



Rayner



Campbell



McClurkin

Black Pilots "Make a Point" of Flying Together

It was seven years ago that George Rayner, first officer, and Frank Campbell, second officer, were chatting during a layover on a Los Angeles to Seattle jetfreighter flight for the airline.

The men were reminiscing about their common childhoods — as black youths with a desire to fly, and little encouragement from their families, friends or society.

"Maybe someday we can do it, George," Frank said. "Schedule an all-black crew and fly coast-to-coast to show young blacks that anything is possible."

George laughed.

Seven years later, on October 16, a Flying Tigers stretched DC-8 jetfreighter taxied out onto the runway at LAX for takeoff. At the controls, Rayner, now captain; Campbell, first officer; and Second Officer Fred McClurkin all had one thing in common: They were black. The three-day scheduled transcontinental flight, originating in Los Angeles with stops in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Seattle, was the manifestation of that idea born out of casual conversation seven years before. But it was no coincidence. Rayner, Campbell and McClurkin had bid for the series of flights to make a point.

"We wanted to project a positive image for young black kids of something other than they see on television. We want to stimulate dreams for young people that can be realized. In the black community, there is frequently little knowledge of what is happening outside the immediate environment," summed up Captain Rayner. "We wanted to show that blacks are capable and are moving up."

From his youth, growing up near Lambert Field in St. Louis, Missouri, Rayner knew that he wanted to be a pilot.

"When I saw John Wayne in that old movie about the Flying Tigers, and when I heard of Wendell Pruitt, the number one black pilot of World War II, I knew that was what I wanted to be," he said. "My family and school counselors had a protective attitude.

They were saying that to put forth the effort and money would be a waste of time, because there were no black pilots. But I wanted to fly. So I joined the Navy to get into aviation."

After his stint in the Navy, Rayner tried to forget about flying and studied engineering at Parks College of Aeronautical Technology in Cahokia, Ill. Unable to successfully divert his interest, however, he headed west to California to obtain the necessary flight ratings and licenses, working as an electro-mechanical designer for the next eight years to support himself and his training. Perseverance won out. In 1966, he was hired by Flying Tigers ... the airline's first black pilot.

First Officer Campbell wanted to be a professional football player; but after his freshman season at Trinidad State University, he began to dislike football and had to think about another occupation.

"I went back home to Washington, D.C. after the first semester to investigate occupations I could get into that would be most profitable," he said. "I went down to the Department of Labor and obtained the occupational list which outlined salaries. Airline pilots were right at the top.

"Coming from a background of living 'on the other side of the tracks,' you begin to wonder, 'Can I get out of this so-called ghetto?'" he explained. "It seemed the only ways then were politics or money. I wasn't interested in politics, so I decided to go the other way."

Campbell chose a college that would offer flying plus an academic education — Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida. He was the first black to enroll there. In 1970, he graduated with honors with a Bachelor of Science degree in aeronautical science engineering.

Stepping out into the professional world, Campbell found just what he was looking for at Flying Tigers. "This airline offered me the world's best equipment to fly, the best route structure, a close-knit pilot group and an outstand-

ing training program," he said.

"There were many people along the way who saw my motivation and helped me out," he continued. "Hopefully this flight will show kids of any race that, if they really want something, they can get it."

Fred McClurkin's fascination with aviation began when the father of a high school friend took him on an airplane ride. The youngest of eight children in Rock Hill, South Carolina, Fred thought flying would be a good career but figured the possibility was beyond his reach.

"In 1970 I was about to be drafted, so I joined the Marine Corps to learn how to fly. I had gone to college and majored in biochemistry, thinking I would go into medicine. But then I received the draft notice.

"Growing up, you look at things that are attainable. I liked science and knew black doctors; therefore, it was something I could attain. But I didn't know any black commercial airline pilots. After flying in the military, I realized that it was the occupation for me," he said.

McClurkin, hired by Flying Tigers in July of 1978, is a DC-8 second officer instructor at the airline's flight training center at Los Angeles International Airport. He has his own thoughts about the transcontinental flight.

"This flight is important to me, as a black flight instructor," he explained. "Sometimes, others see blacks as tokens. However, when people see you as an instructor, they realize that you must know what you are doing."

Flying Tigers currently employs ten black pilots — reportedly the highest percentage of black pilots in the airline industry. (Of some 40,000 airline pilots in the U.S., 143 are black.)

Other black pilots at Flying Tigers are James Bailey of Birmingham, Alabama; Dennis Cropp of Ottumwa, Iowa; Michael Felmons of San Francisco, CA; Joey Johnson of Washington, D.C.; Wayne Lane of Cleveland, Ohio; Harold Thomas of St. Louis, MO; and Thomas Witts of Philadelphia, PA.