Freedom and Flight

Alumni and Tuskegee Airmen Art Hicks Advocates for Civil Rights and Education

By Stacia Momburg

The flight path of Art Hicks's life has been long and scenic, taking him through the turbulence of racism and prejudice to literally historic heights as one of the celebrated Tuskegee Airmen.

Hicks was born on November 2, 1922, in Sparta, Georgia. He grew up "among the capes, hoods and cross burnings of the Ku Klux Klan; among lynchings and daily violence," he said. "No cause made me to always question authority." Hicks graduated from high school two years later, but because of his strained financial state, "it was impossible to hope that any of my family would go on to college," he said, so he worked odd jobs for money.

When Hicks was 15, his mother died in childbirth, leaving his father - a chauffeur - as the sole provider for a family of seven. Hicks worked on Stearman PT-17 aircraft. And as one of the Tuskegee Airmen - the first black military aviators in the U.S. armed forces - he made his way into the history books.

"At that time, Hicks said, "fighting in the war wasn't terrifying. Being at home was." Still, he continued to be vocal about prejudice as he made his way through World War II. Hicks learned early on from his mother, though, not to sit idly by. "She was vocal about segregation and inequality," he said, "and that caused me to always question authority."

When Hicks was 8, he watched as two white men shot and killed a 19-year-old neighborhood friend. "It was a horrifying event for the youngster - but not out of the ordinary for the time and place," he said. "I was born in 1922 in Sparta, Georgia, and grew up 'among the capes, hoods and cross burnings of the Ku Klux Klan; among lynchings and daily violence',' he said. "No cause made me to always question authority.'"

He learned to overcome terror with tenacity and a drive to always work for more. And along the way, he discovered his true love - flight. "There's a feeling of abandon and freedom that comes with flying," Hicks said. "You can escape everything. I miss snap rolls, those were my favorites:' Hicks said, smiling.

A Means to a Better Life

Hicks attended Tuskegee Institute, where he learned to fly. He received his pilot's license in 1942 and graduated from high school two years later, but because of his strained financial state, "it was impossible to hope that any of my family would go on to college," he said, so he worked odd jobs for money.

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Meanwhile, he married his wife, Edith, and started a family. And he remained in the Air Force through the war - continuing to encounter racism as President Harry Truman worked to desegregate the military.

"We had to fight against the wind," Hicks said. "This was a new world, one that we had to face. It was a terrorizing world." Hicks learned early on from his mother, though, not to sit idly by. "She was vocal about segregation and inequality," he said, "and that caused me to always question authority."

Through 90 years - as a child in the segregated South, during World War II, through a college education that included a stop at Cal Poly, and throughout an extensive career working on and flying planes, he did what he could to earn college credits. "I took classes at the residential education centers on base," he said. And between stints in the military - after his time in Tuskegee, he later enlisted in the Air Force - he enrolled at the University of Dayton for a short time.

He taught for 13 years at Cabrillo. And during that time, he came to Cal Poly, earning his master's degree in education (with concentration in supervision) in 1975.

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He left the service in 1971 and began teaching black studies courses at Cabrillo High School in Lompoc. He also taught Racism in Social Studies.

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"I took upper division classes two days a week to further my classroom skills and get oriented in management," he said. "Getting my degree at Cal Poly was like every choice I made - a means to a better life. I needed to succeed as a student so that I could be successful as a teacher."

Now retired from education and living in Lompoc with his wife, Hicks has refocused on his first love: flight. He works with the Lompoc Pilot Association to bring the love of flying to young people who don't have the financial means or opportunity to fly.

"I want to give them the kind of opportunity that was given to me," he said, "to experience the feeling that comes with flying.'"