

Colonel Vance H. Marchbanks, Jr., MD

Today, in this time of the coronavirus pandemic, we honor our medical personnel, the people who keep us healthy so that we can achieve our personal and professional goals. Chief among these for the Tuskegee Airmen is Vance H. Marchbanks, Jr. Second generation Army, Marchbanks would persevere in the face of many obstacles to become a doctor, to become an aviation doctor, to serve overseas, to contribute to aviation medicine, and to participate in the U.S. space program.



Vance Marchbanks, Jr. in Italy, 1944.

Born in 1905 at Fort Washakie, Wyoming, Marchbanks spent much of his early life at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, where his father was frequently stationed with the 9th and 10th Cavalry. Military life in the early 20th century lacked many of the amenities of today. For a couple of years, the family lived in a “two floored hospital tent.”¹ While on deployment away from Ft. Huachuca on one occasion, Marchbanks, Sr. returned home “to build a house,”² so that his family would be comfortable through the winter. The Marchbanks family along with other officer and enlisted personnel employed a teacher to instruct their children, since none was provided by the Army. In 1915, Marchbanks, Jr. and his sister were sent to live with friends in Chicago, so they could attend a regular school. He ultimately graduated from the University of Arizona in Phoenix, where he was allowed to neither live nor eat on campus because he was “colored.”

Undaunted, Marchbanks pursued his dream of becoming a doctor by enrolling in Medical School at Howard University. His father was desperate to help him with expenses, but had very limited resources himself. Fortunately, Marchbanks, Sr. was assigned to the Washington High School Cadet Corps in Washington, DC from 1934 to 1939, so Marchbanks, Jr. was able to live at home, thus reducing his medical school expenses considerably. He graduated in 1937 and continued on to complete his residency there at Howard.

¹ “Roll Call: First Sergeant Vance Hunter Marchbanks,” *Huachuca Illustrated*, Vol. 1, 1993:6
<http://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/wwi/comment/huachuca/H12-22.htm>

² *Ibid*, 6.

Inducted into the army as a First Lieutenant in 1941, Marchbanks was assigned to the U.S. Veterans Administration Hospital (colored) in Tuskegee, Alabama. He wanted to complete the aviation medicine course at Randolph Field, Texas, but was transferred to Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, where he suffered “many unpleasant experiences.”³ Finally in June 1942, Marchbanks was assigned to the Station Hospital at Tuskegee Army Air Field, then to Selfridge Field as a flight surgeon with the 302nd Fighter Squadron. He finally obtained his rating as an aviation medical examiner through the extension course at the School of Aviation Medicine. Marchbanks deployed overseas with the 332nd Fighter Group. “Upon arrival in Italy, all the aviation medical officers became flight surgeons,” he said.⁴ Marchbanks went on to become the group surgeon of the 477th Composite Group, then director of the hospital at Lockbourne Army Air Base near Columbus, Ohio, the only Army base managed by Negro personnel.

When the Air Force was established and racial desegregation began in 1949, Lockbourne was disbanded. Marchbanks was assigned to March Air Force Base in California, where he was group surgeon of the 1st Fighter Group, then of the 22nd Bombardment Group, which was subsequently transferred to Okinawa. In January 1951, Marchbanks was back at Lockbourne Air Base as wing surgeon of the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing. Then it was back to the Far East as Deputy Commander and chief of the professional service at the Air Force Hospital at Nagoya, Japan. In March 1955, Marchbanks was promoted to full colonel and he became Air Force surgeon of Okinawa later that same year. His next assignment took him to Loring Air Force Base, Maine, where he was hospital commander and division surgeon.

During his career, Marchbanks received two AF Commendation Medals for his research work. He “developed requirements for standardization of an oxygen mask tester (MO-1),” which became a standard piece of AF equipment.⁵ In Operation Long Legs, Marchbanks flew some 22 hours non-stop from the U.S. to Argentina and return, conducting research on flying stress and combat fatigue. He subsequently developed stress tests and rating systems that were incorporated into AF operations. It was this research, he believed, that earned him a place as one of eleven Air Force surgeons to work on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s Project Mercury. Monitors were stationed around the world. From his tracking station in Kano, northern Nigeria in 1962, Marchbanks monitored John Glenn’s “electrocardiogram, respiration and heart rate” each time he flew over.⁶

Notable among Dr. Marchbanks many research studies was one on sickle cell disease, a painful condition that afflicts mostly people of Mediterranean and African descent. The military habitually disqualified people from pilot training, if they carried the sickle cell trait even though they did not have sickle cell disease. Marchbanks conducted a three-year study drawing blood from Tuskegee Airmen pilots who were WWII veterans. Out of 154 men, 10 carried the sickle

³ Vance H. Marchbanks, Jr., MD, “The Black Physician and the USAF,” *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 1972 Jan: 64(1):73.

⁴ Marchbanks, 73.

⁵ “Colonel Vance H. Marchbanks, Jr.,” *Tuskegee to NASA, 1941-1984*, Black Eagles Soaring to Excellence, ...October 5, 1984, np.

⁶ Matthews LR, Orr ZR, Oaks L, Danner OK, Udobi KF, et al. (2018) The Role of Dr. Colonel Vance H. Marchbanks in developing an oxygen delivery system: A “Forgotten First” in Aviation and Aerospace. *Glob J Medical Clin Case Rep* 5(2): 016-018. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.17352/2455-5282.000062>

cell trait. One of those had 600 combat flying hours. This study led the Air Force to revise its policy of prohibiting personnel from flying if they carried the sickle cell trait.⁷

In 1964 Marchbanks retired from the USAF with the rank of Colonel and as a Chief Flight Surgeon. He then worked for Hamilton Standard in Hartford, Connecticut overseeing the human safety aspects of the astronaut backpacks used in the Apollo space missions. An early supporter of Tuskegee Airmen reunions, Marchbanks wrote an August 1, 1959 letter from his post at Loring to various Airmen around the country suggesting that a convention be held in 1960. However, a national gathering of the men and women who served together from 1941-1949 in what is now known as the Tuskegee Airmen Experience did not take place until the early 70s. Marchbanks was a charter member of the East Coast Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. (ECCTAI), which hosts the annual General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Golf Classic. He held ECCTAI membership card #036.

A member of multiple professional and fraternal organizations, Vance Marchbanks, Jr., MD, Colonel, USAF (retired) passed away in 1988.

Prepared by R. Crockett, PhD
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⁷ Matthews, 018.