

Base leader's father was one of the original Tuskegee Airmen

By Jannette Jauregui
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PHOTO BY JUAN CARLO, VENTURA COUNTY STAR // BUY THIS PHOTO
Capt. William DeBow reviews a video before showing it to his troops as part of Black History Month. He is the son of Lt. Col. Charles H. DeBow Jr., who was a member of the first graduating class of five Tuskegee Airmen. His father flew combat missions during World War II.

At 18, William DeBow knew little about his father's service as a fighter pilot during World War II. The significance of his role as one of the Tuskegee Airmen took years to surface.

But what DeBow has known from a young age is what his father stood for. Integrity and perseverance, he says, were always high priorities.

So when DeBow graduated from Butler University in Indianapolis 30 years after his father got his master's degree on the same campus, his next step was inevitably enlistment.

Now, a Navy captain and commander of the Port Hueneme Division, Naval Surface Warfare Center, the younger DeBow won't share his story without making clear his father's role in its formation. It is a story, he says, that begins at Butler.

Indianapolis in the 1950s was a step ahead of much of the rest of the country, especially where Butler University was concerned.

Founded in 1855 by attorney and abolitionist Ovid Butler, the university welcomed diversity. While other academic institutions enforced segregation, Butler opened its doors to men and women of all colors.

DeBow thinks that if his father, Charles H. DeBow Jr., had grown up in almost any other state, his academic career would have arguably been significantly different. The pride in being an African American would have perhaps been more thoroughly challenged. The hope and faith he had as a patriot may have been a little harder to come by.

But the young World War II veteran embraced the opportunities Butler offered. There, he received one of his many advanced degrees.

Charles DeBow attended a segregated high school in the late 1930s. Despite the challenges of an intolerant society, DeBow says his father had immense pride in his American heritage and in the opportunities he had to further his education.

"There was always an emphasis on education," DeBow said. "He pushed himself and his family a great deal intellectually."

When tensions were mounting between the United States and Japan, and as the pressure of joining the war in Europe grew, Charles DeBow wanted to do his part. For him, that meant becoming a pilot, so he went to the Hampton Institute in Virginia to take flying lessons.

Before 1940, African Americans were not permitted to fly for any U.S. military branch. Civil rights movements led to the formation of an African American flight squadron based out of Tuskegee, Ala.

He eagerly joined the first class of 13 to begin training at Tuskegee in early 1942.

Of the 13 who started the training, DeBow's father was one of the five who graduated. He became a pilot with the 99th Fighter Squadron.

"He was a patriot," DeBow said. "He was excited about making a positive contribution."



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Captain William DeBow's father, Lt. Col. Charles H. DeBow Jr. (bottom right) flew 52 combat missions during World War II.



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In March 1942, Life magazine published an article about the newly incorporated Tuskegee Airmen. For 10 cents, readers could buy the issue that included photos of the elder DeBow.

A sign of the times, the article, in part, read: "White instructors of the 99th agree that their Negro charges, by virtue of exceptional eyesight, courage and coordination, will prove crack combat pilots. Upon their performance and promise hang the hope of additional thousands of aspiring Negro fliers throughout the land."



PHOTO BY JUAN CARLOS VENTURA COUNTY STAR
 Capt. William DeBow is the son of Lt. Col. Charles H. DeBow Jr., a member of the first graduating class of five Tuskegee Airmen. DeBow holds a copy of Life Magazine from March 23, 1942, that has a story about the Tuskegee Airmen. His father flew combat missions during World War II.

The 99th was deployed overseas to fight in the European theater. After 52 missions aboard a P-51 Mustang, Charles DeBow was injured and lost his flight status. When he returned home, and after the war ended, the young lieutenant colonel married and continued his education and eventually worked as a high school teacher and university professor in Indiana.

In 1954, he bought a house two blocks from Butler. William DeBow was born in 1960.

"At the time, we were the only African American family in the neighborhood," William DeBow said. "Living there, being that close to Butler, had a huge influence on me growing up."

Though the values instilled in him from his time in the military were evident, he says his father never spoke of his time in the war.

"He was a man who valued independent initiative, integrity and perseverance," DeBow said. "He understood the importance of drive and combining it with intellect. Those were all qualities he gained from the military and his own upbringing. And he would never boast. I didn't understand the significance of what he did in Tuskegee until he encouraged me to pursue an ROTC scholarship."

At the time, William DeBow was more interested in pursuing a degree and graduated from Butler with honors in 1986. In April of the same year, his father passed away.

He joined the Navy in 1987 and soon after was commissioned as an officer. After additional training in Coronado, he began assignments aboard several ships including the USS Texas, the USS Vandegrift and the USS Antietam. During that time, he also got a master's degree from the Naval Postgraduate School. In 2002, he deployed for active duty as executive officer aboard the USS Princeton in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Since then, his career in the Navy has expanded to include assignments throughout Southern California. He also continued to follow in his father's footsteps in academia, obtaining a second master's degree from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces at National Defense University, graduating with distinction. After more than 24 years of active duty, he looks back on his father's influence with pride.

"I attribute my success to my parents," he said. "To my father for encouraging me to pursue my dreams. His advice, the lessons he'd pass along, were more than just words. They were a way of life."

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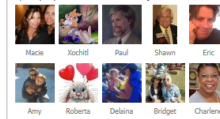
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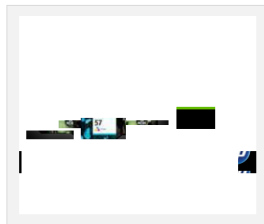
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