

# U.S. Army's first black aviator inducted into OCS Hall of Fame

By PFC PAT HENDRICKS

**T**HE Army's first black aviator, retired Maj. Charles M. Brown, was inducted into the Fort Sill Field Artillery Officers Candidate School (OCS) Hall of Fame in an emotional Feb. 15 ceremony.

Brown, a veteran of 25 years who has seen combat in two wars, was overwhelmed with tears of joy.

"This is the second time I've cried here," Brown said. "The first time was when they pinned on my second lieutenant stripes."

Brown, a Washington, D. C., native who now lives in Silver Springs, Md., was commissioned in 1942 in the same building that houses the OCS Hall of Fame. His photograph will remain in a room reserved for inductees of distinguished service.

Criteria for selection are that a soldier be a graduate of the Field Artillery OCS and be a recipient of the Medal of Honor or Distinguished Service Cross; or attain the rank of colonel while on active or inactive status; or be appointed or elected to an office of national prominence; or render outstanding service in his community, profession or vocation.

As a second lieutenant, Brown was assigned to the 597th Field Artillery, part of the 92nd Division which was just being formed here. The 92d and 93d Divisions were the Army's only black combat divisions in World War II.

After Brown completed his advanced flight training here, he was assigned to the 351st Field Artillery Group at Camp Livingston, La. Because of racial prejudices of the time, Brown said for a while he

wasn't allowed to be anywhere near the planes, let alone to fly one. He said his commander didn't think blacks could learn to fly airplanes.

"I had completed both basic and advanced flight training," he said, "but it wasn't until the group commander gave specific orders that I was allowed to perform my duties."

Brown was not only the first, but the only black to pilot a plane in the Korean War.

"From September 1950 to October 1951, I flew an unarmed plane over combat zones to search out passable roads and bridges for advancing American troops," he said.

"When I retired from the Army Reserve in 1965, I had logged more than 6,900 hours flying time. Eight hundred of those hours were spent in combat zones."

Brown accomplished many firsts and received numerous awards, including five Air Medals, the Korean Presidential Citation and the Meritorious Unit Award.

He was also recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross. However, according to Brown, his commanding officer refused to approve the recommendation, saying that Brown "already had enough medals."

With or without the approval of others, Brown said he always had goals to accomplish.

"I never really thought about being the first this or the first that," Brown said, "I'd just start doing something. And now, 30 years later, I'm just beginning to realize what all this means."

# OCS Hall of Fame to induct two

By Sp5 RONDA SCOTT

Two distinguished retired Army officers will be inducted into Fort Sill's Field Artillery Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame at 10 a.m. Friday.

Retired Maj. Charles M. Brown, the Army's first black aviator, will be honored for his extraordinary military career. Drafted into the Army in 1941, Brown graduated from Fort Sill's Officer Candidate School in October 1942 and became the pioneer for blacks in Army aviation.

**THE VETERAN** of the Army's once segregated 92nd Combat Division was the only black Army pilot in the Korean War from September 1950 to October 1951,

and the first black to earn the Army's Air Medal.

Retired Col. Thomas K. Hobby, from Waukomis, Okla., graduated from the Fort Sill OCS in August 1952. He was awarded the Legion of Merit and Bronze Star during his 28-year field artillery career.

When Col. J.D. Dooley, director of the Field Artillery School's weapons department, inducts the two men Friday, they'll become the 420th and 421st members honored in the Field Artillery OCS Hall of Fame.

During the induction, Hobby will be presented the distinguished "Ancient Order of Saint Barbara" in honor of his long-term, exceptional service to field artillery.

**THE FIELD ARTILLERY OCS** Hall of Fame honors distinguished

graduates from the Field Artillery OCS at Fort Sill.

Criteria for selection into the hall of fame are that a soldier be a graduate of the Field Artillery OCS and be a recipient of the Medal of Honor or Distinguished Service Cross; or attain the rank of colonel while on active or inactive status; or be appointed or elected to an office of national prominence; or render outstanding service in his community, profession or vocation.

The Field Artillery OCS officially opened here in 1941 to meet the increasing demand for artillery officers in World War II. The school closed after the war, but reopened in 1951 to meet a new demand for artillery officers in the Korean War.

## **Major Charles M. Brown (Class 35-42)**

### **I REMEMBER: Combat Missions as the Army's First Black Pilot**

***Baltimore Sun, 27 April 1980 by Charles M. Brown***

When the field artillery asked for volunteers for flight training, I grabbed it, I had been drafted into the Army early in 1941, trained at Fort Bragg, N.C., and transferred to the Officers Candidate School at Fort Sill, Okla. As a second lieutenant I was assigned to the 597th Field Artillery, part of the 92nd Division then being formed. The 92nd and 93rd were the Army's only black combat divisions in World War II.

It was a segregated army in those days and you never forgot it. Although the enlisted men and the junior officers in the division were black, all the field grade and general officers were white. I was one of five blacks in a class of more than 500 at OCS. When they pinned the bars to my shoulders, I stood there and nearly cried. Here I was an officer in the Army of the United States and I couldn't even go everywhere on post. The white officers' club was closed to blacks.

Serving in the 92d was a terrible experience for me in terms of race relations. I couldn't take it indefinitely. I knew sooner or later I'd get into trouble. I said to myself. "If I'm going to remain in the service, I'll have to do something to change things." The artillery at that time was adopting air observation and needed men to fly light aircraft. The 92d was as anxious to get rid of me as I was to go. I was the first black artillery officer to enter flight training school.

We were assigned to the Army Air Corps flight training detachment at Pittsburg, Kan. I got my liaison pilot's wings after 20 hours of flying instruction. Then I went back to Fort Sill for advanced training, another 40 hours. Strangely enough, in flight school there was no discrimination, no segregation. Each man was there learning to do a job. I don't think the aviation people had really expected me. Somehow I slipped through. The other black artillery officers who followed me into flight training were trained at Tuskegee, Ala., at a school set up for black pilots.

After that I was assigned to the 351st Field Artillery Group at Camp Livingston, LA. My superiors there were nonplused when I reported in. They were all dyed-in-the-wool Southerners. They had never heard of a black man flying an airplane before and they couldn't believe I could do it. The headquarters battery commander not only wouldn't let me fly, he didn't even allow me anywhere near the plane.

I finally went to the group commander and he ordered the battery commander to let me perform my duties. It was only then that I could get the aircraft out of its crate and assembled. We were taught assembly at Fort Sill because in many instances the planes arrived at the units dis-assembled.

Later, when we were staging at Camp Gruber, Okla., taking the Army ground forces test, another black pilot was assigned to the group. That gave us three fliers, two black and

one white. The white pilot was George H. Gelston, who later commanded the Maryland National Guard. He died in 1970.

I saw combat in France and Germany. The race problem never eased up, not even in battle. In a sense, blacks were fighting two wars, fighting the Germans and fighting racism. Segregation continued. When we first arrived in the European Theater of Operations, they wouldn't let us fly. They claimed the Germans would pick up the Negro dialect on the radio and know that a black artillery unit was in the area. I don't know what difference that would have made, but that's the story they gave us.

Another thing: The 351st had taken the Army ground forces test and passed with the highest score of any artillery outfit that had gone through Camp Gruber. We had an almost perfect score. But when we reached the ETO we had to take the test all over again ... because we were black. This was just after the Battle of the Bulge. They couldn't believe we had passed with such a high score.

In 1943 the Army circulated among its staff officers in the ETO a four-page document dealing with the leadership of "colored troops." I wasn't supposed to get a copy, but a friendly white officer passed it on to me. He asked whether I wanted to read something shocking. It was the most atrocious thing you'd ever want to see. I've kept the document to this day. Here's a sample of what it had to offer: ". . . colored soldiers are akin to well-meaning but irresponsible children. As such they have to be given the best possible care by their officers and at the same time subjected to right discipline."

We flew the Piper L-4 Grasshopper, a small fabric-covered plane with a 65-horsepower engine, no weapons and no armor. We used to look for downed aircraft, cut out the armor plate with an acetylene torch and put it underneath us for protection. I'd fly 500 feet over the front line, spotting for artillery, helping the gunners adjust their fire. Most of our missions didn't last more than a half hour. We might go up, register on the target, knock it out with the first few rounds and be back at the landing strip, all in 15 minutes. I still remember our first day in combat. A moving train had been picked up. The first three rounds the battalion fired knocked the train off the tracks.

Our unit participated in the Rhine River crossing, and toward the end of the war was assigned to the British 6th Airborne Division, moving with it all the way up to the Baltic. In all I logged about 30 hours of combat flying.

Following VE Day I was temporarily assigned to counterintelligence because of my knowledge of German. At Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania, from which I was graduated, I had taken four years of German. I led the first convoy of displaced persons, about 500 or 600, to be repatriated to Poland. Our arrival in Cracow sparked a celebration, with dancing in the streets. The next day the mayor took his American guests to a camp a short distance away from town. There was a sign reading "Auschwitz" over the gate. I had seen other concentration camps before... but never in my life anything like this. Some of the officers just couldn't go on. It was that bad.

I ended the war as a first lieutenant. That was another fight. Just before we left England for the continent, another black officer and I requested the Inspector General to look at our unit because none of the black lieutenants was being promoted. The IG made its report. The commanding general of the corps responded by ordering silver bars pinned on black second lieutenants within 10 days. What's more, the group was split up and two battery commanders were relieved of their duty.

Like a lot of other American fighting men, I left the Army in 1946, but remained in the reserves. In 1948 I was recalled to active duty and assigned to the 74th Combat Engineers. There was a critical shortage of liaison pilots.

The Korean War broke out in June 1950. Our unit arrived in the fighting zone two months later as Americans were clinging to the Pusan Perimeter. I stayed in Korea 13 months, moving up to within 30 miles of the Chinese border and back down again when Chinese forces attacked. This time I'd fly at 1,500 feet altitude, again in an unarmed plane, surveying the road network ahead of advancing troops. The combat engineers had the responsibility of making sure roads and bridges were passable.

In my first three months there I earned five Air Medals and was recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross for a mission I carried out 25 miles behind enemy lines and under enemy fire. My commanding officer, who was white, refused to sign the recommendation for the DFC. He said I had too many medals already. In the remaining months in Korea, I got no more medals even though I continued flying the same type of mission. I must have flown more than 800 hours in combat.

During those 13 months I was the only black Army aviator in the war. Interestingly the pilot who replaced me was also black. He was the same man who flew with me in the 351st Field Artillery in World War II. It was fantastic seeing him again.

Once more I stayed on in the reserves after completing active duty. The Army was changing. Integration was being implemented though often at a discouragingly slow pace. Promotions for blacks were improving. I made the rank of major in the early Sixties and was given command of the 327th Light Helicopter Company at Fort Meade, a mainly white unit. I was still demanding rights for blacks right up to the time I retired in 1965 with 24 years of service.

Last February, after official recognition as the Army's first black pilot, I went from my home in Silver Spring to Fort Rucker, Ala., the Army aviation center, to be the post's honored guest during Black Heritage and Achievement Week. I saw a lot of changes. There were quite a few blacks in the command structure down there and quite a few in training. I guess the Army now has dozens of black generals. In many respects the Army has learned some valuable lessons about race. but I'm not sure these lessons are always put into practice. The military after all is a reflection of civilian life. What you find in civilian life you find in the military.