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Over the past twenty years great attention has been paid to the history of African Americans in our armed forces. Many of these studies have focused on the Civil War or the Buffalo soldiers in the western states, and that period of history can no longer be considered unrecorded or unheralded. Recently, scholarship has focused more on the history of blacks in World War II and Korea, and now, excitingly, black servicemen are coming forward to write of their first-hand experiences. Colonel Dryden's memoir is a welcome addition to this new genre.

Dryden was a member of the 99th Fighter Squadron that trained at the Tuskegee Army Flying School at Tuskegee, Alabama. Overseas, after a rough start—due primarily to a lack of combat veterans being made available to teach them combat skills—the 99th performed very well. The unit earned three Distinguished Unit Citations and contributed to the overall Tuskegee battle toll of 111 downed enemy planes, 25 damaged in the air, 150 damaged on the ground and, remarkably, no bombers lost to enemy air attacks. This memoir or autobiography covers Dryden's experiences in the war, but it goes on to include his entire career from flying school in August of 1941 until his retirement from the Air Force in August of 1962. He saw combat in both World War II and Korea, trained other black pilots within the United States, and did a tour in West Germany. His was a distinguished and honorable career at a time when armed services were experiencing the tension of integration while surrounded by a segregated civilian world. While this book is about his life in the Air Force, it is also a book about his face to face struggle with racism. Indeed, racism informs the book as it has his life.

Reminiscent of Colin Powell, Charles Dryden's parents were Jamaicans who moved to New York where Charles was born. He went to integrated schools and it is obvious that his parents were fairly well-
off. They sent him to CCNY for college where he was able to get into the Civilian Training Program and learned to fly. Growing up in a racially mixed neighborhood, Dryden did not experience daily overt racism other than the "N" word sung in a song by a school teacher. But on a train on his way south to join the U.S. Army Air Corps, Dryden ran smack into his first experience with Jim Crow. It wasn't his last. One of his worst experiences came after Tuskegee, and after gaining combat experience in Africa, when he was assigned to Selfridge, Michigan and then Walterboro Army Air Base, in South Carolina. In both places black pilots were kept segregated from whites and denied use of air base facilities. But at Walterboro racist policies were combined with the isolation of a rural southern post in essentially a hostile landscape. At Walterboro, Dryden' career was almost concluded prematurely. He and his students buzzed the town one quiet Sunday morning. His excuse was that he was attempting to show his trainees how to attack a "flak tower" in the form of the Walterboro Water tower. But in his story he makes no attempt to hid the possibility that his growing anger and resentment of segregation and mistreatment at the air base contributed to this spontaneous act. Had he been white, his penalty probably would have been an in-your-face chewing out and some temporary flying restrictions—with a wink and a nod to not be so stupid in the future. But of course in the 1940s U.S. military, they threw the book at Dryden and his career was in serious jeopardy. Fortunately for Dryden and us, cooler heads eventually prevailed and instead of a dishonorable discharge he received three months restriction and a one-year suspension from promotion eligibility. As it was it was a severe setback, but his career continued. Life got better, and Dryden was eventually assigned to Lockbourne Air Field in Columbus which he describes as "Camelot" compared to bases like Selfridge, Walterboro, and Godman Air Field in Kentucky. It was Camelot because not only were the people more friendly, Lockbourne was commanded from top to bottom by blacks.

As a memoir of a WWII and Korean War pilot this book is a readable, captivating book. As a personal history of one black man's struggle for equality it is also captivating, but not so comfortable. Dryden doesn't hide his most intimate thoughts, and for a northern-born white reviewer in the 1990s it is eye-opening. It is also uncomfortable because it is obvious that Dryden's deep resentment and anger at his treatment in the 1940s and 1950s military is still, thirty years later, unsoftened by time. Perhaps this book has been a catharsis for him, but one gets the impression that for as long as he lives, he will never be able to fully trust a white person. One example may suffice. For some reason he describes a chance meeting of a white couple in Switzerland who offered their hands in friendship, asking if he was an American. Dryden wonders if the couple, being from Alabama, might have been as friendly back home as they were in Switzerland where they were the minority. An absolutely legitimate thought—given his life experience—but also a bit cynical. Certainly they were feeling isolated and recognized him by the color of his skin, but just perhaps they were truly happy to see him and would have said hi in Birmingham also. The point is, although justified by life, Dryden assumes the worse and that is a shame, for America, and for a professed Christian like Dryden. Even now, America still has a long way to go toward healing race relations.

Charles Dryden has written a deeply personal, entertaining and thought-provoking memoir of his experiences as a Tuskegee Airman and Air Force Officer. One can read more thorough (and dry) histories of the 99th Squadron or the post-war Air Force. But it is doubtful one can find a better personal account of the experiences of a black officer during the period when the Air Force was experiencing the pain of integration. It is Highly recommended.

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