

James Bryson Jr.; Touted Tuskegee Pilots

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Friday, May 12, 2006; Page B07

James O. Bryson Jr., 80, a member of the famed Tuskegee Airmen group of African American pilots and a retired civil engineer, died of cerebrovascular hemorrhage at Florida Hospital-Flagler in Palm Coast, Fla. He was a former resident of the District.

Mr. Bryson graduated from flight school at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in June 1945, shortly after the war ended in Europe. He was slated for a combat assignment in the Pacific, but Japan surrendered before he could go overseas.

More than 40 years later, Mr. Bryson published a speech guide for Tuskegee Airmen Inc., an Arlington-based national organization established in 1973 to perpetuate the memory of the combat pilots trained at Tuskegee between 1941 and 1946.

The training program, grudgingly established by the War Department, was partially the result of a lawsuit filed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People on behalf of a Howard University student. More than 900 black Americans trained as pilots, navigators and bombardiers at Tuskegee.

"Despite the burden of discrimination in training and combat, the Tuskegee Airmen achieved an outstanding combat record," Mr. Bryson wrote. "They destroyed or damaged over 400 German aircraft, and over a thousand ground and sea targets. . . . The Tuskegee Airmen lost 66 pilots killed in combat, and 32 more were shot down and became 'prisoners of war.' "

James Osborn Bryson Jr. was born at Fort Benning, Ga., and graduated from Hampton Institute in Virginia. Near the end of his first semester in 1945, he applied to the Army Air Corps for pilot training and was inducted shortly after his 18th birthday. He remained at Tuskegee Army Air Field after the war, where he worked as an airdrome officer and a special missions pilot.

Mr. Bryson returned to Hampton Institute in 1946, where he lettered in football, track and swimming. He received a bachelor's degree in architectural engineering in 1950 and a master's degree in civil engineering from Catholic University in 1958.

In 1954, he joined the National Bureau of Standards as a structural engineer in the building research division, where his duties involved testing structural materials and components.

In 1965, he participated in a program at White Sands Missile Range, N.M., to help determine the effect of sonic booms on residential structures. He held a number of other positions having to do with building safety and retired in 1982 as chief of the Office of Testing Laboratory Evaluation Technology.

After his retirement, he worked as a civil engineering consultant until he moved to Florida in 1993.

Mr. Bryson was the author of numerous technical papers and reports. He received several awards during his engineering career, including the American Society of Civil Engineers' State of the Art award in 1973.

His marriage to Lena Jordan Bryson ended in divorce.

Survivors include his wife of 40 years, Doris Dorsey Bryson of Palm Coast; two stepchildren from his second marriage, Darrell G. Brown of the District and Karen L. Vails of Takoma Park; two grandchildren; and one great-grandson.

"He was a Tuskegee airman first, then a golfer," his wife said. He believed that the Tuskegee program, as he wrote in the speech guide, "was the genesis of a national struggle by blacks for equal opportunity that continues to this day."