *Courier* in covering Forsythe and Anderson's epochal hop. The *Courier* ran an ecstatic article on July 22, in which it remarked that Anderson had used to teach Forsythe how to fly and noted that the flyers were on schedule, having visited Pittsburgh and Cleveland on their way. Forsythe and Anderson landed safely in Glendale, California in 33 hours and 15 minutes ("Forsythe-Anderson Arrive on Coast after Record Flight," "Cross-Country Flight Now On"). The *Defender* also mentioned the name of Forsythe and Anderson's plane, "The Pride of Atlantic City," which the flyers had chosen in order to attract the city's white Board of Commerce to support their flight. The name also referred back to Charles Lindbergh's legendary plane "The Spirit of St. Louis," and, according to *Black Flight*, it was meant to "appeal to another cities [sic] pride and turn [the flight] into a state project not just a one-city project" ("Flyers Nearing Goal," *Black Flight* 167). Forsythe and Anderson's goodwill flight was, in other words, designed to invite even more publicity and interest in black aviation than ever before.

And attract it did – the flyers were given ceremonial welcomes in Los Angeles, where 2,000 people led by William Powell were awaiting them, in Pittsburgh, and Chicago. The African American community was, indeed, becoming air-minded. The aviators also carried a goodwill letter from the mayor of Atlantic City to the mayor of Los Angeles, thereby finishing a task that Joel Ace Foreman had not been able to complete in 1927 ("Cross-Country Flyers Stop in City," "Westerners Joyous at Flyers'

Success,” “Chicago Gives Welcome to Coast-to-Coast Flyers,” *Black Flight* 188). The biggest welcome was given at Atlantic City and Newark, however. The mayor of Atlantic City and other white and black dignitaries, along with 2,000 spectators, presented Forsythe and Anderson with commemorative medals, organized a parade with “uniformed representatives of Veterans of Foreign Wars of the Rheims post and Kenneth Hawkins post, who constituted the guard of honor.” The flyers were later hosted by the New Jersey governor, too (“Throngs Greet Air Aces,” “Atlantic City Had Dinner for Flyers,” “Coast to Coast Flyers Feted by N.J. Governor”). Black aviation was thus being celebrated and appreciated by both white and black communities, fostering and improving interracial understanding.

It is important to note, too, that Albert Forsythe was not only changing the image of black aviation as a frivolous activity, but was also replacing Hubert Julian as the West Indian representative of black aviation in the United States. Forsythe had arrived from the Bahamas to study at the Tuskegee Institute, where he had become a student-chauffeur for and mentee of Booker T. Washington. He had graduated in 1913. He had earned a medical degree from McGill University in Montreal – which Julian had also claimed to be an alumnus of. Forsythe had been a fan of aviation since his childhood and so when his income had allowed him to become a pilot and purchase a plane, he asked Alfred Anderson to teach him, which led to a partnership that would change the face of black aviation (*Black Flight* 1-120, Scott and Womack 40).

While the two pioneers were making black Americans air-minded with their historic flight, Hubert Julian exploited their popularity in the black press – he proposed a

goodwill flight to Montreal in July, another non-stop flight to India, and another one to Aden in September, naming his unpaid-for plane “Abyssinia,” thus again invoking Pan-African sentiments in his audience³³ (“Col. Julian to Make Good-will Flight,” “Colonel Hubert Julian Prepares for His Sea Flight,” “Colonel Julian May Fly the Atlantic,” “Julian Back from Boston Flight,” “Christens Julian’s Plane”). As can be gleaned from the newspaper headlines, Julian was also invoking his military credentials as a “colonel” from his alleged service as “air minister” under Ethiopia’s Haile Selassie. Nevertheless, it was Forsythe – following in the footsteps of Leon Paris, another West Indian pilot – who continued to break barriers for black aviation when he proposed a “Latin American goodwill flight,” partially sponsored by the city of Newark (“Newark to Honor Famous Aviators”).

The cross-country flight by Forsythe and Anderson had brought considerable attention to black aviation and demonstrated the importance of goodwill tours in raising publicity and interest in the African American community’s endeavors in the field. As Anderson noted upon landing in Atlantic City, “all along the route of the flight great interest had been shown in the project” and, more importantly, “a better interracial understanding had been brought about, as well as greatly increased self-confidence and self-esteem among the members of the race, especially among the youth” (“Throngs Greet Air Aces with Tremendous Ovation”). The flight did not only inspire young African Americans to engage in aviation – a message that the black press had been

³³ In another article for the *Defender*, Julian’s plane was named “The Haile Selassie, King of Kings” (“Christens Julian’s Plane”).

trying to convey for a decade – but it also indicated that sponsorship of black aviation events and feats was a worthwhile investment. As a result of the transcontinental flight, Forsythe’s nephew notes, Anderson established “a flying school and a charter flying service” near Philadelphia – the school was designed to “train more coloreds and create more pressures for change,” while “the charter service would show that there was an income potential” in aviation (*Black Flight* 203). Forsythe and Anderson thus embodied and spread the goodwill message that aviation education and endeavors brought about employment in the field and advanced the community in the white population’s as well as the black community’s eyes.

“The airplane,” explained James Herman Banning in “The Negro and the Airplane,” “has made neighbors of every nation on the globe.” And it was to United States’ neighbors that Forsythe and Anderson’s sights turned in 1934. First, the two flew from Atlantic City to Montreal (Broadnax 18) and then announced in March 1934 that preparations were on the way to carry out a Pan-American flight later in the year. Both the *Courier* and the *Defender* reported that Dr. Stanley Lucas, the head of the National Negro Aeronautical Society, had left for Haiti and Latin American countries to forge “another definite link [...] in the promotion of a proposed good-will flight to Pan-American countries in the interests of the Race.” The Race Aviation Promotion Society of America had started raising funds for the flight and other groups were expected to join in the effort (“Dr. Stanley Lucas Off on South American Tour,” “Good Will Hop to Pan America Budding”). The goodwill message of black aviation was about to go international.

The reason why Forsythe and Anderson, heavily supported by various organizations, decided to deploy their goodwill message in the Caribbean and Latin America was to combat racial prejudice and fight for civil rights. As Jason Parker explains, the Harlem Renaissance – brought about by the migration of African Americans as well as West Indians to the American North – was a precursor of the transnational black activism of Caribbean decolonization in the 1940s and 1950s as the two groups “were building networks for promoting black freedom” (98-100). In 1920, the West Indian population in New York comprised a quarter of the city’s black population; by 1930, it was a fifth (Foner 4). The cultural, intellectual, and commercial exchange between various groups of people in color in New York was rich and it was perhaps here that Forsythe, himself a West Indian from the Bahamas, and Anderson learned more about the plight of people of African descent in the Caribbean.

The Caribbean region was dealing with a strong legacy of colonialism and slavery, as well as tensions between the Hispanic and African cultures. As Jason M. Colby explains, “slavery and Spanish colonial rule left a powerful legacy of hierarchy and inequality [as] Hispanic elites generally shared white American prejudice toward peoples of African and indigenous descent” (9). Black workers and immigrants across the region and in Central American were looked down upon and maltreated by Hispanic workers, especially in the shrinking job market of the Great Depression, and were also perceived as “inseparable from the problem of U.S. domination, [...] Yankee imperialism and racial degradation” (151). As Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor policy of non-intervention gradually returned power to the Hispanic elites in many of the region’s

countries, this shift came “hand in hand with the rise of authoritarian regimes and the cresting of anti-black xenophobia” (177). Rafael Trujillo’s massacre in 1937 of approximately 12,000 Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic was a climax of such tensions and racism.

The shared plight of people of African descent in the United States and the Caribbean, as well as Central and Latin America, was thus the driving force behind the proposed Pan-American goodwill flight for improved interracial understanding. As Dr. Lucas explained upon embarking to Haiti, “Many well-thinking people are beginning to realize that the difficulties confronting us as a race are due to the fact that our aims and aspirations are so little understood by other peoples.” Aviation was “a means of advancing the race [and] no other method,” asserted Lucas, “can so effectively and at such small cost change the false viewpoint and attitude that millions of people have toward the colored race as the carrying out of the goodwill program.” “Improved interracial relations,” added Lucas, “are as essential to us as protective legislation” (“Good Will Hop to Pan America Budding”).

George S. Schuyler concurred with Lucas when he argued that “the only way effectively to smash the inferior-Negro propaganda is to disprove it by deeds.” Indirectly criticizing the image of black aviation that Hubert Julian had fostered, Schuyler explained that Forsythe and Anderson “are not mere parachute jumpers or men who only fly off at the mouth, but aviators with solid accomplishments behind them in the best tradition of Bessie Coleman.” Schuyler urged his readers to help the flight financially, too, arguing that “with \$100,000 or more behind them they [Forsythe and Anderson] will

bring glory to the entire group” (“Views and Reviews”). In this way, Lucas and Schuyler first openly formulated the anti-racist and civil rights dimension of the goodwill message of black aviation.

The flight was to be, given its scope and importance, a serious undertaking. Forsythe decided to transform the National Negro Aeronautical Society into a more fittingly-named The Interracial Goodwill Aviation Committee, appointing Mary J. Washington as the publicity director and establishing a Flight Advisory Board, members of which were, for example, Oscar DePriest, a congressman from Illinois, and Eugene Kinckle Jones from the Urban League. The newly-formed group organized a Flight Boosters Club which, among other activities, sold buttons to raise funds for the flight (*Black Flight* 205-6).

The *Courier* and the *Defender* reported in August that the West Indian Federation of American and the Caribbean Union lent their support to the flight as they hoped to make “this flight a fitting climax to the celebrations that are already under way to commemorate the centenary of emancipation in the British West Indies.” The emancipation was a result of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 and so it was only fitting that at a time when Hispanic and black workers clashed in the West Indies and black workers were ostracized, African American aviators would fly throughout the region spreading their goodwill and mutual understanding. To appreciate the support of the two organizations and to underscore the importance of black aviation in improving interracial relations, Forsythe made a speech entitled “Aviation and the Destiny of Our Race” at a celebration of the emancipation’s anniversary in New York. Finally, the New Jersey

State Federation of Colored Women's clubs asked that the flyers relay a message from them to the "women of the West Indies and the Latin America countries" ("Race Flyers Plan South American Good Will Tour," "Good Will Flyers to Get Royal Welcome," "Emancipation Anniversary Observed by West Indians"). More and more groups were becoming invested in the goodwill message of black aviation and, as with Leon Paris's flight to Haiti during a period of political tensions between the United States and his homeland, the flight was gradually becoming a serious political endeavor, too.

Perhaps as a consequence, the articles in the *Courier* and the *Defender* on preparations for the flight were devoid of sensationalism. Unlike Hubert Julian's proposed flights, the Pan-American goodwill hop was thus gaining credibility: William H. Davis, publisher of the *New York Amsterdam News* and a longtime aviation benefactor, announced his paper's support for the flight. Congressman Isaac Bacharach announced that he would facilitate assistance from the director of aeronautics of the Department of Commerce and from the State Department. A World War I ace sent a recommendation letter on behalf of Forsythe and Anderson to the director of the United States Bureau of Aeronautics. And various officials from the destination countries had sent welcome letters and assurances that they were ready to receive the flyers ("Paper to Aid Negro Flyers").

Forsythe and Anderson also needed a new plane. They flew to St. Louis to pick up their new Lambert monocoque – while waiting at the factory, the flyers met Charles Lindbergh and discussed their planned route and other details with him ("Aviators Talk to Lindy"). With the new plane, they made fundraising stops in nine eastern cities. While

fundraising in Chicago, they met Duke Kweisi Kuntu, who was “anxious to encourage aviation in West Africa” and suggested that “the West African Aborigines Society would aid in sponsoring [the flyers’] coming in 1935 and especially for the Great World’s Fair there in 1938” (“Aviators Pause Here to Tell Chicagoans of Flight,” “All Roads Led to Chicago,” “Cross-Country Flier Addresses Youth Meet,” “U.S. to S. America Flyers Stop at County Airport,” “Ready for Their Hop to South America,” “Goodwill Flight Program Booms as Plans Progress”). As Samuel Broadnax puts it, “the team of Anderson and Forsythe, as much as anyone, brought worldwide recognition to the abilities and undeniable aviation skills of black pilots (18-19).

While Forsythe and Anderson were making fundraising appearances along the East Coast, Mary J. Washington, their publicity director was writing elaborate pieces on the complexities of flying long-distance flights, highlighting the two flyers’ experience, credibility, and technical prowess. In “Aviators Map Course for Latin American Flight,” for example, Washington explained that the aviators had spent a year studying maps and charts as well as aerial navigation. They had also been preparing to deliver their goodwill message in French, English, Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese and had been trying to secure all necessary permissions from foreign governments as well as the various U.S. departments. Washington also prepared a list of “the major newspapers on the islands that would be visited and a list of many in America to use for press releases [and] compiled a list of two ham radio operators for each island” to relay information about departures, arrivals, and weather (*Black Flight* 214). Furthermore, the Interracial Goodwill Aviation Committee had written a letter about the proposed flight to President

Roosevelt – the president’s office encouraged the flight in its response, which, in turn, facilitated the State Department’s cooperation in granting the flyers permission to the various islands (210). The promotional campaign for the flight was thus reaping success.

The final promotional step to maximize the impact that the Pan-American flight was to engage Forsythe’s alma mater, the Tuskegee Institute, in lending its founder’s name to the flyers’ plane. According to Robert Jakeman, Forsythe’s committee had contacted Robert Moton, the Institute’s president, in early September and a plane-christening date was set up for September 15. F.D. Patterson, the future president of Tuskegee, and Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. were present, along with Nettie H. Washington, Booker T. Washington’s granddaughter (9-10). Upon christening the flyers’ plane, an exhibition flight and photographs were taken – Dr. Moton with Forsythe and Anderson, in front of the freshly-christened plane appeared on the pages of both the *Courier* and the *Defender* (“Pan-American Flyers to Name New Plane Booker T. Washington,” “R.R. Moton to Christen Plane of Noted Flyers,” “Mrs. Moton Christens Airplane,” “Booker T. Washington to Soar Over Americas”). The Institute also helped organize a fundraising committee, raising \$350 (Jakeman 10). Finally, on November 2, Mary J. Washington wrote a piece for the *Defender*, in which she announced the final list of destinations, reiterated the purpose of the goodwill flight, and provided examples of foreign dignitaries who had communicated their excitement to welcome Forsythe and Anderson (“U.S. Approves Flight of Goodwill Aviators”). Among them featured Marcus Garvey of Jamaica – he would finally see black aviators bridging the racial technological gap and demonstrating that black pilots, too, could fly.

The *Courier* and the *Defender* followed the actual goodwill flight as vigorously as its preparations. In their brief but excited reports, the newspapers did not fail to highlight that Forsythe and Anderson's flight had been sanctioned by the president of the United States, the Department of State, and the Department of Commerce, which imbued the hop with an official tone and purpose ("Aviators Hop Off This Week," "Good-Will Aviators Ready for Take-Off," "Crowd Welcomes Race Aviators in Nassau"). The flyers suffered a gas-line break in South Carolina, but were waited upon by the Miami airport officials, and were later welcomed by a crowd of 5,000 in Nassau, Bahamas, Forsythe's homeland. The papers then detailed how ceremoniously spectators and officials welcomed the flyers in Kingston, Nassau, Havana, Santiago, Port-au-Prince, Santo Domingo, San Juan, and Port of Spain ("Thousands Cheer Fliers in Nassau, Havana, and Santiago," "Winging Way to South America," "Goodwill Fliers Honored in Haiti").

While the reports in the *Courier* and the *Defender* provided little commentary in their numerous yet brief texts, Mary J. Washington continued to celebrate the flyers in her articles. She wrote a long piece on Forsythe's homecoming in Nassau ("Pan-American Fliers Complete Water Hop") and, once it had become clear that the flight was in serious trouble after a number of "close calls" in Haiti and the Dominican Republic ("Forsythe, Anderson Continue Flight," "Welcome Good Will Flyers in South America"), Washington wrote a piece in which she portrayed the flyers as crusaders, spreading Booker T. Washington's and their own goodwill message. As previous black aviation pioneers, Forsythe and Anderson were depicted as martyrs for the advancement of the race. The "two cool-headed, thorough, daring men," Washington observed, "travel

with hope for the welfare of a race in their hearts.” They believe that “They are happiest // Who do the most // For others.” This Booker T. Washington’s quotation, exclaimed Washington, “may guide our men on courageously through this modern quest of the silver fleece and bring them safely to the happy landing that is HOME” (“Hazards Dot Route of Good Wil Fliers”). One day later, the flyers crashed the “Booker T. Washington” in Port of Spain, Trinidad, hopelessly damaging the plane and thus ending their flight only 4,000 miles into the 12,000 originally planned (“Plane of Forsythe, Anderson Wrecked,” “Aviators in Crash; Plane Falls in Yard,” “Crash Ends Good-Will Tour”).

Once the *Defender* published the article on Forsythe and Anderson’s crash at the end of December 1934, coverage of Forsythe and Anderson’s endeavors almost disappeared from the Chicago and Pittsburgh weeklies. As Jakeman puts it, “embarrassed, tired, and disappointed, the Goodwill fliers quietly returned to the United States” and the abrupt ending to their visions “ended Forsythe’s active involvement in aviation (19-20). Anderson remained active and would later become an instructor in the Civilian Pilot Training Program at Howard and Tuskegee. The *Defender* carried a photograph of the two flyers with the governor of the Virgin Islands in early January 1935 (“Wing Way to Virgin Islands”) and the *Courier* published a letter to the editor, which praised the flyers for their fight for “greater accomplishments and goodwill for our people, and increased respect, so that we who follow may be a little closer toward equality of opportunity, regard and status” (“Proud of Flyers”). Despite the abrupt

ending, the flight was thus still seen as an achievement by many and the image of aviation may have finally been transformed from a pastime into a civil rights cause.

Harlem welcomed Forsythe and Anderson in early March at a reception, which demonstrated that the Pan-American goodwill flight had accomplished its objective of building inter-racial relationships despite its unfortunate ending. At the event held at the St. James Presbyterian church, Forsythe and Anderson, among other things, presented the “addresses written on scrolls of parchment to the fliers in recognition of their outstanding achievement in promoting international and interracial understanding and good will” (“New York Gives Welcome to Pan-American Flyers”).

As further evidence of the flyers’ achievement, in his report for the December 1934 issue of the *Tuskegee Messenger*, Forsythe noted that “this trip is proving to be of great help to the colored people of the United States and [of these West Indian countries]. Here [...] it makes the people of color feel very proud of themselves and is entirely changing their conception of the colored people of the United States.” Forsythe observed that West Indians thought of African Americans as very black because of the term “Negro” used by the Associated Press, which in Spanish means black. They also believed that African Americans were slaves or servants, could not vote, were unimportant and had never achieved anything of substance. Consequently, black Americans were considered lazy and without aspirations. Forsythe claimed that “this flight alone has immediately proven everyone of these ideas to be false. It would have been even better if we had been both very dark” (“The Good Will Fliers in the West Indies”). Despite technical failures and an abrupt ending, the flight did achieve what in

spirit it set out to do: through a historic achievement in aviation, a cutting-edge technical field historically dominated by white aviators, Forsythe and Anderson connected people of color across nations and filled them with pride.

Long-distance flights carried out by black aviators had always been intended to form a building component of aviation's goodwill message. Without achievements such as these, the aviation coverage in the black press had been one-dimensional, emphasizing pioneering efforts and crusading pilots, while leaving the black newspaper readership somewhat disappointed. Marcus Garvey and Hubert Julian had envisioned black pilots flying to Africa to fight against colonial powers, yet Julian never took off. Bessie Coleman, too, had hoped to spread aviation's gospel in Pan-American countries, but did not get an opportunity, and William J. Powell had been planning a transcontinental race of two planes piloted by black aviators before James Herman Banning and Thomas C. Allen decided to fly it alone. The success of the first cross-country flight, however, had added a dimension to aviation coverage of achievements comparable to those of white flyers. It also brought about a sharp rise in the number of articles in the black press written about aviation and its role in the civil right struggles of African Americans. The output of texts in the *Courier* and the *Defender* doubled.

It was the achievements of Banning-Allen and Forsythe-Anderson's long-distance flights that transformed the image of aviators in the black press, too. As newspapers carefully reported on the details of preparations for flights and informed about the interest that successful long-distance flights had sprung in both black and white communities, the image of aviators changed from individualistic crusaders to

goodwill messengers with a political purpose. Success – technological in demonstrating the ability to fly over long distances and political in bringing about interracial understanding – did not only make black Americans increasingly air-minded, but, more importantly, it turned aviation and the position of black aviators within the system of American civil and military aviation into a civil-rights, political issue.

6. 1933-34: CALIFORNIA AND CHICAGO LEADING THE WAY IN AVIATION EDUCATION

Although the goodwill flights rightfully dominated the aviation coverage in 1933 and 1934, William J. Powell in Los Angeles and John C. Robinson in Chicago continued their pioneering work in educating students of color in aviation through their aviation clubs. As Forsythe and Anderson were building a community of followers of aviation achievements, Powell and Robinson were shaping a new generation of black flyers in the classrooms and training airports. This section of the thesis discusses the coverage of Powell's further pioneering efforts after Banning, a member of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club, had taken away the spotlight off Powell in 1932. It also analyzes the gradual rise of John C. Robinson as the leading figure in black aviation and his groundbreaking proposition to open an aviation school at the Tuskegee Institute in 1934.

Even though the *Courier* and the *Defender* reported on a gruesome airplane accident of a student pilot and his wife on their solo flight in Detroit (“Airman and Wife Die in Crash,” “Young Aviator, Pretty Wife Dead in Plane Crash”), the black community in the United States was becoming increasingly interested in aviation education. In Washington, D.C., for example, the “first Negro school of aviation” was established in early January 1933 (“Aviators School Opens”). In Indianapolis, the Capitol Airport had announced that “its airplanes of opportunity had been opened to all air-minded persons, regardless of race or color” – a local group of African American businessmen and professionals inspected the airport soon after the announcement,

prompting the *Courier* to claim in the headline that this is “Another Evidence of the Race’s Soaring Interest in Aviation.”³⁴ And, as was usual in the aviation campaign in the black press, another outstanding aviation student emerged – Austin Mount in Erie, Pa. (“Flyer”).

Black aviation was flourishing – at least, based on the content of the newspaper articles in the black press – at an unprecedented rate between 1932 and 1935. This trend may be surprising, given the economic conditions of African Americans during the height of the Great Depression. As Raymond Wolters explains in *Negroes and the Great Depression*, in March 1933, “the economic life of the nation was at a standstill. Agricultural prices were less than half what they had been four years earlier, industrial production had declined by more than half, and more than twelve million workers were unemployed” (ix). In late 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration reported that 26.7% of African American citizens in cities – compared to 9.6% of whites – were on relief, and the Urban League informed that in some cities the conditions were much worse (91). One of the reasons for high black unemployment was the fact that they were employed as marginal, unskilled workers and thus when depression hit or new innovations came, these workers were laid off first; many complained that they were “last hired, first fired” (Wolters 92, Greenberg 27). Moreover, Cheryl Lynn Greenberg points out, “there were no longer any purely black occupations [as] there were no jobs

³⁴ The *Defender* informed on the same event, too (“Business Men Inspect Modern Airports”).

white workers refused to do.” African Americans thus could not rely on access to even the worst menial jobs (29).

The black middle class did not fare very well either. Although white-collar job opportunities did open in the government sector, black businesses lost the “hard-won gains from the past twenty years” when the Great Migration had brought about a rise in the number of business opportunities and clientele. The number of African Americans entering professional ranks was also stagnant (Greenberg 29-32). Despite this economic climate, however, black aviation not only survived, but began to thrive, because aviation clubs attracted professions which were in demand even during the Depression. As Scott and Womack observe, the Chicago aero clubs founded by Robinson were joined by doctors, dentists, nurses, lawyers, and educators; some student aviators were employed by the Works Progress Administration (61). Still, many of the aviation pioneers in the early 1930s worked as car mechanics and were employed by or owned businesses predicated on manual, technically-skilled labor.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Robinson, Forsythe, and Doris Murphy, one of Robinson’s female students, had all attended the Tuskegee Institute, where vocational and industrial training were the primary focus of education. However, what distinguishes aviation from being merely another technical field in which African Americans could have prospered as mechanics and maintenance workers upon receiving their training – espousing the self-help doctrine of Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee’s founder and main ideologue – was the fact that black pioneer aviators wanted to fly, not merely repair, and, more importantly, they elevated black aviation into a social force in the fight for civil

rights. This may be another factor why aviation and its black representatives persevered despite the harsh economic conditions of the early 1930s.

In California, William J. Powell intensified his pioneering efforts during 1933 and 1934, adding a new dimension – civic engagement in aviation through drama and fiction. When Forsythe and Anderson landed in Los Angeles on their transcontinental flight in 1933, one of the events that the flyers attended was a performance of a play called “Ethiopia Spreads Her Wings,” a production that, according to Forsythe’s nephew, “echoed the theme of advancing the colored race” (*Black Flight* 189). The play’s theme was more than that, however. Titled by Floyd C. Covington, director of the Los Angeles branch of the Urban League and an avid aviation supporter, the play had been written by William J. Powell during a two-day-and-night writing frenzy (*Black Wings* 122). According to a review in the *Defender*, the play “deals with the financial reverses of an aristocratic Columbus, Ohio, family during the depression.” The family’s five children lose their jobs, the father’s salary is cut, and “the family loses everything.” However, the four sons “decide to hobo to Los Angeles to enter a Negro aviation school. They do and their fortunes change.” With Cleo Desmond, a famous actress, playing the role of the family’s mother, the play was “true to Negro life of the better class, giving an intimate glimpse of the reaction to the economic dilemma in which the technically trained Negro finds himself today.” Most importantly, the play sought to draw attention to aviation, “the only field of industry offering the Race untold commercial opportunities” (“Cleo Desmond Gets Break in Movies and Makes Good”).

Perhaps it was not only the successful long distance flight by Banning and Allen that attracted an increasing number of African Americans into the field of aviation from 1932 onwards. Perhaps it was the constant presentation of aviation as a field open to all races that was changing the minds of those who had lost faith in quick economic recovery during the Depression and saw an opening in aviation. Perhaps the constant and ever-growing aviation coverage in the black press had had an effect on the readership. Powell certainly thought so as he credited his work and the *Courier's* when he compiled a list of positive developments in black aviation once his play received press coverage and its story spread around the nation (*Black Wings* 122). At any rate, Powell, who had been first to promote aviation directly in the black press through letters to the editor, began to utilize literature in order to promote black aviation and its goodwill message as a means of escaping unemployment. If Forsythe and Anderson transformed aviation into a clearly articulated civil-rights issue, Powell formulated aviation's contribution towards alleviating the dire economic situation of the African American community and its technically-skilled members.

Having finished work on the play, Powell devoted his time to expanding his educational activities beyond the Bessie Coleman Aero Club. In February 1934, the *Courier* announced that under the National Recovery Administration and the Emergency Education program, a number of African American teachers "have been employed to teach in district high and junior high schools" in Los Angeles. Among them, William Powell opened "aviation classes" at the Jefferson High School ("NRA Gives Teachers Break"). The *Defender* then informed in April that 86 students of aviation, "comprising

two classes in theory of flight and aerodynamics” were preparing for their final examinations in evening classes led by Powell. Those who would pass, explained the paper, would advance to a class on aerial navigation. Also, “another beginners class will be conducted along with the two advanced classes” and the *Defender* was urging those who were interested to apply soon (“California News”). In July, Powell was asked to expand his classes and the Board of Education at the Jefferson high school was considering incorporating aviation classes into its traditional curriculum (“Lieut. Powell to Teach L.A. School Children to Fly”). Powell was thus allowed to continue teaching aviation classes to both black and white students.

The highlight of Powell’s exposure of black aviation in the black press, however, came in late 1934, upon the release of his fictional autobiography, *Black Wings*. The *Courier* reviewed the book in October, calling it “a source of inspiration to every American, young or old, black or white.” The review also pointed out that Powell’s argument was that “there is a better future for the Negro as a whole in aviation than in any other industry” (“Book Review”). The *Defender* highlighted the same theme in its November issues when it reprinted a large section of Chapter 13, the final chapter of *Black Wings*, subtitled it “Race Neglects Its Opportunities in Aviation: Engineer Tells Why We Should Become Air-Minded.” In essence, the chapter was aviation’s goodwill message distilled. Powell listed all the existing and potential utilizations of airplanes and reminded his readers that aviation was open to all races and exhorted them to “get into aviation now while we have a chance to have black airplane designers, black airplane distributors, owners of black air transport lines, and have thousands of black boys and

black girls profitably employed in a great paying industry.” The *Defender* devoted three separate issues of its feature page to *Black Wings*, including an appendix with a list of licensed black aviators from the United States Department of Commerce. In this way, Powell, the *Courier*, and the *Defender* further capitalized on the publicity brought about by Forsythe and Anderson’s Pan-American flight in late 1934 to promote aviation even further.

Most importantly, however, George S. Schuyler, who would later write at least three aviation-themed novellas in the second half of the 1930s, weighed in with his review of *Black Wings* and opinions on William J. Powell. In his review, Schuyler stated that the text “kept me awake long past my time of retiring” and that he felt “actually stirred” by it. He called the book “the whole story of the Negro (American brand) in aviation from Bessie Coleman to Anderson and Forsythe.” In praising Powell and other pioneer aviators, Schuyler asserted that they “deserve to rank alongside Sojourner Truth and Aunt Harriet Tubman.” He also reiterated the opinion he had voiced in several of his previous columns and which he shared with Powell: that there were opportunities for the African Americans in aviation and they should seize them. Finally, the columnist pointed out that “it is clearly indicated that every one [black pioneer flyer] from the author down was actuated as much by racial as personal motives. They wanted to put THE NEGRO in aviation rather than NEGROES in aviation” (“Views and Reviews”). As before, Schuyler thus depicted Powell – from whom he had probably received an inscribed copy of the book – and his colleagues as crusaders and martyrs for the good of the race. Along with Powell’s text, Schuyler’s review, interspersed with personal

commentary, provides the perfect example of a coherently expressed goodwill message of aviation.

In Chicago, John C. Robinson was formulating his own strategy of trailblazing black aviation: through a military organization and an aviation school at Tuskegee. As one of Robinson's biographers, Phillip Thomas Tucker, points out "more than anyone else, Robinson had played a key role in making Chicago an influential center of black aviation that not only rivaled, but also surpassed Los Angeles" (60). Even though in May 1933, Robinson's Challenger Aero Club lost its airport in Robbins and its airplanes due to a storm ("Tornado Plays Prank with Airplane")³⁵ and in July Robinson scared baseball players in Douglas Park in Chicago when his plane stalled and he had to perform an emergency landing ("Stalled Plane Landed Safely in Chi Park"), the year 1933 was a successful one for the aviator.

To celebrate Chicago's centennial, the city held "A Century of Progress International Exposition" from 1933 to 1934. In the Transport and Travel Building, the Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical University held its exhibition, including engines "assembled by Negro students" attending the institution. The *Courier* used the opportunity of the Chicago World Fair to promote Robinson's class of 1931-32 and the Challenger Aero Club, accompanying their long report on Robinson and his students/co-aviators with a large photograph of the major members of the aero club ("Sepia Air Pilots Thrill World's Fair Visitors"). Even though Harold Hurd, the club's manager, had

³⁵ The aero club moved to the Harlem Airport on Harlem Avenue where it remained for the next few years ("The Other Harlem").

promised after the storm in May to have the club's hangars rebuilt "by the time of the opening of the World's Fair" ("Storm Destroys Airport"), it is unclear whether the black aviators actually demonstrated their flying or merely mechanical skills. At any rate, Robinson as an instructor was making a name for Chicago's black aviators at the event.

More importantly, however, Robinson had transformed his aero club into a paramilitary organization. The photograph of Robinson's students printed on the occasion of the World Fair featured military ranks in front of the students' names: Col. Robinson, Second Lieut. Grover C. Nash, and Lieut. Dale L. White. In fact, although there are eleven people captured in the photo, only those with military rank are mentioned by name, while the accompanying article on the fair features several other Robinson's students – without ranks. As Scott and Womack explain, Robinson's group "sought membership as an Air Reserve squadron within the Illinois National Guard." Despite initial rejection, the group was awarded a state charter as "a Military Order of Guard, Aviation Squadron," thereby acquiring similar status to the state militia, although it had no administrative connection with the National Guard. Robinson was allowed to label one of the club's planes with MOG insignia and members were given quasi-military positions (49). This would explain the military ranks published in the *Courier*.

In essence, members of the club served "as members of the first all-black military aviation unit," having established a "volunteer para-military aviation organization" (Tucker 61). Whereas Hubert Julian had presented himself in military uniforms ever since 1922 without advancing black aviation, John C. Robinson and his group formed a technically educated, skilled, and government-sanctioned para-military

organization predicated upon serving its community in case of emergency. In other words, after more than a decade after the Tulsa riot, Robinson managed to considerably narrow the racial gap in aviation.³⁶

Indeed, the *Courier* only informed about Robinson's group's para-military status indirectly, but so did the *Defender* in reporting on another aero club with a similar mission. Irvin E. Wells, William J. Powell's co-pilot in the Air Derby in 1932, established his aviation school at the Dycer airport in Los Angeles in early 1934 ("California Women Become Airminded"). Later in the year, however, Wells was reported to be preparing to "affiliate himself with the Pioneer Aero Club of Chula Vista," a neighborhood in San Diego. The aero club had been established, per the *Defender*, to "prepare and train Race students of American for commercial aviation and government reserve and offensive emergencies" ("California News," emphasis mine). The paper later carried a photograph of Gilbert Williams, the club's founder, with his wife, Marie Daugherty – the parachute jumper who had helped organize an aviation school in Harlem with her former husband, who had served in the military ("Found Aviation School").

Although these attempts by black aviators were merely symbolic attempts to demonstrate and advertise their skills for potential military service, the successful long-distance flights by Banning-Allen and Forsythe-Anderson had by then created a mood in

³⁶ In fact, Robinson had been connected to military aviation as an instructor even prior to this event. In his second class at the Curtiss-Wright School, Robinson taught not only black students, but also white and Asian ones. Although the Chinese students in his class did crash his own plane early in their training, they eventually became "the nucleus of the Chinese Royal Air Force in China's defense against Japanese aggression" in Manchuria (Scott and Womack 45, Tucker 44).

the African American public of bewilderment over the fact that the US military would not allow black flyers to join the service. E.L. Best, probably one of William Powell's students at Jefferson High, wrote a letter to the *Defender* in October 1934, noting that "there are approximately 2,500 airplanes of various military types in use in America today [yet] of all the 20,000 men who go to make up the personnel of the Air Corps [...] there is not one Negro." "Since the nations of the world are madly preparing for war [and] America is too," Best observed, "it is up to us to make the Government see fit to begin giving us this training right now [because] we, the younger Negroes, demand the right to efficiently and ably protect ourselves" ("The Race and Aviation").³⁷ As the letter shows, as black aviators' skills improved, their frustration with being ignored grew exponentially.

The *Courier*, true to its reputation as a crusader for the inclusion of black troops in the military, ran an editorial which commended "colored former army officers" on establishing an organization, reminded its readers that black soldiers were barred from "aviation, engineers, artillery, signal units, chemical warfare units and tank corps," and called for action to be taken: "We have never made a concerted nation-wide attack on this problem. We have never let our desires be known to the legislators in Washington. It is time to get busy" ("Don't Forget the Negro Soldiers"). Perhaps partially inspired by its very own full-fledged aviation campaign, the *Courier* called for further progress in military inclusion in general.

³⁷ The *Defender* published Best's letter to the Federal Aviation Commission in November 1934 ("No U.S. Race Aviators").

In May 1934, while Forsythe and Anderson's Pan-American flight was in its preparation phase, John C. Robinson carried out a goodwill flight from Chicago to Tuskegee in Alabama. The *Courier* announced Robinson's plan in a brief report, stating that "Col. J.C. Robinson, of the local Military Order of Guards," along with "Captain C.R. Coffey," are planning a "mass formation trip to Tuskegee Institute" on May 18 ("Chicago Aviators Planning Goodwill Flight to Tuskegee"). The phrasing of the short text suggested a military purpose for the flight, presenting the proposed flight as a demonstration of military-level aviation skills. Although Robert Jakeman, as well as Scott and Womack, date the Challenger Aero Club's designation as an air squadron *after* the Tuskegee trip in May 1934 – in order to fit the narrative that Robinson had been inspired to fight in Ethiopia by Tuskegee's refusal and tensions escalating between Italians and Ethiopians in preparation for war – it is clear that Robinson's group had by then been operating as an MOG unit for at least a year and that the black press had taken notice and began to use the designation in its aviation coverage.

The objective of Robinson's goodwill flight was to propose the formation of an aviation school at Tuskegee. As Scott and Womack explain, Robinson believed that "they could recreate the Curtiss-Wright experience at a Negro College that owned huge acres of land and a vocational program featuring automobile engine mechanics and welding. With Chicago as the hub, they believed a Negro flight service company could prosper in the Midwest and the South" (46). Robinson planned his trip in time with the graduation of the senior class in 1934, so that his landing would be a homecoming one and would thus have a stronger effect on Robert Moton, the Institute's president (46-7).

Although Robinson crashed his plane en route to Alabama, he managed to land at Tuskegee on commencement day. As a result, per the *Defender*, “the establishing of an airport at Tuskegee and an annual air show is now being considered (“Good Will Flyers Crash,” “Aviators Drop in on Commencement at Tuskegee Inst.”). In proposing an airport and an air show in order to promote black aviation education, Robinson was, in fact, utilizing aviation’s goodwill message in practice. As Tucker observes, “he convinced some of Tuskegee’s top officials to see the future of black aviation by emphasizing that the institute could benefit from this vast untapped potential of African American students, the same argument he successfully employed at Curtiss-Wright” (57).

Robinson probably saw Tuskegee’s reputation for and history of vocational training as the perfect conduit for spreading aviation’s goodwill message. Proper training in aviation mechanics and other subjects would lead to job opportunities, which were clearly opening in the ever-growing field. After all, he had received a degree in mechanics from Tuskegee himself, explains Tucker (22). Like William J. Powell, who had decided to teach aeronautics at a government-funded high school in Los Angeles, Robinson sought to expand black aviation education among more students – first, he had pressured the Curtiss-Wright school in Chicago to allow him to study, then instruct, and finally open his own class of students of color. Next, he wanted to teach and showcase black aviation at one of the most renowned black vocational schools. In this way, Powell and Robinson were hoping not only to provide job opportunities for skilled black workers, but they were probably attempting to enlarge the pool of potential black pilots

and mechanics in case of a war, too. Tuskegee had held courses in military science since 1919 and by 1934 had its own military department, headed by Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. Indeed, Robinson was a Tuskegee alum and must have been aware of the potential that Tuskegee had in terms of preparing its future aviation students for military service. Thus, as Jakeman claims, Robinson's goodwill flight "marked the beginning of Tuskegee's first attempt to enter the air age (1).

Unfortunately for Robinson and his group, Tuskegee did not approve plans for an aviation school until 1939/40. The *Defender* carried a photograph of Robinson in his plane at Tuskegee, being greeted by Captain A.J. Neeley, the Institute's registrar for whom Robinson had worked as a student-chauffer during his studies. The paper later reported on Tuskegee's General Alumni Association Convention in August, at which Robinson gave a speech entitled "Opportunities in the Field of Aviation" ("Biddng [sic] the Eagle Good Luck," "Tuskegee Alumni Map \$10,000 Endowment Plan," Jakeman 1). Despite his goodwill efforts, however, Robinson had to return to Chicago without prospects of an aviation school at Tuskegee materializing. Although he did not succeed in this project, Robinson would break a different barrier in black aviation in 1935 and 1936: he would become the head of Ethiopia's Royal Air Force and be the first African American pilot since Eugene Bullard to engage in military action abroad. Also, he would shift and expand the visions for black aviation in the black press towards internationalism and militarism.

7. 1935-37: THE MAKING OF AN AVIATION CAMPAIGN HERO

In terms of the history of black aviation and the aviation campaign in the black press in general, the first few months of 1935 were not extraordinary; in fact, no long-distance flights or other ground-breaking events were being planned or took place. In January, the *Courier* informed that Eugene Vidal, the director of aeronautics at the Department of Commerce, was predicting more advancement in aviation in 1935 than in any year since 1920 (“Will Rogers Joins Vidal in Boost to Aviation”). As usual, the black press reported on airplane accidents – John W. Greene, the pilot who in 1931 had complained to the *Courier* about its aviation coverage, survived one in May in Boston (“Aviator Narrowly Escapes Death in Crash”).

Aviation was also registering as a popular hobby with African American celebrities: Josephine Baker, a renowned dancer and a friend of Bessie Coleman’s from their early days in Chicago, announced to the *Defender* in August that she “is planning to enter the field of aviation” and that she believed “her race should develop its own aviators.” In October, Baker was already flying every day before breakfast to work up an appetite (“Josephine Baker to Attempt Aviation,” “Pretty Jo Baker, Home Again,” “Jo Baker Takes Daily Trips in Her Own Plane”). Meanwhile, Stepin Fetchit, a popular comedian, was being considered by Fox Studio for a lead in an “aviation story depicting the aspirations of a young colored man, ambitious to put his race on a par with the white race in air achievements” (“Fox May Shelve Air Story”). Although the film did not materialize, the *Courier* did note in its profile of Fetchit in April 1936 that the movie star

was “a veteran plane fan and flying is his hobby” (“Stepin Fetchit Made Over \$62,000 Last Year”).

But the main focus of the aviation campaign in 1935 was on John C. Robinson and his students’ and colleague’s activities in Chicago. For example, Doris H. Murphy, Robinson’s student and the first woman Tuskegee graduate to enter the field of aviation, was planning to attend Tuskegee’s commencement exercises in May 1935 (“To Fly Soon”). In May, Murphy – who also worked as the Chicago-Tuskegee Club’s recording secretary – was invited by Marie Dougherty, a noted Californian aviatrix and educator, to perform at the California-Pacific International Exposition in San Diego (“Invite Girl Flier to San Diego Expo”). Dr. Earl Renfroe, an African American pioneer in dentistry and another one of Robinson’s aviation students at the Aeronautical University, was awarded a limited commercial pilot’s license in September (“Dr. Renfroe Passes Air Examination”). Evidently, Robinson’s classes were producing successful aviators, who continued with aviation as a hobby or a second occupation. And the black press, typically announcing individual achievements in aviation throughout the years, was publicizing Robinson’s students’ successes, thereby promoting black aviation.

More importantly, Janet Waterford, one of Chicago’s first aviatrixes under Robinson’s tutelage, was making a name for herself and black aviation in the *Defender* – directly participating in the aviation campaign in the black press. In April, the *Defender* began a series of articles authored by Waterford, which were intended to teach young African Americans about aviation and its importance for the community and its progress (“Noted Aviatrix to Teach Kiddies How to Fly Planes”). In a text subtitled “History of

Aviation,” the aviatrix presented a short overview of pre-modern theories of and attempts at flying, while her following piece discussed the development of aerial warfare around the time of WWI. The ability to attack from the air via machine guns attached to planes was one of the “most outstanding achievements” of the period, claimed Waterford. Given the fact that the other texts in the series addressed technical, rather than practical aspects of aviation, it is striking that Waterford used the utilization of aviation in warfare as her point of emphasis. Even though her texts were published in the “Defender Junior” section of the Chicago weekly, it may be assumed that adults, as well as their children, were the intended audience. It is thus possible that Waterford – a close friend of Robinson’s – was using the *Defender* as a useful channel to convey her instructor’s increasingly militarized vision for aviation. After all, Robinson’s club, of which Waterford was a valuable member, and its airport were now the headquarters of an official paramilitary air squadron.

7.1 Black Aviation’s Military Displays in Chicago

In fact, John C. Robinson was borrowing strategies of campaigning for black aviation from Bessie Coleman. The late aviatrix had often presented herself around Chicago in military regalia and celebrated African American veterans’ organizations – the black press advertised Coleman’s endeavors in hopes that she could one day teach black pilots how to defend its community against potential attack by a technologically more developed white population. John C. Robinson signified on Coleman’s style, to borrow Henry Louis Gates’s term from *The Signifying Monkey*, for he, too, did not hesitate to demonstrate the connection between his aviation instructorship at the

Aeronautical University and the Military Order of Guards, which his club was now a member of.

As Waterford's articles in the *Defender* point out, the black press and its aviation campaign was the ideal vehicle for such a demonstration. In March 1935, Nettie George Speedy – the *Courier's* journalist who had informed on the Challenger Aero Club's activities at the World Fair in 1933 – published a piece about the graduation ceremony of Robinson's students at the Curtiss-Wright school. The school's assembly hall was, according to Speedy, filled with "persons, whose names have become famous in the civic affairs of the nation," including Oscar DePriest, Dr. A. Wilberforce Williams, famous physician, and Fred Ingram, president of the Chicago Tuskegee Club. As they were being awarded their degrees, Doris Murphy, Dale L. White, Edward C. Anderson, and Clyde B. Hampton stepped up in their uniforms to Mr. Churbuck, the Aeronautical University's progressive president, in "soldier-like fashion." David E. Taylor, editor of the *California News*, recited Paul Laurence Dunbar's "The Colored Soldier" ("One Girl and Three Men Graduated from Chicago Aeronautical College").

The military-style presentation in front of the audience's "deafening" applause seems to have been no coincidence. With the room filled with dignitaries and even some military personnel, Robinson was showcasing his instructorship in numerous ways: not only had he trained skilled pilots and mechanics and had proved that a qualified African American instructor was capable of teaching students of various nations in a subject as complex as aeronautics; but, most importantly, he demonstrated that his students had been trained in both civil and military aviation. Having been rejected by the Tuskegee

administration in his plans to found an aviation school at an institute with an established military department, Robinson's ambition was clearly to educate a generation of black pilots in military aviation at his existing place of work.

As Speedy's article informed, the Aeronautical University in Chicago was "known as one of the best equipped in the country" ("One Girl and Three Men Graduated from Chicago Aeronautical College"). Therefore, there could not have been a more ideal place for Robinson to carry out his mission. The display of his students' military discipline and aviation skills is most probably what caught the attention of Claude Barnett, the director of the Associated Negro Press (ANP), who introduced Robinson to Malaku E. Bayen, Haile Selassie's cousin and emissary to the United States. On Bayen's recommendation, John Charles Robinson was appointed "chief of the imperial air forces of Ethiopia by Emperor Haile Selassie" in late August 1935 ("Ethiopian Air Chief"). Robinson was to train actual war pilots and engage in aerial warfare himself.

7.2 The Meaning of Ethiopia for Black Aviation

In early October 1935, the full-scale Italian invasion into Ethiopia began. Protests against Italy's aggression were widespread. As S.K.B. Asante explains, "the tales of the unjust war in Ethiopia were told not only in British West Africa, but also in the neighbouring East African colonies of Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika, in the vast territory of Egypt, in the far minority, white-ruled southern Africa, in the West Indies, as well as among the black communities in America, Britain, and Europe" (4). In the United States, the war in Ethiopia "became a fundamental question in Negro life,"

according to Roi Ottley, a journalist and historian of Harlem. “It was all but impossible for Negro leaders to remain neutral, and the position they took toward the conflict became a fundamental test. The survival of the black nation became the topic of angry debate in poolrooms, barber shops, and taverns” (109). In other words, the crisis stirred emotions in the African American community in an unprecedented way.

As Magubane claims, “besides Garvey’s UNIA there is no other phenomenon that stirred the rank and file of the Afro-American as did the Italo-Ethiopian war” (170). Ethiopia featured on the pages of the black press ceaselessly. Between January 1935 and December 1936, when Ras Imru finally surrendered to the Italians, the *Courier* carried over fifty and the *Defender* thirty editorials concerning Ethiopia. Dozens of articles and photographs were being published daily.

And tens of organizations raising funds to aid Ethiopia sprung up. In *African American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936-1941*, Joseph E. Harris lists the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, the Committee for Ethiopia, the Friends of Ethiopia, the American Committee on the Ethiopia Crisis/American Aid for Ethiopia, the Medical Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, and the United Aid for Ethiopia Alliance as the most important fund-raising groups in New York. The influential Ethiopian Research Council was based in Washington, D.C. (49). Even though, as William R. Scott points out, “the average black may not have joined any of the pro-Ethiopian organizations, or contributed financially to the cause, or even to have been quite certain what he stood to gain or lose by an Ethiopian victory or defeat, [...] the prime thing of importance to him was that black men were being threatened by

whites” (167). There was no escape for Africa-descended people living in the United States from the news on and implications of the Ethiopian crisis.

Black aviation and the aviation campaign in the black press were also affected by the Ethiopian crisis. Robinson’s involvement as the Ethiopian Royal Air Force’s head helped finally shift the center of black aviation from Los Angeles to Chicago. At the same time, it led to the gradual disinvestment by Robinson from the Challenger Air Pilots’ Association after the war. Most importantly, however, the crisis finally turned the scope and attention of the aviation campaign towards militarization and increased pressure by the black press on the inclusion of African American pilots in the US military. After all, as Tucker correctly observes, “the most prominent American military aviator in a high-level leadership position and in command of an independent air force in a wartime environment [in the interwar period] was John Charles Robinson” (117-8). The black press seized the opportunity and turned Robinson into an aerial warfare hero with unprecedented technical and mechanical expertise.

The Italo-Ethiopian war has been mostly studied in the United States in the context of Pan-African sentiments and organized efforts on the part of the black population in the US to aid Ethiopia. Despite John C. Robinson’s involvement, however, the black aviation aspect of the conflict has been neglected. Indeed, Robinson’s military endeavors in Ethiopia as a precursor in black aviation history to the Tuskegee Airmen have been the focus of Tucker’s *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen* (2012), Thomas E. Simmons’ *The Man Called Brown Condor* (2013), as well as Jakeman’s *Divided Skies* (1992) and Scott and Womack’s *Double V* (1994). But, as this thesis argues, Robinson’s

mission was more than another step in black aviation history. It was a unique act of Pan-Africanism: Robinson showcased and utilized aviation – a technology historically associated with progress, civilization, and, in the eyes of the black press and nationalist leaders, also white colonial power – to combat Italian colonialism in the name of a mythical black nation. While Bessie Coleman, Leon F. Paris, Forsythe and Anderson – and also, to a degree, Hubert Julian – had only hinted in their flights and rhetoric at the potential of aviation to defy boundaries, connect peoples across nations and inspire a violent struggle for their own liberation, it was Robinson who finally carried out Marcus Garvey’s vision of a black aviator fighting for sovereignty and independence of a black nation against a colonial power. Robinson’s Pan-African mission was thus technologically and martially oriented.

The focus of this chapter is therefore Robinson’s resistance to Italy’s air force, which had helped colonize and would keep under control Libya, Italian Somaliland, and Italian Eritrea. As Federico Caprotti correctly points out, “the fascist regime in Ethiopia was successful partly through aerial superiority.” Italy’s military, and later civilian aviation was “represented as progressive and as a superior technology” in Italy’s African colonies, as it served as a “metaphor for a civilized fascism that would develop the silent colonies.” In this sense, Italian dominance in aviation “juxtaposed the airplane and the aviator with the indigenous and tribal” (386-398). Robinson’s excellence in his flying missions and skirmishes in Ethiopia, however, disrupts this dichotomic narrative of black vs white as technological lag vs technological prowess with civilizing purpose. The fact is that, at a time when there were not more than 60 licensed black aviators in the

United States, an African American pilot demonstrated the ability to stand up against a technologically superior colonial power by utilizing its own technology against it.

This fact visibly reverberated in the black press' coverage of black aviation. In their reporting on the Italian invasion, military strategies, and Robinson's heroics, the *Courier* and the *Defender* registered the importance of aerial warfare in the process of Italy's gradual colonization of Ethiopia. In other words, black America was watching how the racial technological gap in aviation facilitated Italy's advance against and submission – though never final – of the mythical Ethiopian nation. At the same time, the fact that Robinson prevailed – despite inferior technology, training, and, in the colonizer's eyes, origins – confirmed to the black public that black aviators could, if properly trained and supported, equal even the most technologically advanced air force in the world. Robinson's Pan-African mission gave the aviation campaign a new impetus as Robinson became a leader for the black press in its drive to prepare black pilots for war. After Robinson's return in 1936, and then in 1937, the *Defender* capitalized upon the aviator's popularity and engaged in an unprecedented campaign to establish a network of aviation schools under Robinson's leadership and present the aviator as a savior figure. Robinson's historic engagement in Ethiopia thus transformed the *Defender's* involvement in the aviation campaign and solidified the black press' incessant argument that black pilots, too, could and would fight if their nation – or people – called them to arms.

Black America's Fascination with Ethiopia

That black America saw itself as a stakeholder in Ethiopia's fate was not surprising, since African Americans had had numerous long-standing connections to the oldest Christian nation in the world. Religious connections between the United States and Ethiopia were exemplified by the existence of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, which derived its name from the "august appearance [of Ethiopia] in the King James Bible" (Scott 21). In particular, Psalm 68, the psalm of David, prophesies that "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God." The verse depicts Ethiopia as representing "not only the ancient kingdom by that name, but all of Africa and the entire African race," claims Wilson J. Moses. Moreover, "the Bible verse was seen as a prophecy [in the 19th and early 20th century] that the great days of Africa and all her scattered children were in the future. It was seen as a promise that a people of distinction were to come out of Egypt and that Africans were soon to witness the day of their glory" (51).

The verse thus had political significance as well. Not only did many African Americans refer to themselves as Ethiops³⁸, but Ethiopia came to be associated in the middle of the 19th century with black liberation (Scott 12-18). Based on this historical connection of Ethiopia with black power, sacredness, and liberation, African American Christians viewed modern Ethiopia with great respect, especially since Haile Selassie

³⁸ A black aviation-related example of this reference to Ethiopia is William J. Powell's play "Ethiopia Spreads Her Wings." While it is difficult to ascertain whether Powell harbored Pan-African sentiments, the plot suggests that Powell's objective was to make black Americans, Ethiops by another name, black-minded rather than advancing the idea that Africans take up aviation.

“traced his lineage to a liaison between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba” (Meriwether 30). According to Scott, Selassie’s coronation in 1930, heavily publicized in the white and black press, only strengthened the reverence of religious African Americans for the country and the emperor: “Marcus Garvey may have been regarded at one time as the Black Moses, but Haile Selassie seems to have been widely looked upon in the early thirties as the Black Messiah” (105). Working as a personal pilot for the emperor and heading his royal air force must have thus increased John C. Robinson’s stature in the African American public opinion – he was protecting the black messiah.

Finally, along with religious ties to Africa-descended people in the United States, Ethiopia served as an example of a black nation which had resisted and defeated a colonial power; in 1896, Menelik II secured Ethiopia’s sovereignty against Italy at the Battle of Adowa. As Scott points out, this military victory “established unequivocally in the minds of some Afro-Americans the belief that Ethiopia was the pre-ordained defender of all black people in the world and that it would one day lead them to freedom” (31).

Symbolically, then, Ethiopia had long existed in the minds of the black population of the United States. But it was not until 1919 that African Americans came into direct contact with Ethiopians. First contacts between the two groups took place on Ethiopian soil (Scott 37-68), but in 1919, a diplomatic delegation including Dedjazmatch Nadou, one of the signatories for Ethiopia when it was admitted to the League of Nations, and Belanghetta Herouy, the Mayor of Addis-Ababa and later Minister of Foreign Affairs, came to Harlem and visited the Metropolitan Baptist Church (Ottley

106). In 1927, another mission, headed by Dr. Azaz Wahrnek Martin, invited African Americans to settle in Ethiopia (Ottley 107). However, according to Scott, no repatriation movement was launched after the 1919 mission, and only about one hundred African Americans migrated to the country between 1930 and 1935, inspired by Selassie's coronation (85-107).

In 1922, Malaku E. Bayen, Haile Selassie's mother's first cousin, was sent to the US in 1922 and in 1928 began studying medicine at Howard University. He, too, was charged with bringing African Americans to Ethiopia: he brought Hubert Julian in 1930, Dr. John West as a Public Health Organizer in 1931, Cyril Price as an educator in 1932, and John C. Robinson in 1935 as aviation instructor (Scott 255, Bayen 5-6). In 1936, Bayen became Selassie's representative in the United States and in January 1937 began publishing *The Voice of Ethiopia*, a weekly newspaper of the Ethiopian World Federation, Inc., which functioned as the official fund-raising organization on behalf of the emperor (Bayen 7-8). Africa-descended people living in the United States were thus connected to Ethiopia not only in terms of history, religion, and politics, but had also established interpersonal ties prior to the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian War in 1935.

Given these ties between black America and Ethiopia, the black press in the United States covered the Ethiopian crisis in detail. One of the aspects of the conflict which the black press registered immediately and reported on continuously was aviation and aerial warfare. In April, the *Courier* announced "the introduction of obligatory military service" in Ethiopia. Selassie's military was estimated to consist of up to one million men ("Italy Ready for Peace; Africa Mobilizes Men, Women for Hostilities").

The *Defender* then reported on Ethiopia's mobilization in June, when it showed a collage of photographs of Ethiopian soldiers, including "Flight-Lieutenant Teera, ace-pilot of the Ethiopian Air force" ("War Clouds Still Gather over Ethiopia"). The *Courier's* mid-July issue finally connected black Americans' interest in the Ethiopian situation with the emperor himself. The paper reported that Selassie was ready to accept US volunteers "for war service," noting that the emperor "is concentrating on developing an air force with which he hopes to compete with Italy."³⁹ Importantly for the aviation campaign which decried the lack of opportunities for soldiers – including aviators – to join the US military, the text informed that Ethiopia would accept World War veterans "as officers in all branches of the Army and Navy" ("Ethiopia Welcomes U.S. Volunteers").

Despite the fact that the U.S. Department of State immediately barred US nationals from enlisting in Ethiopia, the reaction to Haile Selassie's call was unprecedented. One week after the emperor's cablegram virtually invited black Americans to join the Ethiopian army, the *Courier* announced the disappointing news from the State Department, but also carried a photograph of a bomber plane, entitled "Who Said Ethiopia Didn't Have Airplanes," and an article informing that "twelve American flyers were [...] ready to fight for Ethiopia against Italy." Led by Hal du Berrier and aided by Major Granville Pollock of the Lafayette Escadrille, the group was

³⁹ The article also informed that "unconfirmed reports hint of an alliance with Japan for buying materials of war." Etsuko Taketani discusses black America's fascination with Japan and its potential aid to Ethiopia in *The Black Pacific Narrative* (2014).

hoping to “form the nucleus of the Ethiopian Air Corps” (“12 White American Aviators”). The paper then envisioned in another article how “Italy would be whipped if American Negroes and Whites get transportation to Abyssinia” (“U.S. Whites Volunteer for Ethiopian Service”). The following week, along with reiterating du Berrier’s claim and confirmation that the State Department was “definitely opposed to American citizens enlisting in the armies of either Ethiopia or Italy,” the paper brought the news that Japan may be ready to help Ethiopia prepare for the upcoming clash (“War News...Airplanes...Japan,” “Move to Halt Recruiting for Ethiopia is Launched,” “Japan May Aid Ethiopia”).

Most importantly, however, the *Courier* published an entire page in late July with letters from volunteers from around the country, black and white.⁴⁰ Among these, a group of pilots that was “decidedly in sympathy with the Ethiopian people” asked the paper if Ethiopia needed “airplane pilots, instructors and mechanics” (“In Sympathy with Ethiopian Cause, Whites Ask to Go”). An aviator from Ohio offered his services “if the price is right” (“Flyer is Ready”), while another volunteer from Detroit with “experience with aeroplanes” felt that it was his duty to “answer the call of Ethiopia” and “give all that is in me to help the just cause of the black race” (“Air-Minded”). Finally, a reader from Illinois inquired “if there is any chance of our getting into the Ethiopian air service” (“For Air Service”). It seems that the *Courier*’s readers had also registered the role that aviation was going to play in the upcoming conflict. Especially

⁴⁰ Meriwether estimates that there were letters from at least thirty eight states (45).

since the Pittsburgh weekly titillated its audience with incessant news about potential Japanese involvement – thus entertaining the notion that two sovereign nations of people of color could form an alliance against a colonial power – as well as the wish of white experienced flyers, led by du Berrier, to engage in aerial warfare against Italy’s vaunted Regia Aeronautica.

Even though the *Courier* provided space for its readers’ expression of Pan-African sympathy with Ethiopia, the paper, along with the *Defender*, also initially discouraged African Americans from direct engagement in Africa. As Meriwether points out, the *Defender* carried a rare front-page editorial in July 1935 as letters from volunteers flooded the *Courier*’s offices, in which it asked its readers: “Go to Ethiopia? Why not fight at home? Is there not enough here to fight for? Why don’t you fight lynchings, peonage, bastardy, discrimination, segregation? Why don’t you fight for jobs to which you are entitled? Why don’t you fight for your own independence?” In its conclusion, the text asserted that “Yes, you MUST think of Ethiopia. You MUST be world minded. You MUST realize that you have kinship with all peoples of the world – but above all you MUST FIGHT to correct evils at home” (40).

The *Courier* addressed its readers in a similar way, when its July editorial asserted that “black America needed to keep money and resources at home” (Meriwether 39). In its discouraging message, the text, titled “Helping Ethiopia,” noted that “the purchase and equipment of a Douglas bomber will build 1,000 playgrounds with swimming pools [and that] the price of one good-sized airplane bomb will win a school segregation case in the courts or snatch some innocent Negro from the shadow of the

electric chair.” Although the paper thus registered that an air force – or lack thereof – would play a crucial role in the conflict, it encouraged its readers to invest in its community at home. In this way, the *Courier* also rejected its readers’ aspirations to fly and fight for Ethiopia.

Despite the initial isolationism, however, the black press eventually changed its tone and message. Perhaps it was because *Defender*’s readers rejected the paper’s stance and sent numerous letters to editor to voice their disagreement with the logic expressed in the paper’s July editorial. One reader, for instance, expressed her view thusly: “Let every heart within a black man’s body be with Ethiopia, the country which is ours. Ethiopia hasn’t been the uncivilized place the U.S. is, with lynching, rape and murder. [...] I really feel that everyone should love Ethiopia the way we love Joe Louis. One of the greatest, proudest loves in the world” (“Why Go to Ethiopia – Letter to the Editor”). Another reader opined that “the so-called Negro should think internationally rather than nationally if he is to triumph over his conditions” (“Why Go to Ethiopia – Letter to the Editor”).

Finally, another letter criticized the paper for its hypocrisy: “Had you written such an article advising our boys against the enlistment in the World War to save a Democracy of which they then and now have no part, I would have agreed with you. And now, you invoke a respect for the laws which you continually assure your readers do not guarantee the Race the protection to which they are entitled.” The authors concluded their argument by asking “will you not admit that with the American Negro contributing to a victorious Ethiopia the reaction would be beneficial to those of us

remaining here” (“Why Go to Ethiopia”). As Meriwether observes, the black press then “quickly shifted from urging caution and a focus on America to offering a more pan-African view” (44).

The fact that the State Department forbade recruitment for Ethiopia and the black press was, at first, non-committal did not deter Harlemites from active preparations for war. As Victor A. Berch points out, “black nationalists generally believed that the indifference on the part of Western nations [...] was nothing short of an act of racism” and that the upcoming invasion of Ethiopia “was merely the first skirmish in what they viewed as a worldwide race war” (25). This may explain why “one militant group in Harlem boasted of two thousand volunteers and discussed plans to buy or charter a freighter and sail for Ethiopia,” explains Scott, and why another group, the Black Legion “reportedly three thousand strong, inaugurated a training camp in up-state New York with instructors for five hundred aviation students and for two full regiments of infantry” (192).

The case of Black Legion’s preparations for war – especially its aviation squadron – was reported in the *Courier* and the *Defender*. Initially, in “Flyers Get Their Wings” from March 1935, the *Defender* showed two aviators, Thomas Mills and Leonard Yates, and informed that they were part of a 15-student group comprising a “Race aviation college with a ground school and class in Harlem”⁴¹ – their equipment

⁴¹ Their aero club was probably the N.F.S. Aviation club, which had organized an air show at Roosevelt Field in May 1934. Mills and Yates were listed by the *Defender* as licensed pilots and members of the club in its short report on the event (“Race Aviators to Give Air Show Decoration Day”).

was at Roosevelt Field, the same airport which had been previously used by the US Army Air Service, Bessie Coleman, Lindbergh, Earhart, and Banning and Allen. Importantly, the paper also reported that neither flyer was “interested in offers to fight in the air for Emperor Haile Selassie of Abyssinia.” Apparently, the pilots’ attitude had changed by August 1935. The *Courier* and the *Defender* published a photograph of the “Black Legion,” or “what is said to be the first Negro air squadron,” which included both Mills and Yates. Clad in uniforms and standing in front of a plane, the group was expected to “go through an advanced flying course to prepare for possible duty in Abyssinia against the Italians.” As both papers noted, one of the flyers, Miss Lola Jackson, “eventually expects to form a women’s flying corps to serve as nurses” (“Harlem’s Pride Ready for Air,” “Harlem’s Air Squadron,” “Harlem Trains Black Legion with the Infantry Regiments”).

Although the group had put on such a military display, none of its members were dispatched to Ethiopia. As Harris shows, the FBI became involved in the matter and their investigation concluded that “although Lola Jackson had told a journalist that she planned to go to Ethiopia if she could be helpful there, she had no such plans.” In fact, no members of the group, according to the investigation, were “considering service in Ethiopia.” Mills and Yates initially showed interest, but, in the end, no service in Africa materialized (57). Again, the black press titillated its audience with news about a black squadron willing to engage in aerial warfare abroad. If the group had actually engaged in fighting in Ethiopia, it would have represented a new milestone in black aviation history and also a new dimension in the Pan-Africanism displayed by black America. However,

it was left to two individuals – Hubert Julian and John C. Robinson – to advance Pan-Africanism through military aviation.

7.3 The Black Eagle Has Landed: Hubert Julian as John C. Robinson’s Foil

When long-distance flights by black aviators dominated the aviation coverage between 1932 and 1934, Hubert Julian hoped to capitalize on other flyers’ success. In May 1934, the *Courier* announced another one of Julian’s proposed flights with the mocking title “Chanting His Annual Song!” and in June the paper carried a brief text informing that Julian was, once again, raising funds for his flight (“Black Eagle Appeals for Donations of 5 Gallons of Gas”). As Forsythe and Anderson were securing documentation and a new plane to carry out their goodwill trip to Pan-American countries, thus occupying the front pages of the black press incessantly, Julian, again, borrowed from his successful colleagues.

In connection with his transatlantic flight, Julian announced that he would “carry several hundred pounds of mail aboard his large black and gold monoplane [...] on his flight to Ethiopia this summer.” The letters would “be sent by his people here in America to the kingdom of Abyssinia as a message of good will and friendship.” Finally, the letters would be backstamped in Ethiopia and “each piece of mail will be handsomely engraved and will bear the autograph of the famous Black Eagle,” effectively serving the function of “souvenirs of Colonel Julian’s flight” (“Colonel Hubert Julian to Carry Good Will Letters on Hop to Abyssinia”). In short, Julian was appropriating Forsythe and Anderson’s plan to bring goodwill letters to the people in

Pan-American countries, and added a hint of Pan-Africanist sentiment to it to increase donations.

Despite never delivering on his bold promises, Julian's escapades had been constantly reported in the black press, because – as he proved with Bessie Coleman's goodwill message – Julian could package and market other flyers' goodwill message better than its original authors. As a cartoon in the New York *Daily Mirror*, reprinted in the *Courier* in February 1935, aptly put it, "Julian Always a Good Copy." In essence, Julian was a foil to successful black aviators depicted in the black press. His "annual song," to borrow the *Courier*'s phrase, kept black aviation in the black press and his inability – or unwillingness – to turn his proposals into actions highlighted the honesty, hard work, and dedication of other, less famous black pilots such as Powell, Banning, Forsythe, Anderson, and, ultimately also John C. Robinson. Julian's role as a foil would become most apparent in his embarrassing engagement in Ethiopia, followed by Robinson's heroics.

Since Julian had occupied the front pages of the black press since 1922 and proposed a flight to Ethiopia or Liberia on numerous occasions, he may have become in many black readers' eyes the face of black aviation combined with Pan-African worldview. That might explain why a letter to the *Courier* in March 1935 inquired if "there is a fund or committee for the purpose of raising money to build an Ethiopian air force" and proposed that "all we need is some good man to start the fund and lead an expedition to our homeland. I would say that Colonel H. Julian would be the man, for he is our greatest colored pilot" ("Italy's Greed").

By that point in 1935, Julian had been, in fact, already on his way to Ethiopia, as the *Defender* noted in the article “Julian Arrives in London on Way to Ethiopia.” In April, the Chicago weekly announced that Julian had escorted “the largest shipment of arms ever received in the African Empire” from Czechoslovakia (“Convoy”), while the *Courier* claimed one week later that Julian “got a cool reception” upon arrival in Addis Ababa, “carrying two bags crammed with pictures of planes he hopes to sell the government” (“Italy Ready for Peace; Africa Mobilizes Men, Women for Hostilities”). Since Czech military historians deny the fact that a planned consignment of weapons for Ethiopia ever left the country because of France and Britain’s embargo (Chmiel 1991), it may be assumed that Julian was once again merely playing to the black readership’s hopes of black American volunteers aiding Ethiopia in a meaningful way.

Despite his reputation and history in Ethiopia, however, Julian stayed in East Africa for several months, receiving positive coverage especially in the *Defender*. In July, he gained Ethiopian citizenship and thus became eligible to sign up for military duty (“Julian Becomes Ethiopian Citizen”) and as late as November 1935, the *Defender* published a photograph of “Colonel Julian, American air ace” assigned “the duty of training men for aerial service (“Ethiopia Prepares to Take to the Skies”). In mid-August, Julian cabled to the *Courier* that “Patriotism [is] at fever heat and Ethiopia is ready.” The country’s “military plans [are] cloaked in secrecy but American Negroes can feel assured that unpleasant surprises [are] awaiting invading army,” informed the aviator. Along with acquiring an unspecified role in the Ethiopian army, then, Julian

began to effectively work as a reporter for the black press, promising that “additional articles and pictures [are] on the way” (“Hubert Julian Cables the Courier”).

Along with Haile Selassie’s coronation in 1930, which was directly reported on by the *Courier*’s Joel A. Rogers, and Schuyler’s heavily publicized investigative trip to Liberia in 1931, the Ethiopian crisis became a watershed moment for the way the black press informed on foreign news. As John Maxwell Hamilton points out, “much of the foreign news in black newspapers was cribbed from other papers or came from letter-writers and part-time correspondents,” as the brief notes sent to the black press by Julian suggest. The *Defender*, for example, pieced its news about Ethiopia from “a variety of sources, including an on-the-scene correspondent codenamed Operative 22” (336). The *Courier*, however, became directly invested in the Ethiopian crisis, when it sent Rogers to interview Selassie directly and report on the happenings in East Africa.

Claude Barnett’s Associated Negro Press was also constantly reporting on Ethiopia and it had recruited John C. Robinson in early 1935 to write his observations from the country. Barnett’s agency was an important cog in the wheels of the black press. He started the company in March 1919, emphasizing “constructive news that would offer readers models to emulate and would win respect from both black and whites for the responsible black press” (Hogan 48). The initial news release from March 1919 went out to eighty members of the agency, including all the major weeklies, except the *Courier*, which joined in 1924, and the *Defender*, which did not become a subscriber until 1940 (57). The ANP sent out news releases on Fridays and Mondays so that its members had time to utilize the news by their Wednesday deadline (59).

While the agency proved invaluable, especially for its smaller, local members during such national events as the Scottsboro case in 1931, it also played a key role in providing the news to the black press on black aviation. Many a story about William J. Powell and John C. Robinson in the *Courier* was reported courtesy of the ANP correspondents in California, namely Harry Levette, and in Chicago. There are dozens of texts from the Golden State and Chicago, as well as much regional news on aviation that appeared in the Pittsburgh weekly. Furthermore, it was the ANP that had been able to deliver the news about Forsythe and Anderson's goodwill flight from every West Indian and Pan-American country that the flyers had visited. It was thus no surprise when Claude A. Barnett, with his ANP headquarters in Chicago, recruited Robinson to become the agency's correspondent – under the nom de plume Wilson James (Tucker 167) – in Ethiopia in 1935. In this way, Barnett combined the allure of direct foreign reporting, Pan-African sentiments for Ethiopia, and Robinson's potential military engagement with Italy's vaunted air force.

As Lawrence D. Hogan, historian of the ANP, claims, “the focus of foreign reporting during the 1930s” in the black press “remained the same as it had been in the previous decade.” Stories documenting and “tracing the historic ties of black Americans to the African homeland, and those criticizing European colonialism” dominated the foreign-news sections of black newspapers. What changed in the 1930s, says Hogan, “was the greater attention and resources brought to this coverage” (114). While the *Courier* sent Rogers to Ethiopia in the fall of 1935, the ANP had already secured a Latin American correspondent by 1933. Rudolph Dunbar had begun reporting for the ANP

from London in 1934 and in 1935, the agency had listed its own reporter in the Virgin Islands. By 1938, informs Hogan, the ANP “had executive correspondents reporting from London, Paris, Copenhagen, Moscow, Johannesburg, the West Indies, the Virgin Islands, and Cristobal in the Canal Zone” (121). The ANP was thus responding to an increasing demand by the black readers in the US for foreign news from countries with populations of Africa-descended people. Its involvement in Ethiopia through Robinson in 1935 then did not only showcase Barnett’s own Pan-Africanist views, but also marked the first step in ANP’s increasingly African direction. As Hogan explains, through the 1950s and into the 1960s, the agency “came to concentrate more and more on events and people from” Africa, and by the end of the 1950s, “some seventy-five African papers were subscribing to the service” (235).

It was ANP’s John C. Robinson’s reporting and flying skills that eventually ended Hubert Julian’s sojourn in Ethiopia. Not only was Julian no longer needed as a source of information about the happenings in the country, but his inability to teach and perform flying tasks were exposed by Robinson. When the Chicago flyer “sent home a story [in August] in which he had discounted Colonel Julian’s activities in Ethiopia in disparaging terms,” claims Scott, Julian attacked Robinson and was consequently demoted and replaced by Robinson as the Commander of the Air Force (225-6). A letter in the *Courier* mocked Julian as a “runner-up to Baron Munchausen” (“On Julian”), and Georger S. Schuyler devoted his entire column in early September to Julian’s career, noting that while the demoted Julian “is now drilling Ethiopian infantry recruits in the remote Wallaga region, [...] John C. Robinson [...] is flying over Addis Ababa every

day in one of the emperor's best airplanes and electrifying the populace with his ability" ("Views and Reviews").

Although Julian later claimed in the *Defender* that he had "personally asked His Majesty to place me in an infantry command instead of aviation where I was a mere servant to a French flying expert" ("Col. Julian Restored to King's Favor"), he left Ethiopia in November in disgrace ("Julian Quits Ethiopia," "Col. Julian Leaves Ethiopia for U.S."). The *Defender* published a short fictional story on Julian entitled "Black Star," in which the aviator from Trinidad "fights, bleeds and dies for Ethiopia, but in doing so covers himself in glory" and in December, the paper reported that Julian had written a 68-page manuscript entitled "Why I Resigned from the Abyssinian Army" in which he was ready to tell of "Ethiopian horrors" ("Colonel Julian Has Story"). *Courier's* "The World This Week" summarized Julian's brief career in Ethiopia most aptly, when it quipped that "he never succeeded in getting higher off the ground than a mule's back." Meanwhile, "Colonel John C. Robinson, a Negro who is a real aviator and a credit to his race [...] achieved high place in the Ethiopian air force. [...] Julian will soon be back here collecting for another flight." Julian's role as a foil thus set the scene for Robinson's emergence.

7.4 John C. Robinson's Ethiopian Endeavors in the Black Press

Before delving into the analysis of the newspaper coverage Robinson received during his mission in Ethiopia, however, it is necessary to contextualize Robinson's recruitment by Claude Barnett for Haile Selassie's government, and examine the sources of the pilot's Pan-Africanism. According to Janet Waterford, Selassie reportedly said to

Malaku E. Bayen, his recruiter in the United States, that “if this young American [Robinson] can construct an aeroplane from the ground up, he would be considered. Ethiopia has everything to make planes, from the ore to the most expensive woods. I have flyers. What I want is someone to teach mechanics and everything that goes with it” (“John Robinson Wings His Way Down to Tuskegee”). But Robinson became more than just an instructor in Ethiopia as he may have left for his mission there with more than an instructor’s job in mind.

The accounts of how Robinson met with Barnett differ (compare Scott 199, Tucker 69, Scott and Womack 51), but, in any case, the pilot offered his services to the Ethiopian government through Barnett, who had long known Bayen as the Ethiopian had previously translated Ethiopian news from Amharic into English for the ANP (Harris 54). According to Tucker, Robinson “made the promise that he would volunteer to serve to defend Ethiopia’s independence in the face of Italian aggression” because he “viewed Ethiopia as the most visible stage and positive means to promote black aviation to the world” (69).

Initially, Robinson did not offer only his own services, but those of his group as well. The members of the Challengers Air Pilots’ Association “felt their designation and experience as a Military Order of Guard Aviation unit provided the expertise needed to assist Ethiopia in the development of an Air Force.” That is why it was reported that “at least seven Challengers planned to serve as a volunteer air squadron for Ethiopia” (Scott and Womack 50). As with Harlem’s Black Legion, however, the plan did not materialize

and only Robinson had been able to travel to Ethiopia before the State Department barred Americans from enlisting.

While Robinson had obvious military ambitions in Ethiopia – given the fact that he was hoping to enlist his para-military group – his Pan-Africanist sentiments were also a strong pull factor for his mission. Tucker claims that it had been Robinson’s continuous exposure to the Star Order of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Missionaries to Abyssinia’s activities, as well as the official Ethiopian delegation visiting Chicago and recruiting black professionals in 1927, that inspired the pilot’s Pan-Africanist philosophy (75-6). Also, some of the Challengers were members of the NAACP, the Urban League, and other black political and social organizations which were “focused on developments in regard to the fate of people of color far beyond America’s shores” (62). Finally, however, it should not be omitted that Robinson and the devout members of the Challengers worshipped at the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago’s Bronzeville (60).

The church’s reverend, Junius Caesar Austin had initiated and sponsored the annual flyover of Bessie Coleman’s grave and was the master of ceremonies at the aviatrix’s opulent funeral in 1926. He had also supported and urged his parishioners to financially aid Hubert Julian in 1931. Austin was also a founding member of the Challenger Air Pilots’ Association, according to Burkett, a historian of various black churches (326). Most importantly, Austin preached Pan-Africanism at his church. In 1922, the reverend had given a speech entitled “Representing the Negro Clergy” at the UNIA’s conference in New York. Austin was a Garveyite from early on. In 1924, he had been elected to head the Foreign Mission Board for the National Baptist Convention and

the Pilgrim Baptist Church had consequently become of the largest foreign-mission contributors in the country (Burkett 327-8). The reverend's activities reflected his focus on Africa and so must have his sermons – in January 1936, Robinson thanked Austin for having donated \$100 to Ethiopia (“Ethiopia Gets Check”). Claude A. Barnett also attended Austin's church (Burkett 334) and, although it is not clear whether Barnett and Robinson made their acquaintance there, it may be assumed that they shared Austin's Pan-African philosophy. Furthermore, given Austin's affinity for black aviation, Barnett must have heard of Robinson's group at the church on numerous occasions.

Similarly, he must have heard of or even met Robinson at the regular meetings of the local Tuskegee club, of which the two men were members along with Doris H. Murphy, one of Robinson's students. Barnett and Robinson may have also met in August in 1934 at Tuskegee, where both men had given speeches (“Tuskegee Alumni Map \$10,000 Endowment Plan”). Given these connections between the two men, it is clear that Barnett must have heard about the military dimension of aviation that Robinson's group was emphasizing at its events and aviation students' graduation ceremonies. In other words, it may be safe to assume that when Barnett, the owner and director of a news agency that had been reporting on black aviation for fifteen years, recommended Robinson to Bayen, he knew that he was promoting black aviation and its military potential, as well as fostering stronger Pan-African ties between black America and Ethiopia.

Flying and Fighting in Ethiopia

There are few sources on the history of Ethiopian civilian and military aviation prior to 1935. Reportedly, Tafari Makkonen – crowned as Haile Selassie in 1930 – had hired two French pilots and purchased four French biplanes in 1929 (“Ethiopian Air Force – History”). The four Potez 25 biplanes assisted Makkonen “in the decisive battle against a rival warlord in early 1930.” Having witnessed the tactical and technological advantage that the planes could bring in battle, claims Tucker, “the emperor became an enthusiastic proponent of air power’s importance (102). Hubert Julian, serving under Makkonen at that time, confirmed the future emperor’s utilization of air power to the black press upon his return to the US in 1932.

As the nationalist Youth Ethiopian Movement gained importance after Selassie’s coronation, the emperor sought to hire black professionals rather than employ white foreign nationals, thereby ending the French monopoly on the small Ethiopian air force (Tucker 65). Between 1930 and 1935, the number of planes in the fleet had risen up to either 11 according to Tucker (103), or 13 (“Ethiopian Air Force – History”). Along with French, Italian, German, and English planes, the fleet included a lone American aircraft – the Beechcraft, which “could outperform – or outrun – even the swiftest Italian combat fighter in case of pursuit” and thus became the “Emperor’s aircraft” (Tucker 104). Because of the embargo imposed by the League of Nations, Robinson could only secure additional aircraft from Hitler’s Germany – he received three Junkers 52 aircraft, which would later become valuable for transporting material (105-6). Such was the material situation of the Imperial Air Force when Robinson was named its chief in late August

1935 as between his arrival in April and promotion in the late summer, Robinson had played a leading role in “repairing, servicing, and improving his aircraft for active service (136).

But it quickly became obvious that Ethiopia was not ready for Italy’s Regia Aeronautica. At first, the *Courier* advanced a theory that Benjamin and Joseph Martin, sons of Dr. Martin, Ethiopia’s minister to London, may meet in air battle with Bruno and Vittorio Mussolini (“Sons of Warring Fathers May Meet in Air Battles”), as the two Ethiopians were en route to join the country’s air force. The story escalated two weeks later when the paper reported that Martin’s sons “have challenged the two sons of Premier Mussolini to an air duel in Ethiopia” (“Il Duce’s Sons Challenged”). The following week, the *Courier* carried a photograph of Mussolini’s sons in a dejected pose, informing its readers that the Italians’ planes had been riddled with Ethiopian guns (“Their Planes Riddled”). In pursuing this story, the black press was preparing its audience for the clash between the technologically overpowering Italian air force and the technologically lagging, but increasingly patriotic and enthusiastic air force of Ethiopia. The photograph showed that even Mussolini’s sons were not invincible and that, perhaps, Robinson’s fleet could stop Italy’s invasion. But this vision emphasized battles between individuals rather than Italy’s actual military strategy.

It was Robinson himself, however, who quickly disabused the black press’ audience of its naiveté. In “Robinson Tells All in the Bombing of Adowa” in the *Defender*, he related that “four large bombing planes arrived over [Addis Ababa and] caught the city asleep and unaware.” “I saw a squad of soldiers standing in the streets

dumbfounded, looking at the planes soaring above. They had their swords raised in their hands.” Two planes, according to the report, were “droning ominously, circling the apparently doomed city. When I left the city, it wasn’t possible to number the dead.” The *Courier*’s vision of warring brothers staging duels to decide the fate of Italy’s invasion – as well as Robinson’s own para-military training in Chicago – did not prepare the black press’ readers for the shock of the way Giulio Douhet’s doctrine, first presented in *The Command of the Air* in 1921, utilized Italy’s air force to destroy civilian and military targets on the ground. For example, J.A. Rogers reported in December 1935 that 10 Caproni airplanes came “sweeping out of the haze of an early dawn, spreading death and destruction in their wake,” attacking a “defenseless town” (“Sick, Wounded Burned Alive by Italian Bombs”). Italy was using its technological advantage in aviation differently than expected – by killing civilians.

Despite Italy’s obvious technological advantage, Robinson was excelling as Ethiopia’s air chief and the black press took notice. P.L. Prattis, one of the *Courier*’s renowned reporters and a former journalist for the ANP, wrote a long biographical story of Robinson, which “reads like fiction” and offers “lessons to inspire and hearten black boys in every State.” Apart from celebrating Robinson, the article did not fail to mention that the aviator had decided to go to Ethiopia rather than wait whether Tuskegee would vote on opening an aviation class in April 1935 (“Ethiopian Air Ace Outwits Italian Planes in Battle”).⁴² This only confirms that Robinson had seen more opportunities for

⁴² On the same page, the *Courier* published a photograph of three Ethiopian pilots.

the military advancement in black aviation on the front in Ethiopia than at an institute with a theoretical military department.

Later in October, the *Courier* and the *Defender* announced that Chicagoans were raising funds for the “John Robinson Defense Fund for Ethiopia” (“Make Pledge to Raise Funds for Haile Selassie,” “Name Ethiopia Aid Fund for Local Aviator”). One month later, the two papers also carried a photograph of Robinson with H.R. Knickerbocker, International News Service Correspondent, and two French flyers, inspecting a map of the war zone. The *Defender* noted that Robinson “has won the respect and warm friendship of the Ethiopian people as well as the white newspaper men and foreign attaches stationed at Addis Ababa” (“American Correspondent and Pilot,” “Col. John Robinson Checks Plan of War”).

Since the Ethiopian air force lacked offensive capabilities,⁴³ one of Robinson’s duties was, according to Tucker, reconnaissance flights. These “became the most effective sources of intelligence gathering for the emperor to ascertain Italian intentions, concentrations, and to relay orders to Ethiopian commanders on the front lines” (108). Robinson also flew Selassie on inspections of his troops (“Takes Plane Ride to Inspect Troops”). And in December, Robinson took the *Courier*’s J.A. Rogers on one of such trips. Flying over the southern war front, Rogers noted to his readers that his pilot was “William H. Robinson [sic], Chicago youth and Tuskegee graduate, who is head of His

⁴³ A young aviator, Gus Coleman, opined in the *Defender* in early December 1935 that “should Ethiopia manage to secure even a small air force, they could have the Italians at their mercy by blowing up the single aviation base the Italians thought necessary to construct in view of Ethiopia’s complete lack of air equipment” (“Dixie Youth Sees Future in Aviation”).

Majesty's air force," and who pointed out during the flight various locations and hidings spots of the Ethiopian army ("Rogers at Front").

One week later, Rogers reported that another one of Robinson's flights led the pilot into a battle with two Italian planes: "Col. William T. Robinson [sic] was returning here from Addis Ababa with medicine for those wounded in the first air-raid of the Italians." "Seeing a bomber," Rogers informed, "he attacked it with his machine gun spitting bullets. He was in a position for the kill, it is alleged, when the distressed Italian plane was rescued by other ships. Robinson, with his motors roaring, escaped into the rainclouds. His plane was slightly damaged" ("Col. Robinson Stages Air Duel in Clouds with Enemy Planes"). Thus, despite having been reportedly hired to teach mechanics and service Ethiopian planes, John Charles Robinson became the first African American pilot to have fought in Africa for one of the continent's countries' independence against a colonial power wielding superior technology. And he did not lose.

William J. Powell's Intermezzo

Even though Robinson's achievements dominated the aviation coverage in 1936, the second year of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, other black aviators – especially William J. Powell – were still promoting their goodwill message of aviation in the black press. Powell remained closely connected with the *Courier*, in which all of his letters and reports on his educational activities had appeared. Having written a play, a fictional autobiography, and numerous letters to the paper, Powell did not change his *modus operandi* in 1936. In January, he commended the Pittsburgh weekly on its ongoing aviation campaign and the coverage of his classes in Los Angeles during 1934. He

informed that he had 125 students enrolled at the moment, many of whom had applied in reaction to the articles in the *Courier* (“Lauds Courier for Part in Boosting Aviation to Race”). In July, he again thanked the paper on behalf of his organization, the Craftsmen of Black Wings, “for its wonderful support in publicizing the need of the Negroes’ entry into the aviation industry [and for] letting Negroes know that thousands of jobs await them if they only get into the aviation industry now” (“California Aviators Make Rapid Progress”).

If Robinson was gradually becoming black aviation’s leader in aerial warfare, Powell was increasingly seen as the best educator of prospective aviation students. In May, both the *Courier* and the *Defender* reported on a study by the Division of Negro Affairs, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, which indicated that there were 55 licensed black pilots in the United States, two of which were exclusively employed in aviation – Powell teaching aeronautics and Robinson fighting in Ethiopia (“55 Hold U.S. Air Licenses,” “Number 55 of Race as Holding Pilot Licenses from U.S.”).

Since Robinson’s career was being closely monitored in the black press already, the *Courier* devoted much space in 1936 to covering Powell’s school and aviation group. The paper provided a detailed biography of Powell and his school’s graduation statistics in “Aviation Boom Sweeps West,” highlighting the progress that black aviation was making in California under Powell’s tutelage. The paper later published a photograph of students at work in one of Powell’s classes and the *Defender*, too, carried a photo collage celebrating Powell’s success (“Californians Take Lead in Aviation,” “Craftsmen of

Black Wings at Work”). The photo, inscribed by Powell, served as a demonstration of the technical and mechanical expertise that successful aviators had to learn to possess.

Most importantly, Powell introduced a new incentive into the aviation campaign; one that the black press had on several previous occasions called for – an aviation scholarship. In November 1935, the *Courier* informed that Powell had taken members of the Alpha Delta chapter of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity for an air trip over Los Angeles. Upon landing, the chapter’s leader opined, per the article, that “the Negro should get into aviation now while there is a chance to get in on the ground floor,” thus echoing one of the key phrases in Powell’s *Black Wings* (“Alphas in Air”). Powell announced in September that the Craftsmen of Black Wings had completed plans to “give 100 free scholarships in aviation to Negro students,” including “six months of practical experience in building of planes, 50 hours of flying and ground courses in aerodynamics etc.” Powell’s objective was to create “One million jobs for Negroes in aviation” (“100 Scholarships to Be Given Race Aviation Students”). In January 1938, Powell was able to secure the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity’s promise to “give him moral and financial support and offer scholarships in his school for worthy Negro boys” (“Alphas to Temper Initiations,” “Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Expands Progressive Program”). Powell thus advanced his aviation campaign one step further.

Despite his continuous success and diligence, however, frustration was still perceptible in Powell’s writing. Although a reader sent a letter to the *Courier*, commending Powell and stating that his organization “should receive the serious attention and earnest support of all black Americans, whether they are now air-minded or

not” because “the time and day for Negroes to be skeptical towards scientific progress has gone forever,” Powell did not feel satisfied. As in the early years of his aviation campaign, he criticized in a November letter the lack of support on the part of the African American community. Borrowing a statement from his book, Powell suggested that black leaders should inform the community that “NEGROES WILL NEVER RIDE BELOW THE MASON AND DIXON LINE AS FREE MEN AND WOMEN UNTIL THEY RIDE IN AIRPLANES, OWNED AND OPERATED BY NEGROES.”

Specifically, Powell targeted W.E.B. DuBois, declaring that the famous race leader should impress upon his readers that “today THE SECURITY OF ANY NATION OR RACE LIES IN ITS AVIATION INDUSTRY” (“Leaders Should Encourage Field of Aviation, Says”). The all-caps lines do not suggest only Powell’s frustration with a historic problem in making black aviation relevant, but also points to the fact that black aviation pioneers such as Powell and Robinson had had to promote a field essential to the race’s survival without much help from the race’s leaders. Not only was aviation being ignored financially, but also politically.

Showing Off: John C. Robinson’s Technical Expertise on Display

As evidenced by the massive political support for the Civilian Pilot Training Program from 1938 onwards, the only way to advance black aviation politically was to present it as a military necessity for the African American community. That is what Robinson sought to do in Ethiopia. In January, the *Courier* reported that an order of six new British airplanes, intended for Robinson’s colleagues from the Challenger association, had been turned down by both the United States and Britain, as were

passport applications for the six Chicago flyers ready to join their leader in Ethiopia. Even though the US consul in Addis Ababa expressed pride in Robinson's work and stated that the US government was supportive of the flyer, Robinson remained in Ethiopia on his own ("Col. Robinson Orders Six New Planes").

Despite this setback, Robinson still featured in J.A. Rogers' texts, providing expertise on all things aeronautical. When Rogers wrote a text describing the panic in the Ethiopian capital over a potential Italian air raid, Robinson's expert opinion functioned as a calming presence: "The capital is 8300 feet high and the bombers will have to climb at least another 8,000 feet to escape the anti-aircraft gun. This, Col. John C. Robinson assures me, will be extremely difficult for the heavy bombing planes," concludes Rogers his article ("Rogers Paints Vivid Word Picture").

To present Robinson to the *Courier's* readers, to showcase the flyer's technical and mechanical prowess, and to outline his Pan-African sentiments even further Rogers interviewed the Chicagoan in early January. In the interview, Robinson thanked Rogers for assuring him that "I am not fighting alone and that although I am the only American, black or white fighting for Ethiopia, that all the people of my race in American are behind us 100 per cent in our struggle." "I am glad," explained Robinson, "also to know that they realize that Ethiopia is fighting not only for herself, but also for black men in every part of the world and that Americans, especially black Americans, are willing to do anything to help us to carry on and to win." Once again, Robinson's dedication, humility, and profound feelings of Pan-Africanism were contrasted with Julian, who, according to Rogers, "is just the opposite" of Robinson – the man who, despite having

broken his arm in four places had still heeded the call of Ethiopia (“J.A. Rogers Gets Exclusive Interview with Col. Robinson”).

The comparisons between Robinson and Julian filled the pages of the *Courier* and the *Defender* throughout 1936. While Robinson was reported by Rogers to have drunk hot water from his airplane to survive during one of his flights in the Ethiopian wilderness (“Rugged Ethiopian Hills to Halt Italy”) and to having been assigned to pilot Selassie’s brand new British four-seater (“Emperor Gets Special Plane”), Julian had been deemed “another Benedict Arnold.” He had allegedly made a deal with the Italian consul in London to give damaging statements about Ethiopia in return for money (“Julian Sold Out for \$1,250, Alleged”). Julian was even preparing a tour around the US, in which he would make pro-Italian statements – but was barred from one such proposed event by the Boston Urban League (“Ask Hub Mayor to Bar Julian”).

In late February, Schuyler reprinted a letter from Charles Diggs, an American doctor living in Paris, who claimed that “Julian is a disgrace to the color of his skin. He is here trying to sell some documents [from Ethiopia] to the highest bidder” (“Views and Reviews”). Finally, in March, when Robinson was asking black Americans for more medical aid from the Red Cross (“Colonel Robinsons Asks Race to Aid Ethiopia”), Rogers reported that he had “yet to hear a single Ethiopian, European or American, say a good word for Julian,” who was, along with Ras Gugsa, a defector, among the most hated men in the country (“Ethiopia Glad to be Rid of Julian”). Julian would never stop being Robinson’s foil.

While the *Courier* had Rogers, the *Defender* was relying in some of its reporting on its “Operative/Operator 22” – a correspondent, whose identity the paper would not divulge, but whose photograph accompanied each of his reports. The texts sent out by the mysterious journalist were, however, mostly yellow journalism; uncorroborated stories. In March, for example, the *Defender*’s reporter claimed that the Ethiopian air corps “consists of 150 pursuit planes and 40 bombers of the latest types. There are now 300 native pilots who have had at least six months of intensive training. There are 25 dare-devil stunt flyers who have been in the air corps service for more than a year” (“From Operative 22’s Mail”). Apart from the six-month training period – since Robinson had been present in Ethiopia since April of the previous year – the rest of the information reported was fabricated.

The *Defender* reported another piece of sensationalist news in October, when it claimed that “Five hundred Ethiopian students are now studying aviation in various institutes of technology in Japan.” “The belief is prevalent,” continued the report, “that as soon as they have been licensed as pilots [...] sufficient number of planes will be furnished them, and they will return to Ethiopia [...] to resume the war with Italy.” Finally, the Black Dragon Society,⁴⁴ was allegedly interceding with the Japanese government on behalf of Ethiopia (“Train 500 Ethiopian Pilots in Japan”). The *Defender* was thus still using yellow journalism and sensationalism in its coverage of the Ethiopian crisis. However, it is necessary to point out that, perhaps having been inspired

⁴⁴ For more on this secret nationalist organization, see Frank Jacob’s *Japanism, Pan-Asianism and Terrorism: A Short History of the Amur Society (The Black Dragons) 1901-1945* (2014).

by Robinson's successes in aerial warfare, some of the paper's most sensationalist news concerned Ethiopian, or black aviation.

After the January interview with Robinson, the reports on the aviator published in the spring issues of the *Courier* by Rogers and others began increasingly to emphasize Robinson's versatile mechanical, technological, and flying skills along with his dedicated Pan-Africanism, so aptly formulated in the interview with Rogers. In "Ethiopia Making Own Airplanes and Gas Masks," Robinson was reported to have been "experimenting with Ethiopian raw materials and automobile parts [and] last week the first plane was completed." The text also noted that Robinson had a history of building airplanes from scratch and that he had built for the Ethiopians a "war machine which acts perfectly in tests." One week later, Robinson's piloting skills were compared with those of British flyers in Ethiopia's service. They, unlike the Chicagoan, had repeatedly crashed planes on important missions because "no matter how capable and what their record elsewhere, [they] are not so efficient in Ethiopia where they must fly under radically different conditions" ("Robinson May Return to U.S."). Because of the services Robinson had been performing for the Ethiopian army, he was selected "to lead a squadron of special bombing planes in an assault on certain mountains which are to be blasted in the campaign of Ethiopia to halt the advance of the Italians on Addis Ababa" ("Leading Mountain Attack"). According to Tucker, the mission probably never took place, but Robinson was later cited for bravery (182).

The climax of the coverage of Robinson's achievements in Ethiopia came in early February, when Rogers wrote a lengthy essay on the country's beauty and the

pilot's prowess and reputation. Rogers had taken an airplane ride in 1928 in Paris and described his experience vividly to his paper's readers in "J.A. Rogers Goes up in the Air in Paris." The Ethiopian piece also provided much space for Rogers' own commentary, but much of it revolved around Robinson, who was, for the last time in the Ethiopian coverage, given space for personal remarks. Rogers described Robinson as knowledgeable of the Ethiopian terrain, although the pilot admitted to Rogers that "flying was tough as h—l in this land for me at first." According to Rogers, "Robinson has been selected as a special target by the Italians. They are seeking revenge for the agitation against them by the people of Robinson's race in America." A few days before, for example, sixteen Italian bombers had attacked a spot where Robinson had just landed; and the Italians knew every time he left the capital, explained Rogers ("Rogers Takes Death Ride with Robinson").

The flyer also demonstrated his expertise at length in the text, when he discussed Ethiopian army's camouflage tactics as well as Italians' cowardice: "You won't find many Italians risking their skin. [...] They select a certain spot then they go up from nine to ten thousand feet and loose their bombs, taking their chances at hitting something." In his conclusion, Rogers had only words of praise for the Chicagoan: "He is an ideal if ever there was one. [...] He loves his race. [...] To give up a job of \$550 a month with the Curtiss-Wright company; to leave his flourishing garage business in Chicago and come to risk his life for Ethiopia, where he earns less than in America is as fine an example of heroic devotion as one can think of" ("Rogers Takes Death Ride with

Robinson”). Rogers would later describe Robinson as “one of the world’s heroes” (“Rogers Pays Tribute to Colonel Robinson”).

Two reasons make Rogers’ piece crucial for what has been described in this thesis as aviation campaign. First, the *Courier*’s reporter employed the same tone and message in his concluding remark on Robinson as that which had been utilized by the black press ever since Bessie Coleman’s emergence in 1921/22. Robinson was depicted as a crusader, a hero of his race, who promoted black aviation in order to advance his race. Moreover, the context of the Ethiopian crisis added a Pan-African and military dimension to the existing goodwill message of aviation – Robinson was a Pan-African martyr, willing to give up his life in fighting a colonial, technologically superior enemy. Secondly, it was the technological and military expertise that Robinson displayed across Rogers’ texts in the *Courier* that demonstrated not only Robinson’s lack of fear of Italy’s vaunted technology, but his understanding of its underlying logic.

In pointing out and connecting Italian soldiers’ cowardice with Douhet’s doctrine of civilian bombing, Robinson exposed the cowardice, cruelty, and dehumanization through remote control of technology that seems to be inherent to the ways in which colonial powers were using their technological advantage against native populations in Africa and elsewhere. Robinson’s opinions, expressed in Rogers’ in-flight essay, thus also indirectly highlighted the dehumanizing strategy facilitated by aviation that white Americans in Tulsa employed toward their black compatriots when they attacked them not face to face, but remotely from the air, unsuspecting and defenseless. At the same time, it was Robinson’s flying, technological, mechanical, and military expertise that

also demonstrated that, if properly trained and equipped, Africa-descended people could and would bridge the existing racial technological gap and push back against colonial power. Robinson's underlying goodwill message of black aviation was thus decidedly Pan-African.

8. THE ROBINSON EFFECT: THE *CHICAGO DEFENDER*'S AVIATION CAMPAIGN IN 1936-37

When the Regia Aeronautica destroyed the few remaining aircraft of the Ethiopian air force in a massive bombing campaign at the end of April, Robinson was granted permission by the emperor to leave the country; even Selassie himself was about to flee to London (Tucker 183). But the Chicago that Robinson returned to in May 1936 was unlike the one he had left in April of the previous year. The city's black aviation and main newspaper had changed and would change even more because of Robinson in three important ways. First, in Robinson's absence, his club's members had shifted their allegiance to Cornelius Coffey and Willa Brown – originally Robinson's protégé – was gradually becoming the face of Chicago's civilian aviation. Their group, which would step out of Robinson's shadow in 1938, would become the main aviation organization advocating participation in the CPTP from 1938 onwards. Secondly, the *Defender* had decided to capitalize upon its city's aviation hero and had expanded – and would expand even further in the following year – its aviation campaign, supporting Robinson in establishing a network of schools around the country. Consequently, and thirdly, through the *Defender*'s newly-expanded campaign, Robinson came to be perceived as a military aviation instructor – the only African American one in the country. The *Defender* would also portray him as his race's savior in early 1937. In short, the Robinson effect gave new, military-focused impetus to black aviation and its campaign in the black press and

would serve as a precursor to the drive for CPTP which would begin in 1938, unfortunately without Robinson in any leading role.

Emulating the *Courier*'s success with letters from and articles about William J. Powell, the *Defender* asked Janet Waterford, who had been reported in the *Courier* just two weeks prior to be planning a new all-women aero club in Chicago ("Sponsor"), to write for the paper about Robinson. The series of articles which ran from late March until Robinson's return to Chicago at the end of May 1936, serves as another indication of the increasing symbiosis between the black press and black pioneer aviators. Also, it is another instance of black pilots directly writing their own (hi)story. The Chicago weekly ran an advertisement for Waterford's story on Robinson in the form of the aviatrix's photograph on March 28, 1936 with the title "Let's Go!" In the first installment, Waterford began with acknowledging Bessie Coleman's crusading role,⁴⁵ thus indirectly associating Robinson and herself with the most celebrated black flyer, and noted that Hubert Julian's theatrics had overshadowed Forsythe and Anderson's accomplishments as well as those of Robinson ("Race Interest in Aviation"). Waterford's article was accompanied by a small photograph of the author in a nursing uniform, for as the aviatrix herself explains in *Soaring above Setbacks*, she was sometimes referred to as "the Flying Nurse."

The articles by "Janet" covered all the highlights of Robinson's career. On April 4, the *Defender* carried a large portrait of Robinson, dubbing him "Brown Condor," and

⁴⁵ Coleman was remembered in a separate article in the *Defender* in early May ("Recalls Exploits of Brave Bessie Coleman").

Waterford wrote about Robinson's beginnings in Gulfport, Tuskegee, and his early days in Chicago ("The Real Story of Col. John Robinson"). The series continued with Robinson's first efforts to establish an aero club in Chicago, noting that the flyer and his friends lacked funds – a common trope in the aviation coverage by the black press ("Robinson Organizes Brown Eagle Aero Club"). Next was the story of Robinson's persistence in gaining admission at Curtis-Wright, his subsequent employment there, and opening of a small airport for his group of flyers ("Robinson Arouses Race Interest in Aviation"). Waterford also described the aviator's teaching style ("Robinson Excelled as an Instructor") and related the episode during which the Challenger club's airport had been destroyed by a storm and reopened elsewhere owing to the members' desire to make it in aviation ("First Race Airport").

The series concluded with the story of Robinson's goodwill flight to Tuskegee and recruitment by Barnett and Selassie ("John Robinson Wings His Way Down to Tuskegee"). On the day of Robinson's arrival in Chicago, Waterford added an exclusive text about the Challengers association ("The Race and Aviation"). Waterford's pieces functioned as a distilled version of the black press' goodwill message of aviation: perseverance, training in mechanical, technical, and flying skills were highlighted; and Robinson's success despite lack of funding and support by the larger black community in Chicago and nationwide was celebrated.

Waterford, however, was not the only aviator associated with Robinson who was making headlines in 1936.⁴⁶ Dorothy Darby had recovered from her injuries in 1934 and was becoming successful as a parachutist. She was studying at the Pontiac civic airport and school of aviation and gave exhibitions in Michigan, where she was also honored by the Michigan air forces (“Dorothy Darby to Make Leap,” “Pontiac, Mich.”). The Harlem airport, operated by the Challengers, witnessed a fatal crash in July, when two people died flying Dr. Earl Renfroe’s airplane (“Sister Sees Pilot Die in Crash”). The Aeronautical University in Chicago produced another African American student, Frank S. Reed, Jr., who graduated with a double degree (“Wins Degrees”).

Most importantly, Willa Beatrice Brown emerged as a new active promoter of Chicago aviation. Graduate of Robinson’s first class at Curtiss-Wright, Brown is mentioned by Enoch P. Waters, a renowned *Defender* journalist, as the one who revitalized the paper’s aviation campaign in 1936 (195-99). Although Waters’ account is incomplete and its timeline seems incorrect by two years, Brown did feature in the black press on numerous occasions in 1936. In January, for example, she featured in flying gear on the front pages of the *Courier* next to Robinson’s photo with J.A. Rogers (“Wants to Fight Italian Bombers”). Robert A. Hill credits this photograph with inspiring George S. Schuyler to write the female chief pilot of the Black International in the

⁴⁶ In other aviation news, Lincoln Payne, an aviator, aviation advocate, and a barn stormer, died in October 1936 (“Lincoln Payne, Flying Mail Carrier Dead”). Brazil purchased 30 American planes for its air force to be able to suppress future revolts more easily (“Brazil Buys 30 American Planes”). Allen Moton, son of former Tuskegee president, announced his plan for a transatlantic flight with Hubert Julian (“Son of Tuskegee President Plans to Fly Atlantic”). “Flying High,” an air-minded musical made its premiere in Chicago in May (“Fulton Alexander’s Flying High”).

Ethiopia-inspired, air-minded novella *Black Internationale*, serialized in the *Courier* between 1935 and 1936 (268). Brown also became member of the Challengers' advisory board when the organization voted Cornelius Coffey as its stand-in president for Robinson in January 1936 ("Robinson's Chi-Air"). In May, as Robinson was on his return to the US, Brown was featured on the pages of the *Defender Junior* section – as Waterford did the year before. The paper announced that Brown had consented to establishing a Billiken aviation club in Chicago. Brown was going to teach children about the history of aviation as well as take them to field trips to airports ("To Organized Junior Birdmen," "To Help Us"). The *Defender* was thus targeting its young readers again, promoting black aviation in all its sections.

Brown was also among the twenty thousand black and white Chicagoans who welcomed John C. Robinson upon his arrival. The *Courier* announced in early May that the aviator was on his way back to the country, but would stop in London to deliver messages from Selassie to Dr. Martin, the consul ("Col. Robinson, Ethiopian Air Ace, Returning"). On May 23, the *Defender* devoted its front page almost entirely to Robinson's arrival in New York. The page featured two photographs of the flyer in "his regular aviator's leather jacket. On the left side was the insignia of the Emperor's Conquering Lion of Judah embossed in gold. He wore a slip over sweater with the wings of a plane embossed in gold lettering and the Emperor's crown." Displaying thus his allegiance to Ethiopia, Robinson reiterated in an interview with a *Defender* reporter that "it was not so much the military skill of the Italians" rather than in-fighting that troubled Ethiopia. In this way, Robinson once again dismissed the idea that Ethiopians or any

other black nation should fear the presumed technological advantages associated with colonial powers. Despite defying Italy's technological superiority, Robinson admitted to having been "severely gassed" several times, having had his collar bone broken, and having been shot twice "while in combat with the Italians." According to the article, Robinson had taken part in twelve "actual flying battles and in one he narrowly missed shooting down the plane of Mussolini's son." Finally, he had amassed 728 flying hours in Ethiopia, tallying 1,328 flying hours over his twelve-year flying career ("Defender Scribe Greet Robison").

With the detailed descriptions of Robinson's wounds and flying experience while defending Ethiopia against Italy's colonialism, the *Defender* continued the *Courier's* portrayal of the aviator as a crusader. Unlike Coleman, Powell, or Banning, however, Robinson had become a crusader scarred by actual battle in faraway Africa, thereby finally combining aviation with military experience and Pan-Africanism. The image of Robinson, the Pan-African war ace, must have been imprinted in black America's mind, because the *Defender* reported that the police had to battle seven hundred spectators in Harlem upon Robinson's arrival ("Rioting Marks Demonstration for War Ace"). Three more thousand people welcomed the aviator at Rockland Palace at an event organized by the United Aid for Ethiopia. The organization awarded Robinson "a silver trophy surmounted with an airplane model having a bloodstone base, symbolizing the blood he shed on Ethiopian soil" ("Robinson in Big Ovation in New York"). The trophy did not only solidify Robinson's image in the minds of many as the first actual Pan-African

warrior hailing from the United States, but also associated aviation with its military purpose, demonstrated by Robinson in Ethiopia.

Harlem's welcome for Robinson, however, could not compare to Chicago's, as the May 30 issue, filled with articles on and photographs of Robinson at various events, demonstrates. Five thousand supporters awaited the flyer at the airport and twenty thousand by the Grand Hotel, where Robinson gave a speech. The war hero was greeted with military honors, too. Officers of the Eight Infantry Illinois National Guard, which Coleman had celebrated at her exhibition in 1922, were present. So were members of the Military Order of Guards, Boy Scouts of America, the commander of the George L. Giles Post American Legion, and officers of the Challengers. Along with these, Chicago's dignitaries were in attendance, too: Robert S. Abbott, W.T. Brown, the mayor of Bronzeville, Julian H. Lewis, president of the Chicago branch of the United Aid for Ethiopia, Oscar DePriest, Lieut. John Scott of the Chicago police, and members of the Chicago Tuskegee club including Claude A. Barnett.

Robinson was assigned his own policeman for protection as, reportedly, there had already been six assassination attempts carried out against him. Junius Caesar Austin of the Pilgrim Baptist Church was among those giving a welcome speech. Doris Murphy, Janet Waterford, and Willa Brown took a picture with the Brown Condor for the *Defender*, too. Dinners were had, interviews were given and speeches made – Abbott, for example, commended Robinson thusly: “The virtue of Colonel Robinson's success, while seeking to enhance the military fortune of his black brothers in Ethiopia, was intensified by the fact that before leaving America, Colonel Robinson had made

ample preparation through diligent scientific study to properly assume the obligation which awaited him” (“Twenty Thousand Greet Brown Condor,” “Socialites Greet Hero at Airport,” “Col. Robinson Exhibits His Leadership,” “Aviatrixes Welcome Col. John Robinson,” “Reveal Six Attempts to Kill Condor,” “Col. Robinson Speaker at Du Saible,” “Editor Abbott in Tribute to Col. Robinson”).

As Robinson’s unprecedented reception in Harlem and Chicago and his image portrayed in the *Defender* indicate, the aviator had managed to make black aviation and its military potential a nation-wide political issue. Even though monographs on Bronzeville as well as Chicago aviation ignore Robinson and his group, the aviator had turned Chicago air-minded. The image he projected was no longer that of an unlucky crusader – so prevalent in previous black aviation coverage – but rather of a Pan-African warrior, unafraid of colonizer’s technological superiority, because his own abilities and skills matched it. He had the support of the *Defender*, one of the most popular black newspapers in the country, as well as of Reverend Austin, a strong advocate of Pan-Africanism. Robinson’s group had a para-military status and its leader had amassed well over a thousand flying hours, more than half of them on the battlefields of Ethiopia. Here had emerged a leader, the *Defender* seemed to be saying in its coverage of Robinson’s arrival, who can militarize black aviation. From Robinson’s return from Ethiopia onwards, the press coverage of black aviation would no longer use the crusader image. It would emphasize even more the need for potential black aviators to seize educational opportunities and it would transform aviation, especially military training in aviation, into a political issue. If Forsythe and Anderson’s goodwill flight had utilized aviation as

a means of fostering interracial relationship as a civil-rights issue, Robinson's military duty in Ethiopia made black aviation decidedly political.

8.1 Not Tuskegee: Robinson's New Aviation School

It was thus no coincidence that in the articles documenting Robinson's return, the black press did not fail to mention that the aviator was going to become an aviation instructor at Tuskegee in the fall of 1936 ("Col. Robinson, Ethiopian Air Ace, Returning," "Defender Scribe Greet Robinson," "Twenty Thousand Greet Brown Condor"). Claude A. Barnett, a Tuskegee graduate like Robinson, had been discussing the flyer's potential employment at the Institute with Robinson for some time – and he had issued press releases for black and white newspapers announcing Robinson's future employment and organized, in cooperation with Frederick Douglass Patterson, an aviation event upon Robinson's arrival at Tuskegee (Tucker 202, Jakeman 29). The exciting news inspired Chicago citizens to donate money for the Col. John C. Robinson aviation fund, which was intended to purchase a plane for Robinson before his departure to teach at the institute ("Rally to Buy Col. Robinson a New Plane"). In July, Robinson visited Tuskegee, where Patterson said to Robinson and the press in attendance that "a course in aeronautics would probably be started at the Institute next year" ("Brown Condor at Tuskegee Institute"). As Jakeman and Tucker concur, Tuskegee along with Barnett was hoping to use the considerable amount of money donated to Robinson's fund to sponsor not only its aviation program, but other departments as well. In fact, Barnett was reportedly withholding the fund's money from Robinson until late summer 1936, which prompted the aviator to take his educational plans in another direction

(Tucker 208-11, Jakeman 30-32). Despite the setback, Robinson is still widely credited with having initiated what would later become the Tuskegee Airmen program.

Along with debating whether to accept Tuskegee's offer, Robinson spent the summer giving lectures about aviation and Ethiopia and visiting his home town. He stopped in Gulfport, Mississippi on his way to Tuskegee in July ("Home Folks Honor Flyer"). In early June, Robinson visited the Poro College, a beauty college in Chicago, operated by Anna Turnbo Malone, the first African American female millionaire ("Col. Robinson is Feted at Poro College"). At a lecture at the Du Sable High School in June, Robinson explained how Italy had employed its black Muslim troops to fight Ethiopian Christians, thus pitting troops of color against each other while the white Italian troops barely engaged in battle ("How Black Troops Won War for Italians"). The highlight of Robinson's lecture tour, however, came in late June when he visited New York. He was met by twenty two black pilots, including Alfred Anderson, from Pennsylvania and other neighboring states. They escorted him to Roosevelt Field where over seven hundred people had been waiting and they performed a short air show. During his visit to New York, Washington, D.C., and Pittsburgh, Robinson also discussed his idea of a "chartered air service in the South [...] which would aid the entire section as well as give qualified pilots regular jobs." The potential success of this service would in turn convince other companies to hire black pilots ("Col. Robinson, Ethiopian Air Hero").

In fact, since Robinson's Tuskegee plans had fallen through, the aviator put his idea of an air service into practice in Chicago. As Tucker claims, Robinson owned a four-seat Curtiss Robin plane marked "John Robinson Airlines" (213) and, as an article

in the *Courier* suggests, Robinson had indeed established a “flying service” in Chicago by the end of September. Willa Brown, along with Lola Jones, served as hostesses at the Harlem airport, or as the paper called it: “Colonel J.C. Robinson’s Flying Field” (“The Brown and Jones Girls”). The air service was apparently a business adjacent to Robinson’s school, which opened in late September 1936 (Tucker 213).

The John C. Robinson’s National Air College and School of Automotive Engineering, informed articles in the *Courier* and the *Defender*, was Robinson’s “life dream.” The school was located on the Poro College campus, offered 15 mechanical courses and owned equipment which were all “above the Government regulations as outlined by the Department of Commerce.” The school employed experienced and government-licensed instructors, including Cornelius Coffey and Captain Homer Lewis, who taught Spanish and French, which were among compulsory subjects. Most importantly, the school was under “military discipline, directed by an army reserve officer” (“Col. John Robinson Opens Aviation College,” “Col. Robinson’s National Air College,” “Aviation College is Opened”).

When the black press remarked that Chicago “now boasts of the only Race aviation college and automotive school in the world,” it was not exaggerating (“Aviation College is Opened”). Rather, it was highlighting the fact that Robinson’s college offered a unique opportunity for African Americans to bridge the racial technological gap, which had been slowly narrowing in the automotive and aviation industries. Robinson’s college had government-approved equipment, staff, and used a nearby airport to teach its

students to fly. Although the institution was segregated, it more than equaled white schools, was the message that Robinson was projecting through the black press.

And technology could be the African Americans' domain as well. While Powell's classes at Jefferson High and his Craftsmen of Black Wings club also offered several courses and used the Dycer airport for exercise, Powell was working mostly on his own – as far as the reports in black newspapers indicate – and did not teach automotive engineering. More importantly, Powell did not provide on-campus accommodation coupled with strict military discipline. Since the Tuskegee aviation school proposed by Robinson did not materialize, the aviator transposed his plan to Chicago and imbued it with as much military instruction as he was allowed at a civilian institution. Despite obstacles, Robinson – no longer an unfortunate crusader – repeatedly found ways to offer military-like technical education and training for his students. First at Curtiss-Wright, where his best students came to form the nucleus of the Military Order of Guard Aviation Squadron, and then at his own college. The year 1937 would expand Robinson's vision beyond Chicago and his college.

Business as Usual

In the *Courier* in 1937, the aviation campaign reverted to its old form before Robinson's mission in Ethiopia. The paper announced in brief notes new student fliers from around the country: in Arkansas, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Maryland ("Makes First Solo Flight," "Aided by Father of His White School Chum," "Young Oklahoman Wins Flying Permit," "All Ready"). It also published two short texts about Haitian military officers coming to the United States to study aviation. Lieut. Edouard Roy was

reportedly studying at an aviation school at the Roosevelt Field in New York. Although Roy and his colleague later made headlines with a love story gone wrong, it is important to note that Capt. Duly Lamothe was studying aviation “with the U.S. army,” unlike black Americans (“To Study,” “Haitian Army Officer”). In October, the *Courier* announced that there were, according to the Department of Commerce, “103 Negroes, 10 women and 93 men, [who] have qualified as aviators,” 70 of whom, including 6 women, had active licenses (“10 Race Women, 93 Men Qualify as Aviators”). The text noted that Hubert Julian was listed under a student’s license only. Despite that, Julian appeared on NBC in May and in Harlem with an Egyptian princess in December, having failed to join the Chinese Air force as he had promised in October (“Negro Flier on Ripley Program,” “Julian, with Monocle and Princess,” “Black Eagle Julian is Hurt”).

The *Defender* did not lag far behind the *Courier* in its routine aviation coverage. The paper covered Julian’s Chinese story as well (“Black Eagle Hurts Arm,” “In U.S. Again”). As it did Josephine Baker’s marriage to a French aviator (“Josephine Baker Marries French Broker and Aviator”). The paper also brought the news about the first black airport in Washington, D.C. (“First Race Airport Celebrates Opening”). More importantly, the *Courier* and the *Defender* continued in promoting aviation through letters and editorials. The Pittsburgh weekly urged its readers in its “The World This Week” column to “Watch aviation, young man! Study it. Learn to fly. The bars are up now. Changing conditions will lower them. [...] Aviation is girdling the globe. [...] Everywhere young men are training. What about you?” The *Defender* published a short letter to the editor, which asserted that “Race males should be trained at once in aviation,

so that when the inevitable war comes the Race will be able to do their part in helping to save the nation” (“Train for Aviation”).

Before proceeding to the unique aviation campaign that the *Defender* launched with Robinson’s help in 1937, it is necessary to note the *Courier*’s continuous support and coverage of William J. Powell. The Los Angeles-based aviation pioneer began publishing a monthly magazine called “Craftsmen Aero-News” in early 1937, for the purpose of keeping “the public informed of the activities of Negroes in aviation” (“The Social Institute”). George S. Schuyler, who had gradually become the most vocal advocate for aviation in the black press, devoted an entire column in January to Powell, his school, and its new magazine. Schuyler noted the “immortal Bessie Coleman” and the scores of licensed aviators, as well as the goodwill flights across the country and abroad, and remarked that “considering the opposition to Negroes entering aviation or getting any instruction in it at all, this is little short of miraculous.” The columnist then singled out Powell, whose students had built “the first Department of Commerce licensed airplane” by African Americans, in saying that this was a new field which African Americans had created for themselves. The text added details about Powell’s school, its new equipment as well as the opportunities that awaited African Americans in the field. In an April column, Schuyler further remarked that young black men, according to a New York engineer, were reluctant to enter aviation education and urged them to start reading Powell’s magazine and/or apply for his school so that black America could reach 100 “trained Negro aviators and mechanics [who] might get a unit

in the Army Air Corps or secure work in airplane factories” (“Views and Reviews,” “Views and Reviews”).

Schuyler’s two columns are notable for several reasons. He continued spreading Powell’s goodwill message of aviation, but increasingly began to tie demonstration of prowess in the technical and mechanical aspect of aviation to African Americans’ potential acceptance in the US military. In this way, Schuyler’s texts can be considered a crucial element in the *Courier’s* ongoing campaign to secure a place for black soldiers in the country’s army as well as a stepping stone for the intensified editorial-based campaign that the paper launched in 1938. In highlighting Powell’s new equipment, instruction skills, and his students’ ability to construct a government-approved airplane from ground up, Schuyler pointed at African Americans’ technical and mechanical skills – lack of which had been used by the government for decades as an excuse for barring black applicants from the military air service – that thrived despite segregation and lack of institutional support. In other words, Schuyler’s emphasis was, as in the case of Robinson, on the racial technological gap, which Powell had been seeking to bridge.

Powell made headlines in August with one more technological advancement. A Cuban official contacted Powell “in regards to the establishment of air lines between the U.S. and Cuba, and furnishing airplane pilots for these lines, because the Cubans desire to make all conveniences to entertain and cater to the colored tourists who have never had the opportunity of visiting” Cuba. Furthermore, the paper noted that there were “two and a half million Negroes in Cuba and that they are interested in aviation progress among Negroes.” Powell was interested in Cuba’s offer and he remarked for the paper

that he was hoping to start an air service in the US solely for black passengers, because “Negroes will never ride as free men and women below the Mason and Dixon line until they ride in airplanes owned and operated by Negroes;” thus echoing his own words from the *Black Wings* and numerous letters to the *Courier* (“Craftsmen of Black Wings Designing New Planes”). Powell was evidently still deeply involved with propagating technical and mechanical education in aviation to black students and was making future planes, like Robinson, to establish an all-black charter air service. Due to segregation and Robinson and Powell’s leadership, black aviation was making a separate and increasingly equal headway.

8.2 Robinson’s New Mission

While the *Courier* relied heavily on Powell and Schuyler’s efforts to promote aviation on its pages, the *Defender* in 1937 invested directly into John C. Robinson’s career, devising a new level of symbiosis between the black press and black aviators. While Tucker’s and Simmons’ biographies of Robinson, as well as Scott and Womack’s monograph on black aviation and the *Courier*, do note that Robinson spent much of 1937 touring the country and campaigning for aviation and his school, the combined efforts of the *Defender* and Robinson in the spring and summer of 1937 have so far gone unrecorded. The archive of the *Defender*’s articles on Robinson, however, indicates that the *Defender* was positioning itself to become the black press’ leader in the aviation campaign by supporting the only African American war hero airman in the country.

Robinson’s new mission emerged in early 1937 – Memphis was under water. As Patrick O’Daniel notes, “Tens of thousands of desperate refugees rushed to Memphis

fleeing floodwater in January and February of 1937. [...] This massive superflood broke all previous records, even those set in 1927. By mid-January it had devastated communities throughout the Ohio Valley, and then it moved into the rain-drenched Mississippi Valley.” Suddenly, “overwhelmed Memphians not only had to accommodate the survivors of this disaster but also had to save their city from a flood crest greater than any before in the United States” (10). The *Chicago Defender*, distrustful of the Red Cross yet eager to help the black Southerners who had been the paper’s loyal readers for more than two decades, paired with the Memphis Community Welfare League and promised to deliver food and other necessities to the area by train and plane (“Clothes, Shoes and Bedding Sent by Chicagoans”). And on February 6, the paper announced on its front page that Colonel John Robinson would fly the *Defender*’s relief to Memphis. A photograph of Robinson in his pilot’s jacket with Ethiopian air force insignia was printed next to the announcement, which explained that Robinson was bringing “war-time experience and ability to aid.” While he was looking for a proper plane for the purpose of his mission, it was planned that he would make two trips a week from the paper’s relief station to the various camps in the flooded areas (“Col. John Robinson to Fly Relief Aid”).

Two weeks later, the paper printed a large photograph of Robinson standing in full gear in front of a plane labeled “Chicago Defender Flood Relief.” His war experience and close ties to Ethiopia and its emperor were again highlighted through the accompanying caption, effectively portraying the aviator as a savior figure. Aviation was one of the few means of reaching the flood-stricken areas around Memphis and there

was no one better equipped than the *Defender*'s pilot to complete this dangerous mission ("Chicago Defender Flood Relief Plane").⁴⁷

Initially, however, Robinson's plane suffered setbacks due to weather conditions and subsequent technical problems on the plane. Robinson was forced to land in Bloomington, Ill., and wait for spare parts. Owing to his reputation, however, the aviator was determined "to complete his mission of mercy to Memphis, Tenn., or die in the attempt" ("Col. Robinson Downed by Bad Weather"). Unlike Julian, who had promised similar determination but never delivered on it, Robinson eventually completed his mission in early March— and the *Defender* advertised it using language reminiscent of the paper's coverage of the flyer's return from Ethiopia. "Unseen hands, Friday just as evening was singing its swan song and the murk of the night was submerging the somber glow of a blood-red sun, rolled back the gathering clouds for just one minute," wrote Dan Burley, the *Defender*'s white correspondent in Memphis. "That one minute, ladies and gentlemen, was enough. It let the Brown Condor of Ethiopia, the personal air escort of his Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie, King of Kings, Conquering Lion of Judah, Select of God and Goodwill Ambassador of the *Chicago Defender*, Col. John Robinson, to slip through." The city knew that "he would not fail [to arrive], since he didn't fail Selassie," explained Burley ("Brown Condor Lands Plane in Memphis").

Since Robinson was supposed to arrive in Memphis two weeks before, only four people were awaiting him at the Memphis airport. According to Burley, the local white

⁴⁷ The *Courier* informed on Robinson's mission later in February in "Air Ace Flies to Memphis."

newspapers and radio shows had been mocking Robinson's efforts for weeks, regarding "the flight as typical of Race enterprise" and expecting "some burlesque type of aviator – probably some aged fellow, bent, rusty, speaking some sort of ununderstandable lingo, crawling out of the cabin." But Robinson's arrival, successful landing, and visage apparently endeared him to the white reporters awaiting him and the word quickly spread around Beale Street that the promised black savior had arrived.

"The *Chicago Defender* became a symbol of progress," claimed Burley, because the successful flight meant much to the city's black populace ("Brown Condor Lands Plane in Memphis"). Robinson was even greeted by Robert Reed Church, Jr., Memphis' most influential African American politician ("Bob Church Greets Flyer"). He also spoke at the local radio station WNBR ("Memphis Officially Welcomes Col. John C. Robinson") and took photographs with the city's black businessmen and professionals ("Memphians Throng to Pilot"). He visited and gave speeches at the LeMoyne College and Porter School to hundreds of black students, telling them stories from Ethiopia and about flying ("1100 Memphis Students Hear Noted Flyer"). Throughout the coverage of these events, Robinson's war experience in Ethiopia was highlighted repeatedly.

The *Defender* thus added a new piece to Robinson's existing aura of the race's savior – not only had he been willing to fight Italian technological dominance in Ethiopia and prove black aviation's worth, but he also braved the calamitous weather and white Memphians' prejudice to deliver much-needed relief aid to Memphis. Black aviation was, owing to Robinson's skills, connecting communities and making them notice the growing field. The *Defender* summarized Robinson's trip briefly in April

(“Aviation”), but, more importantly, provided space for the aviator to write his own story of the goodwill flight, as the paper called it on several occasions. In “Robinson’s Own Story of Epic Flight,” the pilot deferred any self-glorification and simply described the technical difficulties and dangerous weather conditions that had hampered his flight. Robinson’s emphasis on solving these problems and his expertise in engine and flight mechanics, however, served as a reminder that black America had skilled black aviators who had bridged the racial technological gap and were teaching those willing to learn how to excel in a technological field.

8.3 Networking in the South: Schools and Air Lines

It is unclear how effective the *Defender*’s campaign was, but it did make black America register that some of its men could, indeed, fly. Robinson appeared in the news repeatedly during the rest of 1937, touring the country and promoting his college. In May, Robinson was reportedly supposed to pilot a renowned Chicago card player to a bridge tournament in Cleveland (“To Fly to Bridge Tourney”). It is possible that this trip was carried out by Robinson’s charter service. In early July, per the *Courier*, he took Mrs. Malone, owner of the Poro College, for a trip over Chicago’s South Side (“Mrs. Malone, Head of Poro, Takes to Air”). The *Defender* printed two photographs from the event later in the month (“Mme. Malone, Poro Head, Takes to Air”). In the middle of July, Robinson flew Malone to Kansas City and continued to Topeka to give a speech (“Air-Minded!). According to Tucker, after Topeka, Robinson with Mrs. Malone visited Mound Bayou, Mississippi, for the 50th anniversary “as a self-governing 100% Negro

community.” In early August, the aviator flew to Jackson,⁴⁸ where he gave an interview to a *Clarion Ledger* reporter, gave a speech, and then visited Meridian for a speaking engagement at a black high school (Tucker 217-19).

What Tucker’s detailed list of activities after Topeka leaves out, however, is that Robinson apparently made a speech in St. Louis as well. As the *Courier*’s St. Louis column from July 17, 1937 indicates, Robinson was planning to open a school in the city, perhaps because of its considerable black population and aviation infrastructure. Per the *Courier*, Robinson “set up a tentative program for a local aviation school which would be an important unit of the Col. John C. Robinson Aviation Activities.” This program had been formed to “stimulate and promote aviation among our race; To create positions and connections for jobs for qualified members of our race in all lines of aviation and automotive mechanics.” Robinson was reportedly planning to open a branch of his college in St. Louis as well as set up airports in cities where there was a sizeable black population and connect these via a charter service operated by black pilots. He also sought to promote goodwill among pilots regardless of nationality. Most importantly, Robinson’s objective was to “try to get a place in the army corps for members of our race who desire such placement” (“Chatting with Lue Swarz”). In other words, Robinson was launching a plan to create a network of colleges, airports, and qualified mechanics and pilots so that black America could travel by plane, be offered technical and mechanical jobs, and, in turn, produce viable candidates for service in the

⁴⁸ The *Defender* informed about Robinson’s visit to the city and subsequent exhibition flight at the end of August in “Mississippian Flies Here with Colonel.”

country's military. Robinson's network of colleges would thus have a clear purpose to educate black students for service in skilled positions in the military.

The *Defender's* coverage of Robinson's activities during August and September 1937 provides a map of the areas where the aviator was hoping to set up his network of colleges – like Powell, Robinson was targeting the segregated South. Between July and August, Robinson was travelling daily between Dallas, New Orleans, and Jackson. In New Orleans, he was the American Legion of Honor's guest of honor. He also spoke to, among others, member of the local Poro club (“Col. Robinson Pays Visit to New Orleans”). An article on another dinner remarked the “Colonel's intention to establish an aviation school in the Crescent City” (“Col. Robinson is Guest of Hartmans”) and another text noted that Robinson was planning to set up a “Primary Flying School” in Jackson⁴⁹ and was mulling the possibility of connection his proposed college in New Orleans with Xavier University (“May Open Flying School at Xavier”).

In Dallas, Robinson and Mrs. Malone visited the local Poro branch, which was, among others, teaching a plane modeling class. Robinson reportedly suggested that “the formation of other clubs to promote interest in aviation among the older boys and the adult members” (“Texas State News”). Finally, per the *Courier*, Robinson dropped “a football to open the annual gridiron classic between Wiley College and Prairie View Normal” at the Cotton Bowl and was making arrangements “for his stunt on Negro participation day” at the Pan-American Exposition (“To Stunt at Texas Exposition”).

⁴⁹ Robinson visited Jackson again in October to give exhibition flights at the Annual Mississippi Negro State Fair (“...Jackson, Mississippi...”).

The *Defender* later confirmed Robinson's stunt flying ("Robinson Flies a New Plane to City") and both black newspapers informed that the aviator visited vocational schools in Tennessee in September ("Col. J. Robinson Makes Flight to Sommerville," Col. John C. Robinson Honored at Luncheon," "Noted Flyer on Southern Lecture Tour").

Indeed, Robinson's tour of the South was not intended to promote his aviation vision only. The articles in the *Courier* and the *Defender* report that the aviator spoke as much about Ethiopia and Italy as he did about aviation ("Tells of Italy's Efforts," "Col. Robinson, Mrs. Malone, Speakers"). Not only was he thus promoting aviation as a field and a means of acquiring a technical degree, but was also spreading the spirit of Pan-Africanism and anti-colonialism around the segregated South. It may be assumed that Robinson's audience – high school and college students as well as other adults – listened to the aviator's inspiring narrative that coupled military aviation and heroism with necessary technical and mechanical expertise and juxtaposed Robinson's skills with that of the allegedly overpowering technological superiority of Italy's colonial power.

It is also necessary to note that Robinson had spent the summer travelling around the South with Mrs. Malone aboard his plane, visiting numerous Poro college campuses. According to Bettye Collier-Thomas, by 1926 Poro claimed to have around 75,000 agents around the US, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. The Poro college employed up to 175 people. Although Malone's business reportedly suffered due to her divorce in the mid-1930s (461), the entrepreneur must have still had a considerable network of colleges around the country, as the articles on Robinson's tour indicate. Given the fact that Robinson's Chicago college with around 40 students (Tucker 217) was housed on the

Poro campus and that Malone was “the nation’s first black philanthropist” and was perceived as “overgenerous” (462), she was probably the primary sponsor of Robinson’s efforts to establish a network of aviation colleges and was perhaps willing to provide space on her various campuses.

In 1939, the *Defender* reported that Robinson had been “selected by the National Youth Administration as aviation consultant for the air mechanics schools now in operation and to be established at various points throughout Illinois.” Robinson’s school at Poro had been reportedly taken over by the NYA, but the aviator was still the institution’s director. It is possible that Malone’s financial trouble hit Robinson as well. The NYA, however, invited Robinson as the only African American to attend the institute of nationally prominent civil instructors held at the Air Corps Technical, Chanute Field, and was furnishing the college with \$250,000 worth of Army and Navy surplus equipment. NYA’s aid came with a caveat, though: “this equipment will be used to give instruction of a purely industrial nature and the commercial aspects of the aviation picture will be stressed rather than the military” (“Col. Robinson Named Aviation Consultant”). Although he could attend the Air Corps institute, thereby entering the military environment he had so long sought for black America and himself, Robinson’s school’s initial emphasis on military aviation was being rolled back by the NYA. At any rate, Robinson was still allowed to teach his students on military equipment.

After 1937, Robinson virtually disappeared from the aviation coverage in the *Courier* and the *Defender*. Between 1938 and 1939, Robinson’s name would only be

mentioned in passing as others were completing the mission to secure a government-funded civilian pilot training program in case of a war and, in turn, to include an African American division in the US Air Corps. But between the summer of 1935 and December 1937, Robinson had been the face of the aviation campaign in both papers. Owing to his military displays in Chicago in the first half of the 1930s and later his missions in Ethiopia, Memphis, and the American South, the black press had been able to double its aviation coverage. Effectively, Robinson's activities – as well as those of William J. Powell – paved the way for aviation news and editorials to become a common feature in black newspapers by 1938.

9. CONCLUSION: BLACK AVIATION AS COMMON OCCURRENCE

The *Courier* noted in one of its editorials on December 3, 1938 that the secretary of war had just set “9,280 planes as the United States Army goal” with the Navy asking for an increase of 3,000 planes. “It is evident,” observed the text, “that the United States aims to have no peer in war planes, as she boldly states her policy as one to defend the entire western hemisphere.” But, the editorial aptly asked, “Are Negroes going to fly those planes as well as pay for them?” (“Will a Negro Ever Fly Them”). Such a question no longer seemed out of the ordinary by 1938 for black aviation had become a common occurrence on the pages of the *Courier* and the *Defender*. Whereas in the 1920s, the technological gap between the African American population and the white population only allowed the black press to complain about the lack of inclusion of black aviators in the US military – as there had been hardly any black pilots – by 1938 the *Courier* could demand that black pilots be taken into account.

By the end of the 1938-39 period when the black press refocused its aviation campaign from imploring the members of the race to study to become pilots to demanding that the government open fully-funded pilot programs with technical and mechanical courses at black colleges, the *Courier* had published at least 122 texts and photographs on aviation, while the *Defender* had tallied around 130 of them. Given the fact that both newspapers were weeklies, the numbers are staggering. But also not surprising any more. Despite having been barred from many aviation schools around the country, the black aviation community had developed its own institutions, a network of

local instructors, and segregated airfields for training. Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles were black aviation hubs with decorated aviation pioneers operating schools and airports as well as organizing regular air events. By early 1939, there were 81 active licensed black pilots in the country – a sevenfold increase compared to 1932. The number of black aviation students waiting to receive their license was probably considerably higher, too.

Most importantly, by 1938, aviation had no longer possessed the image of a white technological field. The hundreds of articles, photographs, as well as dozens of air events, long-distance and local flights, and the historic feats achieved by the pilots discussed in this thesis had turned black aviation into a phenomenon. Having gone from depicting early black aviators as martyrs for a marginal cause to presenting black pilots as men and women who were up-to-date technologically, in terms of mechanics, and were members of a highly-skilled community, the black press had transformed its aviation campaign into an unprecedented educational movement. While detailed information about the flying machines and their equipment may have been seen as oddities in the early stages of the aviation coverage, they were now widely discussed among the black populace which had gradually begun to attend black air meetings and events.

Exploration of the period between 1921 and 1937 presented in this thesis demonstrates that the *Courier* and the *Defender* were heavily invested in black aviation even before 1938. Black aviators had been provided space in black newspapers to promote their achievements, lament about the lack funding as well as about segregation,

and had been often depicted as technically-gifted crusaders for a cause that their community would come to appreciate only in the future. Throughout the years, the black press promoted a goodwill message of aviation, which emphasized technical and mechanical education as well as future job opportunities in aviation if only African Americans could seize them. Ground-breaking aviation pioneers such as Bessie Coleman, William J. Powell, James H. Banning, James Holt Peck, Janet Waterford, and John C. Robinson – along with Willa Brown in the 1938-39 phase – helped journalists formulate the main objectives of black aviation; its core values and elements. The military potential of aviation had always been present in the texts on aviation and in the comments made by black aviators. The military aspect had gradually gained importance as John C. Robinson turned from a leader of a local paramilitary group into a Pan-African war hero. It was also Robinson's touring around the country between 1934 and 1937 that demonstrated to the black community that aviation was the means of transport of the future, but black aviators would play an important role in its development. Finally, long-distance flights – both transcontinental and international – expanded the horizons of the African American community as they demonstrated that aviation allowed crossing geographical and racial boundaries like no other technology before. In educating its readership about the possibilities in aviation as well as the opportunities offered by the field, the black press had adopted and promoted black aviation as an increasingly essential cause for the African American population.

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