**The Cunningham Story**

**Chapter 1: Genesis**

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The Cunningham Story actually began before World War II. And the Story begins with the Davidson Family, of Kokomo, Indiana. You see, the two daughters in the Davidson family both married Tuskegee Airmen. Daisy Davidson married John McClure, also of Kokomo, just after his completion of flight training in Tuskegee, Alabama. Winifred Davidson married John O. Cunningham, also a Tuskegee trained pilot, just after WW II was over.

But even before the two sisters married there was aviation in and around Kokomo. Barnstorming had become an attraction in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Flight schools grew everywhere. Because there was segregation in this country, Black flight schools had to develop to provide flight training for Black people. One of the pilots lived in Kokomo and flew around the area.  His name was Lewis Jackson [photo below]. Lewis owned or built his own airplane, and he would fly around the area. This was always a draw to the local Black population.

On one occasion Winifred Davidson was attending one of Lewis Jackson’s flying exhibitions. After Lewis had landed his airplane, he had left the airplane and was crossing a fence when the fence caught and tore the stockings that Winfred was wearing. Lewis felt so bad about the incident that he offered to take Winifred up in his airplane. Winifred agreed and was introduced to flight for the first time.

I mention Lewis Jackson because he became director of training at the Army Air Force 66th Flight Training Detachment, where, under his guidance, three groups of Tuskegee Airmen ranked first among the 22 schools in the Southeast Army Air Corps Training Command. Prior to the war, Lewis joined with Cornelius Coffey and formed the Cornelius Coffey and Jackson Flying School in Chicago. Some time after the war, Lewis became a PHD and later became President of Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio near Xenia, Ohio. The local airport in Xenia has been named after him. It is now named the Green County - Dr. Lewis Jackson Regional Airport.

**Chapter 2: John and Daisy McClure**

Prior to Daisy marrying John McClure, she had to travel from Kokomo to Tuskegee. Young women did not travel alone, especially young women of color, and into the South. So her sister, Winifred, traveled with her. During their stay in Tuskegee, before the wedding, they would look out of the room they were staying in near the Tuskegee Campus and see George Washington Carver walking up and down the street.

John McClure graduated with Class 42-G, and was designated as a fighter pilot. This was the 4th class to graduate Black pilots, in which all the graduates were placed into the newly forming 99th Fighter Squadron. Several classes later, after the 99th got 33 pilots together, they were ready to do their part in the war effort. The pilots were issued P-40 Warhawks to fly their combat missions. It was the exploits of the 99th in North Africa and Sicily that gave the notoriety back home for the US Government to form the 100th, 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons made up of all Black pilots. The four fighter squadrons formed the 332nd Fighter Group. As they say, the rest is history!

Yet, somewhere along the journey of the 99th, John McClure crashed his P-40. It was said he was the first to survive a P-40 crash. All previous P-40 pilots that crashed in their planes had died. John McClure nearly died as well. He had injuries that kept him from flying later combat missions, injuries that eventually took his life. After the war was over, he and Daisy moved with the 99th to Columbus, Ohio. Some time after that he went into surgery to correct a minor problem that had affected him from the crash. He went into shock and never recovered from it. This was in the 1950’s.

**Chapter 3: The Cunningham Legacy**

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For the last three generations this branch of the Cunningham family has been involved in the military. First, was John O. Cunningham, who leads by being a veteran of World War II and the Korean War, followed by son, David, who was a Viet Nam War veteran. And following her dad and grandfather, David’s daughter, Joi, carried on this legacy in the Middle East wars, partly in Iraq and partly in Afghanistan.

For John, the wars meant a fight for the freedom for all Americans as well as a change for the betterment of the African Americans at home. For David, the war meant supporting the Nation and the war effort during one of the most turbulent times in American history. That time was during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Both John and David became military men under the times of the draft to fill the military needs of the country. Joi came along during a time when this country came under attack and our military was all filled with volunteers.

**Chapter 4: John O. Cunningham**

The Cunningham Legacy all began when John O. Cunningham was drafted into the Army in 1941. As an African American, in a segregated country and a segregated military, John came in as an enlisted man and soon grew to be a Surveyor in the Army. Having one year of college gave him an advantage when the need for pilots came up in his area. These pilots were a different kind than the famous Red Tail fighter pilots being trained in Tuskegee, Alabama.

John’s assignment was in Michigan. There was a need in the US Army for Liaison, Forward Observation pilots. These pilots would have the job of flying out over different areas and locating the enemy and directing artillery cannon fire toward them. You see, artillery by itself was ineffective. There was always the need for ‘eyes’ to find the enemy, either from the ground or by air, and for the cannon fire to be directed upon them. John was trained to locate the enemy and to direct the artillery fire from the air.

From August to November, 1942, John was transferred to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, to attend Officer Candidate School (OCS). From August to November, 1943, John attended Basic Flight training in Tuskegee, Alabama. This gives him the official title of an Original Tuskegee Airman. He returned to spend 2 months in Field Artillery School in Fort Sill, before going to combat against the Japanese in the South Pacific. He was assigned to the 93rd Infantry Division (segregated), 594th Field Artillery Battalion (also segregated). It was here where he was awarded the Air Medal in1945 for his part in the liberation of the Southern Philippine Islands. He also received the Good Conduct Medal, WW II Victory Medal as well as a Philippine Island Presidential Unit Citation. All of this was done within a segregated military.

The short story has John exiting the Army in December, 1945. He soon returned to the Army as an enlisted man (The Army no longer had the need for pilots and officers). By this time he was married and opted to bring his bride to Occupied Japan with him, where his son, David, was born. In 1951, the Korean War flared up and John was once again called up to be an officer and pilot to assist the war effort in Korea. The Korean War was the first war where the military was not segregated. Truman’s presidential order 9981 (1948), had declared the military as integrated.

After the war in Korea was over, John learned to fly helicopters and was moved to places such as North Carolina, Germany and Kansas. Lastly, he was ordered to the Air National Guard in Northern Ohio, where he spent his final six years in the military. As Air Advisor, John continued to fly fixed wing aircraft, helicopters, instructed and gave check rides to pilots in the Air National Guard. John O. Cunningham retired from the Army Reserves as a Major in 1962. Unfortunately, John died of heart failure in May of 1969.

Note: All of the above information came from his military records and can be confirmed.

**Chapter 5: David O. Cunningham**

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Born to John O. Cunningham and Winifred G. Davidson Cunningham, David came into this world in Yokohama, Japan, in 1949. The son of a WW II and Korean War veteran, David spent his early years traveling with his parents until they settled in Southern Ohio, where he finished high school in 1968. A short stint in college, David found this was not for him. While he was out of college, his father passed away. It was during this time David found out he was a prime candidate for the draft the military had to supply the needs for the war in Viet Nam.

When David turned 18 the year before his high school graduation, he knew he had to take the Selective Service exam. He must have scored well because the US Navy offered to train him in whatever he wanted to do. While in Recruit Training boot camp, David selected Avionics as his path. He opted for the advanced training which gave him an extra three years in the Navy. That gave him a total of seven years with the US Navy. It was worth it for him.

After completing Basic and Advanced Avionics training, David learned a specific aircraft computer system that would take him aboard the US aircraft carrier, USS Midway (CV-41). During the two and a half years aboard this aircraft carrier, David spent eleven months (March, 1972 thru February, 1973) off the coast of Viet Nam, supporting the war effort there. Afterwards, he home ported in Yokosuka, Japan, with the carrier in the fall of 1973. David was able to bring his new bride, Dora, with him where she spent a year in Japan with him.

After completing seven years in the Navy, David chose to separate and use his good conduct separation to find employment in Silicon Valley (San Jose), where he has lived ever since. David and Dora raised a daughter, Joi, and a son, John. Both children are doing very well in their lives. David worked in Silicon Valley for 25 years before settling into a government position with the FAA. In all, David has used his military avionics training for 48 years.

David joined the Bay Area Black Pilots Association in 1992, where he gained the support of other members to pursue his lifelong goal of becoming a pilot. This goal he accomplished by gaining his pilot’s license in October, 2003. David discovered this accomplishment was within a few days of exactly 60 years after his father completed his Basic Flight Training in Tuskegee, Alabama. You see, David decided to go to Tuskegee to complete his Private Pilot Check Ride. David passed his check ride!

Approximately 15 years ago, David joined the local Bay Area Chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. At that time their name was the San Francisco Bay Area Chapter. For the last 10 years, David has supported the goals of the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. (TAI), as the local San Francisco Bay Area’s William “Bill” Campbell Chapter President. Since his dad had been one of the Original Tuskegee Airmen, it has been an enjoyable and rewarding task. TAI has two goals: First, to remember what the Tuskegee Airmen have done for this country. That is, to fight against this country’s enemies, including the racism that has divided this nation in the past; Second, to inspire youth, especially the at-risk, minority youth, to pursue aviation careers. The Bill Campbell Chapter hosts an annual Summer Flight Academy for two weeks, where selected youths receive the Tuskegee Airmen Story, a basic flight ground school and will then receive actual flight training from certified flight instructors. This is a free service to the students. But the number of students selected is limited by the amount of money available for the flight training.

**Chapter 6: Join K. Cunningham- Spencer**

Joi K. Cunningham was born into a peaceful and free life located in the heart of Silicon Valley. She grew into a fine young lady, attended local schools and made many friends. After taking a Black College Tour into the South, she chose to attend Tuskegee University. Little did her family know her interest in the Air Force ROTC program that the University had.

Joi spent her first two years at Tuskegee in the AFROTC program. Unfortunately for the Air Force, she passed the Navy test for the Officer’s Candidate School (OCS). After completing her 4-year program in Tuskegee, Joi went into Navy OCS and NFO training. In the NFO program she would pursue and pass the requirements to go on to become an Aviation Navigator, or, as it was called, Naval Flight Officer School (NFO). She then went to Jacksonville, Fla., Hawaii for more training and would go on to the Middle East.

After completing her tour to the Middle East, and returning to her duty station in Hawaii, Joi witnessed the upcoming end-of-life of the P-3 Orion aircraft she was trained on. She needed to find a new direction within the Navy. It was about that time she met and fell in love with her husband, Kenny Spencer, a former Navy man himself. Part of her attraction to him was the fact that he was also a motor cyclist as she also was.

Joi earned a chance to go on to the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, CA, where she earned her Master’s degree. From there she moved into her new role in the Naval Reserves and relocated to San Antonio, Texas. She and her family have bought a home there and plan to stay there for a very long time. Joi is still an active Naval Reservist.

*Source: David Cunningham*