

Oscar Holmes: A Place in Naval Aviation

By Robert J. Schneller, Jr.

History doesn't often change, but it does sometimes get amended. The Naval Historical Center recently uncovered information regarding the first African American Naval Aviator, a distinction previously held by Ensign Jesse L. Brown. Research revealed that Ensign Oscar W. Holmes entered the Navy as a qualified pilot and was designated a Naval Aviator upon completion of flight instructor training on 30 June 1943. He was not required to attend the basic pilot training course. Ensign Brown, on the other hand, was the first African American to complete the Navy's basic flight training program for pilot qualification and was designated a Naval Aviator on 21 October 1948.

Oscar Wayman Holmes never set out to break the color barrier when he signed up for Navy flight training during WW II. Nevertheless, he became the first African American to wear Navy wings.

Born on 31 January 1916 in Dunbar, W.V., Holmes received his early education in the segregated school system of nearby Charleston. After graduating from Garnet High School in 1932, he studied chemistry in undergraduate and graduate school, receiving a bachelor of science from West Virginia State College in 1936 and a master's degree in chemistry from Ohio State University three years later.

Ironically, Holmes never liked chemistry. However, after teaching the subject for three years at Claflin College at Orangeburg, S.C., in 1940 he took a job as a chemical analyst for the Erie Lighting Company in Erie, Pa. But what Oscar Holmes really wanted to do was to fly.

With the depression lingering on



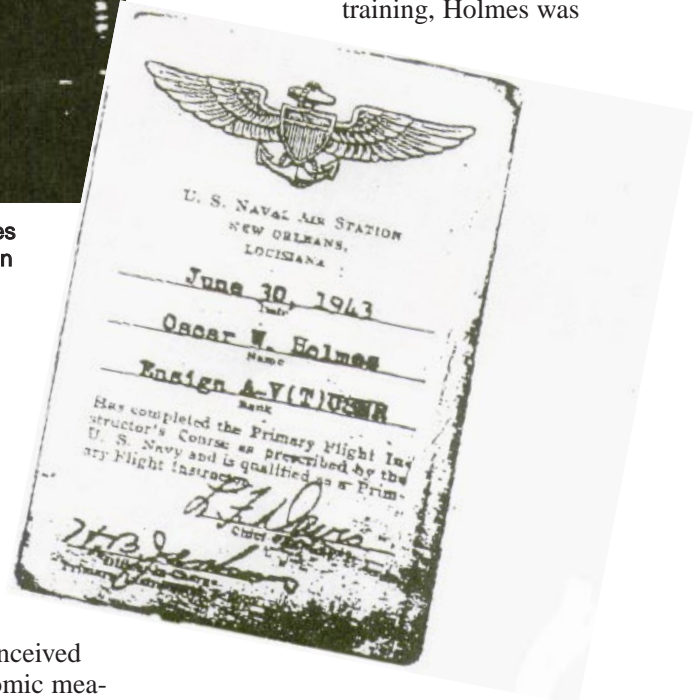
Above, Ens. Oscar W. Holmes after receiving his commission in 1942. Right, Holmes' flight instructor certificate.

at home and war about to explode in Europe, the Franklin Roosevelt administration had created the Civil Pilot Training Program (CPTP) early in 1939. Conceived as both a New Deal economic measure and a war preparedness program, the CPTP established branches at scores of American colleges, universities and small flying schools.

Shortly after moving to Erie, Holmes saw an announcement in the local newspaper that the CPTP was establishing a branch at a nearby airport and would hold a competitive exam for flight training scholarships. Holmes won a scholarship, took the ground course, received primary flight training and got his private pilot's license. In

1941, he completed secondary civilian pilot training at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pa.

Later that year, Holmes spotted an announcement at an Erie post office stating that the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) was seeking applicants with a college degree and pilot's license to train as air traffic controllers. Holmes applied and was accepted by telegram. After completing the training, Holmes was



assigned to the New York airway traffic control center as an assistant controller, thus becoming the CAA's first African American air traffic controller.

Soon after Holmes started his new job, the CAA had him fill out a questionnaire that included a question on race. Holmes indicated that he was "Negro." Until then, his superiors had thought he was white. In spring 1942 his supervisor recommended him for promotion; regional headquarters returned the recom-

mentation with the notation, “Do nothing on this.”

In August 1942, Holmes saw an announcement in the *New York Daily News* that the Navy was offering reserve commissions to men with a pilot’s license and 125 hours of flying time to train as flight instructors or aircraft delivery pilots. Frustrated at not being promoted in the CAA, Holmes sent the Navy a letter of inquiry stating that he met all the other requirements, but had amassed only 90 hours of flying time. Without mentioning the 35-hour shortfall, the Navy replied that it had received his “preliminary application” and told him to report to the Manhattan aviation cadet selection office in New York City for an interview and a physical examination. Holmes sailed through and was offered a commission. He was sworn in on 28 September 1942 as an ensign, A-V (P)—a designation assigned to commissioned and warrant officers appointed in a probationary status. His reserve commission dated from 14 September.

The Navy still did not know that Holmes was black. African Americans were only accepted in the messman’s branch until June 1942 when the Navy opened a few other enlisted ratings to them. There were still no plans for black officers, and the Navy would not knowingly commission an African American until March 1944. Holmes knew about the Navy’s racial policy “but they didn’t ask me and I didn’t tell them—and I didn’t give them any false information. Evidently, they were in a rush to get people in there,” he added. Indeed, the Navy found itself short of everything in 1942, particularly pilots.

The Navy assigned Holmes to Colgate University, Hamilton, N.Y., in the CAA-WTS Program (Civil Aeronautics Administration-War Training Service Program), a military adaptation of the Civil Pilot Training Program. Soon after Holmes’s arrival, the cadet selection office asked him and the other trainees for a birth certificate. Holmes submitted a copy, which

clearly indicated the race of his parents. Only then did the Navy realize that it had inadvertently commissioned an African American.

After completing CAA-WTS training, Holmes went through Navy flight training at Naval Air Station (NAS), Corpus Christi, Texas, and NAS Glenview, Ill. He then went to New Orleans, where he completed flight instructor training. On 30



In 1952 Holmes was the assistant chief air traffic controller at La Guardia Airport in New York.

June 1943, the Navy designated Ensign Holmes a Naval Aviator (Heavier-than-Air). His classification assigned by the Bureau of Personnel was A-V (T), indicating he was a commissioned aviation officer holding a designation as a Naval Aviator, qualified for special types of flying duty only.

While his classmates got jobs as flight instructors, Holmes was sent back to Manhattan to interview aviation cadet applicants. “I don’t think they wanted old Oscar Holmes to be teaching those white boys [to fly],” he said.

In fall 1943, when the Navy issued a message promoting all ensigns with dates of rank of 1 October or earlier to lieutenant (jg), Holmes did not advance with the others. In a 1996 interview, Holmes recalled that before he could be promoted, he had to pass a flight check at Floyd Bennett Field, N.Y. Holmes did so and became a lieutenant (jg) on 29 November 1943.

Within several months Holmes became bored with interviewing avi-

ation candidates, so he asked for duty as a flight instructor or an aircraft delivery pilot. In April 1944, he was assigned to NAS Dallas, Texas, where he delivered Consolidated SNJ *Texan* trainers to bases around the country.

In June, Holmes was reassigned to the Naval Air Transport Service’s Air Ferry Squadron 3, Terminal Island, Calif. For the rest of the war, he flew SB2C *Helldivers*, TBF *Avengers*, F6F *Hellcats*, F4U *Corsairs* and many other single-engine Navy aircraft from factories to bases throughout the United States. He eventually became a lead pilot, responsible for up to six airplanes flying together to the same base.

Although other African American officers and enlisted men trained and served in segregated facilities during WW II, Holmes ate, slept and served beside white officers. He always remained low key about his race. “The Navy knew I was black, and I knew I was black, but not many other people knew it,” Holmes said. “I certainly had no reason to [advertise it], particularly

since all of our routes were through the deep South.” The Navy never made an issue of Holmes’s race, either.

In January 1946, Holmes returned to his old job as an air traffic controller and finally received a promotion. The Navy released him from active duty the next month. The staff at the Officers Separation Center in Philadelphia, Pa., assumed that Holmes was white and listed him as such on his discharge papers. He remained with the Federal Aviation Administration (the CAA’s successor) until his retirement in 1973.

Holmes never considered himself a pioneer or a champion of racial justice. He simply wanted a niche in aviation, so he made one for himself. In doing so, he became the CAA’s first African American air traffic controller and the first African American Naval Aviator. ✪

Dr. Schneller is a historian in the Contemporary History Branch of the Naval Historical Center. Photos courtesy National Air & Space Museum.