

Neal Loving in Context

African-American Aviation Pioneers

By Mark Martel

Before Neal Loving a few African-American aviators had pioneered against the odds. In 1911 [Charles Wesley Peters](#) of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania became the first recorded black to build and fly his own powered airplane—just three years after the first public demonstrations of powered flight by the Wright brothers had created widespread publicity. Peters had already flown a glider in 1906. A few years later during World War I, [Eugene Jacques Bullard](#) had to go to France to become the first black combat pilot, where he earned the Legion of Honor, France's highest prize. In 1921 [Bessie Coleman](#) left her job as a Chicago manicurist to also travel to France in order to learn to fly. Licensed as the first black woman pilot, she returned to the U.S. to perform as a barnstormer.

Despite these examples, black aviators were rare overall and to this day remain underrepresented. In 2009 the Washington Post reported, "Of the 14,130 Air Force pilots, 270—or 1.9 percent—identified themselves as black. The percentage is similar for commercial pilots."

The [Organization of Black Airline Pilots](#) noted, "In 1976, approximately 80 black pilots were employed by the nation's major and commuter passenger airlines and freight carriers. By 1986 that number had risen to nearly 400, and today [2009] the total is estimated to be 674... impressive on the surface, one must realize that there is a total of over 71,000 pilots working for these airlines."

Neal Loving's autobiography describes the struggles of Detroit blacks in the 1930s trying to gain access to aircraft and flight instruction. He and partner Earsly Taylor would open the first African-American flight school in 1946.

Loving achieved his engineering degree in the face of strong prejudice. Fellow black engineer at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and longtime friend Dr. Clark Beck described the hurdles he faced in the same time and part of the country. At Purdue University, the dean of engineering told Beck "your people can *not* be engineers" and "if you enroll you will not graduate." Accepted at the University of Cincinnati, Beck was largely ignored and made to feel invisible. Financial hardships compounded the difficulties of college. He did not eat properly or dress sufficiently for the winter weather, leading to illness and lifelong health problems.

A decade later at Yale University, 80% of black freshmen were dropping out of the engineering program. By 1974 the [Society of Black Engineers](#) formed to encourage education and professional development, growing to a membership of 33,000.

African-Americans remain underrepresented in higher education, particularly for the sciences and technology. The [Journal of Blacks in Higher Education](#) reports that in 2004 that zero Ph.D.s were awarded to blacks in many engineering fields nationwide. Overall, black women now earn two-thirds of all graduate degrees attained by blacks.

In light of all this, Neal Loving's accomplishments as an aircraft pilot, designer, builder and engineer were that much more remarkable.