



### **Hubert Julian and the Five Black Birds**

Herbert Fauntleroy Julian was a very colorful individual born in 1897 in Port of Spain, Trinidad. His life was filled with exciting adventures. Julian was born into a middle class family and educated in England. After his education in England, he moved to Canada. Julian always demonstrated extraordinary resourcefulness and personality. He attempted feats that an ordinary person would not attempt. He flew airplanes when very few African Americans were flying and usually was the star of any show where he appeared. He made parachute jumps in dangerous situations and attempted airplane feats that had not been attempted before. In the Black community, he was known as the, "Black Eagle," and he used the term Col. Julian from a title that was bestowed upon him by the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie in 1934 when referring to himself. During the days of Adolph Hitler in Germany, he challenged Herman Goering, the Commander of the German Luftwaffe, to a duel over the English Channel. Although Julian was a pilot, he originally received his notoriety from making parachute jumps and later on from his flying stunts. In his later years, he became an arms dealer. Although there were other African American aviators during his time, Julian was able to keep himself in the news and received extensive coverage for most of the adventures he participated in. Several African Americans who were flying during the same period as Julian did not receive the same level of publicity. His presence and personality always commanded attention.

An African American who perhaps accomplished an equal if not greater amount of success as Julian was Willie "Suicide" Jones. He performed as a wing walker and parachute jumper. Jones held the record for a delayed parachute drop on March 2, 1939; at Chicago's Municipal Airport he jumped from 24,468 feet before opening his parachute just 800 ft. above the ground. It is suspected that he received his nick name "Suicide" from a jump that he made in Arkansas where he experimented in a test of Coast Guard lights that blinded him during the jump and he had to land on the ground by instinct. Jones participated in air shows from 1920 until the 1950's; an example of one of the shows he participated in was advertised in Illinois in the 1930's. The poster advertising the air show read, "Mammoth Air show, Sunday, Aug. 28, 12:30 P. M. Special Feature, Willie 'Suicide' Jones." This poster advertised that Jones on that day would attempt to break the world record for a delayed parachute jump. Although Julian, like "Suicide," did make parachute jumps, there does not appear to be any records of him having accomplished any particular feat that would merit any official record like Jones had accomplished. His hallmark was that he seemed to be ubiquitous regardless of the associated issue. He became involved with the Aeronautical Department of the UNIA, which was an organization founded by Marcus Garvey's black movement. His greatest claim to fame is perhaps the fact that he transcended both the pre- and post-Charles Lindbergh eras, took on all challengers and defied skeptics like Lindbergh who said...aviation is a tool especially shaped for western hands... one of these possessions, which permit the white race to live at all in a pressing sea of yellow, Black and Brown.

During the 1930's Julian was very active in aviation which prompted the Emperor of Ethiopia to send an emissary to Julian who was 33 years old at the time to come to his country and put on an aerial display



with a French airplane that he had purchased for the occasion. After his arrival Julian did a parachute jump and landed almost at the feet of the Emperor who was very much impressed with his jumping skills to the point that he bestowed citizenship on Julian with the rank of Colonel and awarded him a medal. His success and good luck however was short lived. Within three months he had crashed the Emperor's favorite airplane and was promptly dismissed from the Country. When Julian came back to the United States, he came out to California and was shown standing on the side on an advertisement Board which announced an air show that was coming to Los Angeles.

During the great southern migration, large numbers of African Americans came west to California looking for a new start. Many of these immigrants came to the southern California City of Los Angeles to begin their new start. Many of these individuals were multi-talented individuals with a variety of skills that could promote their economic interest. The largest settlement was along Central Avenue, which was an area where they were allowed to live and conduct businesses. African American talent and culture was centered along Central Avenue. During this time period, they were making their mark in the city in literature, music, art and aviation. Born in Tulsa Oklahoma in 1906, Marie Dickerson Coker moved to Los Angeles to be a performer. During one of her performances in a night club, she met two African American flyers who promised to take her for a ride. After her flight, she was hooked on aviation and soon became a pilot. She later joined a group of flyers who called themselves the, "Five Black Birds," and performed at air shows. During the air shows, they performed "daredevil stunts," wing walking and parachute jumps to the excitement of the crowds in attendance.

Another very talented individual who lived in the Los Angeles area during this time period was William J. Powell, who was born in Henderson, Kentucky in 1899 and raised in Chicago. Powell attended the University of Illinois and when World War I started, he left school and became an Officer in the Army. Powell served in France and was injured on the battlefield; he returned home from the Army and finished his college training to obtain his degree in electrical engineering. Powell went back to France and while he was there, he had an opportunity to take a flight in an airplane. He decided that he wanted to become a pilot and after his arrival back in the United States, like all of the African American pilots before him who were flying, he had a difficult time finding someone who would teach him how to fly in 1928. Eventually he overcame this obstacle and learned to fly. By 1932, he had completed his pilot's training and obtained his pilot's licenses, navigator's licenses and aeronautical engineering degree.

He later founded the Bessie Coleman aeronautical club to honor Bessie Coleman who was the first African American to receive an International Pilot's License in the early twenties in France. Bessie was awarded her pilot's license in 1921 in France by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale. Not unlike all of the African American pilots who followed her, Bessie had difficulty finding someone who would teach her to fly so she saved her money and went to France to get flight training. Bessie performed at air shows all over the country until her death in an airplane accident in Florida in 1927. Her greatest desire was to open a flying school and teach African Americans how to fly. Unfortunately, she died before her dream was realized.



Another female pilot during this era was Janet Bragg who was able to bring Bessie's dream to fruition when she opened an aeronautical school in the Chicago area that trained many pilots who later became Tuskegee Airman. Janet had some difficulties in getting her flight training like all the African American pilots before her. After she learned to fly, she was rejected by the Women's Auxiliary Service Pilots (WASP) who ferried Army Air force airplanes for the military during World War II. She continued to fly for pleasure until 1965 and died in Chicago in 1993.

There were other Aviators with great records of accomplishments who also flew in the same time period as Herbert Julian; however, his notoriety outlived all of his fellow pilots that flew during the twenties and thirties when he flew.

In 1929 during a visit to the Los Angeles area by Congressman Oscar DePriest, the only African American in congress, William Powell and Herbert Banning flew a single engine airplane above the parade grounds. The plane they flew was given the name of Congressman DePriest in honor of the visiting congressman. A couple of years later Powell organized the first all-black air show in Los Angeles that drew over 15,000 attendees. Herbert Julian can be seen in a picture while standing on the side of the billboard advertising the event. If there was some Aviation excitement attached you could expect Julian to be a possible participant.

Julian was the most noted black aviator prior to World War II, the first African American to parachute over New York City, in addition to his many exploits he also ran a gold mining company during his life. When Julian died in Harlem in 1983, his death went largely unnoticed.

### **Chronology**

1897 - Born in Port of Spain, Trinidad

1919 - Becomes an Aviator

1922 - Becomes a parachutist

1927 - Marries Essie Gittens

1929 - First African descendant to fly Trans-Atlantic solo

1930 - Awarded rank of Colonel in the Ethiopian Air force.

1931 - First African descendant to fly coast to coast in the United States.

1931 - Set record for longest flight without refueling

1934 - First Aviator of African descent to land on French soil.



1935 - Invited to Ethiopia by Emperor to head Air Force.

1940 - Fought in Finland winter war with Finnish Air Force

1949 - Founded Black Eagle Enterprise Limited

1983 - Dies in the Bronx on Feb. 9

