

Oscar Holmes: He Broke Three Color Barriers, but Few Knew

(By: Terry Kraus, FAA Historian, with thanks to Tuskegee Airmen and retired FAA executive Bill Broadwater for information and photos)



When we read about the many accomplishments of African Americans at FAA, we rarely hear the name Oscar Wayman Holmes. Holmes, who never really thought of himself as a pioneer, actually broke three color barriers, becoming the first African American air traffic controller in 1941 and a year later becoming the first commissioned Black officer in the U.S. Navy and the first Black Navy pilot.

Holmes never set out to break down racial barriers – he just wanted to fly. Born on January 31, 1916, in Dunbar, West Virginia, Holmes attended a segregated school in nearby Charleston. Upon graduating from Garnet High School in 1932, he entered West Virginia State College, a land-grant institution for Black citizens of segregated West Virginia. He earned a B.S. in chemistry in 1936.

With a graduate assistantship funded by the National Youth Administration, Holmes earned a M.S. in chemistry from Ohio State University three years later. (The National Youth Administration, established in 1935, provided scholarships and grants to high school, college, and graduate students.) A superb student, Holmes graduate research became the basis for a coauthored article in the *Journal of the American Chemical Society* – a rare feat for a master’s student. Although he later claimed to hate chemistry, Holmes taught the subject for three years at Claflin College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Tired of the low paying teaching job, he subsequently found a part-time position as a water and fuel analyst for a power company in Erie, Pennsylvania.

While in Erie, Holmes entered the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP). Established in 1939 by the federal government, the CPTP introduced young Americans to aviation. Holmes successfully completed the program and earned his private pilot’s certificate. Shortly thereafter, he spotted a civil service job announcement at the Erie post office that put him on the path to a new career. The Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) was looking for air traffic controller applicants with a college degree and a private pilot’s license.

In 1941, once he completed his training, the CAA offered Holmes a position as an assistant controller at the New York airway traffic control center with an annual salary of \$1,800 per year. After he accepted the position, the CAA required Holmes to fill out a questionnaire that included a question on race. He excelled as a controller and in the spring of 1942 the center’s chief controller, Robert L. Johnston, told Holmes that he had recommended him for promotion. The promotion, however, never came through. According to Holmes, for 15 years he believed that Johnston had lied to him. Not until 1957 did he learn that someone at the regional headquarters, not Johnston, had stopped the promotion. The paperwork had been returned to the center with a notation, “Do nothing on this.”



Oscar Holmes (left foreground) at work at the New York airway traffic center, 1942

Frustrated by his lack of promotion, Holmes applied to the U.S. Navy in 1942. The Navy was offering commissions to men who had pilots' licenses and 100 hours of flying time to train as flight instructors and ferry pilots. Although he did not have the requisite flying time, Holmes applied and soon had an ensign's commission. The Navy did not know it had commissioned an African American because of Holmes' light complexion. (The Navy did not knowingly

commission a Black officer until March 1944.) At Colgate University, where the Navy had enrolled Holmes in the War Training Service Program, newly commissioned officers had to submit, among other things, a birth certificate. At this point, Holmes later explained, they realized "they now had commissioned a Negro in their Navy . . . They didn't know what to do about it, and I suppose rather than make a fuss . . . and try to get rid of me they said, 'Oh, we've got him now, we'll just let him stay.'"

Finishing flight instructor training at the New Orleans Naval Air Station, Holmes became the first Black flying officer. The Navy assigned him first to sit on the Aviation Cadet Selection Board and then in 1944 as a ferry pilot for the Naval Air Transport Service, Air Ferry Squadron III. The Navy treated Holmes as any other officer, which was unique at the time since the military was segregated. Black sailors served in the "black" Navy, and Black aviators in the Army Air Corps served in segregated units and were not allowed in officers' clubs. As Holmes explained, "The Navy knew I was black, and I knew I was black, but not many other people knew it."

After the war, Holmes returned to his job at the CAA's New York airway traffic center, finally receiving his promotion as well as a second promotion six months later. In 1950 he became a senior controller. While at his job in New York, Holmes attended Brooklyn Law School as a part-time student. He graduated with a bachelor of laws (LL.B.) degree in 1954. He earned a master of laws (LL.M.) the following year. Admitted to the New York State bar, he opened a part-time law practice. He gave up his practice when he accepted a position at the Federal Aviation Agency's headquarters in June 1959. There he advanced his career and retired as a GS15 hearing officer in 1973.

Oscar Holmes never set out to be pioneer. He said he did not "particularly relish becoming the first of anything." He merely wanted to find a career that let him enjoy his passion – aviation.