

Marguerite Davis and the 43rd Aviation Squadron at Bowman Field, Kentucky, Airport During World War II: Essay, Interview, and Photographs

by Bruce M. Tyler

In the 1930s, after graduating from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, Marguerite Davis returned home to Louisville, Kentucky to teach science for one semester in the Louisville Public School system and to teach for the WPA. She also became a recreational worker for the WPA and worked as a recreational worker at State Hospital for mentally ill patients and the severely handicapped. Davis next worked at Bowman Field for soldiers as a recreational director for African-American troops based there. She went on to American University in Washington and became a Red Cross worker and recreational director for military troops at home and abroad¹. Marguerite Davis's is a vital story of the late 1930s Depression era and the impact World War II had on her life and career. It is part of the greater history of Louisville and its people. Marguerite Davis's story is told through historical documents and job applications and an oral interview.

Marguerite Nelsenia Davis was born in Louisville September 1, 1911. Her parents were Preston Davis and Luverta Davis. Marguerite graduated from Central Colored High School. One of her teachers, Carrie Alexander, who graduated from Central High School in 1889, paid her tuition to attend Fisk University, where she received her AB in 1934. She replaced a teacher on leave at Madison Junior High School for one year from September 1934 to 1935. Davis taught courses in general science, accelerated classes and one special education class. From 1935 to 1937, she worked for the Works Progress Administration. She completed a rehabilitation program for the WPA. She also helped train and supervise forty National Youth Administration women for community center playgrounds and recreation work. She worked as a Junior Clerk in the Louisville Public School system. She was terminated because there was "insufficient room to segregate white and colored workers," according to a notice dated June 9, 1939².

In April of 1943 Davis applied to work as a "Messenger" at Bowman Air Field in Louisville, Kentucky with the United States Civil Service Commission. Carolyn E. Gardner and Dorothy M. Gentry of Louisville signed Davis's application to vouch for

her. The section of her employment was the Ear (Entertainment Red Cross) Department, SOS (Service of Supplies). From February of 1944 to August, Davis worked as a Recreation Technician at Bowman Field Air Base, where she organized volunteers and planned social and light recreation entertainment. She set up and established rooms for this work. Davis found and approved of wholesome rooms for servicemen's families visiting their sons and relatives in the Armed Forces at Bowman Field Air Base. She acted as a liaison in Louisville for obtaining talent and entertainment and sponsored parties for soldiers. She arranged for a horseshow. She organized and supervised sports activities. She supervised two servicemen assistants.

Davis soon applied for an overseas appointment. On her annual leave from August 1944 to October 16, 1944, she reported to the American University in Washington, D.C. for the American Red Cross In-Service training program in preparation for overseas service to provide recreation for servicemen. At the end of her training, she embarked for New Guinea in the South Pacific Theater of war with Japan. From January 1945 to August 1945, she served as the Red Cross Club Director in Hollandia, New Guinea, for recreation for the troops. She supervised three girls and five servicemen. In Hollandia, they set up a club and canteen. They also visited troops in the jungle on the perimeter to serve coffee and donuts and provided musical entertainment. This involved developing a "clubmobile" to service these troops in the field. From August 1945 to May 1946, Davis worked in Manila, Philippines, doing welfare work among the troops for the American Red Cross. This work included Prisoner of War relief and checking incoming and outgoing mail of released American Prisoners Of War (POWs). She established communications between families and POWs who had been released. She set up and supervised this vital and sensitive office of communications between POWs and their families.

From May 1946 to March 1947, Davis served as Club Director for the 24th Infantry Regiment in Okinawa. She set up a service club and did recreation work. She supervised four American employees to do this work. She set up a canteen and a mobile and permanent library service. Finally, Marguerite Davis returned to the United States in 1951 and worked as a Club and program director at Fort Knox, Kentucky until her retirement³.

Endnotes

1. Form 2806-1, Marguerite Nelsenia Davis, Designation, change, Or Revocation of Beneficiary, To the United States Civil Service Commission, Washington, D.C., recorded and approved seal April 3, 1943, U.S.C.S.C. Com. Div.; Standard form 57A, Continuation Sheet For Standard Form 57, "Application for Federal Employment," May 1954—U.S. Civil Service Commission, Marguerite Nelsenia Davis Stewart (married as a Stewart), extensive career data.

2. Thelma Cayne Tilford-Weathers, *A History of Louisville Central High School, 1882-1982*, Louisville: (no publisher listed), 1982, p. 71, 84.

3. Much of the information herein came from the following interview with Marguerite Davis. (See below.)

Interview with Marguerite Davis Stewart, January 23, 2004

Eddie Smith was my supervisor at the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. I don't know if he covered the whole state or just Louisville. I worked at Central State Hospital. I was on his payroll. He was my supervisor under the WPA and he issued me my check each month. When he went to Bowman Field to take over the Special Services at Bowman Air Field, he got me a job at Bowman Air Field. Eddie Smith made me several offers. He was a very influential man. I was at Bowman Field in no time before he offered to send me—the Red Cross would take me and send me to Africa. I said I could not leave my mama. He made me another offer: He said, they're going to put women into the Army and he said you can go to Special Services School and become an officer. I said I don't want to leave here. He was the man who influenced me to work with the military. He also offered to try to get me other jobs. Are you following me? Those were the days of racial segregation. I don't know where they would have put me. He was a man, I think, who acted like it but did not say it, who was very much in love with me. He was a white man in the days of [racial] segregation. But the man never said anything out of the way to me. He influenced my career at Central State Hospital and at Bowman Field Airport. Honey, I didn't have a job and so I was glad to be working.

When I came out of college I began to teach school. I found out that I could not make any money teaching school because I had to support my mother. My mother was a very brilliant woman. She dyed people's clothes and she sewed. She had gone to Normal School—do you know what Normal School was? S.O. Johnson (school teacher) said my mother was the most brilliant mathematician that ever passed through his class. S.O. Johnson was head of the mathematics department. He taught my mother math at the Normal School. But Mr. Dan Lawson—mother had been out with “spinal teaser,” so she said she had had, and Dan Lawson told her that Mr. [Albert] Meyseek [the principal of the Normal School] was not going to allow her back in school; and she didn't come back to school. Mr. Lawson said that Mr. Meyseek was not going to let her graduate or come back to school.

My mother's father had died. She had nobody to stick up for her, except her mother and her mother had dental work before and my mother's father was a tanner. Do you know what a tanner was? My mother said that her father made good money. They brought rawhides into Louisville and he tanned them. I guess he had a shop here. His name was Waters. I guess it was Sam Waters. He looked white. But I don't know



This is a picture of Marguerite Davis at Bowman Field.

Photo from
Images of America Louisville in World War II by Bruce Tyler

how black he was. He had blue eyes and was snow white in skin. He came to Louisville with my grandmother who looked like an Indian. Her name was Jane Depp. The Depps are still there in the Russellville area. They are German. I think German. Depp is an abbreviation of a longer German name. My mother is a descendant from the Depps. My mother had China-blue eyes and snow white skin. And her father was a real white man with blue eyes. I have his picture somewhere here unless someone has lost it. There is a picture of him with his brother-in-law. He's on a picture with another man with his brother-in-law.

I worked in the Fifth Service Command at Bowman Air Field and its Air Evacuation School. All the whites there and officers were connected mentally. They gave them an IQ examination, and those who made a much higher score were sent south to school to become officers. Not all of them were trained at Bowman Field to become



Marguerite Davis and Bowman Field Army Air Forces Base soldier, a member of the 43rd Aviation Squadron, pose for the camera at a dance on the base with the all-white 567th Army Air Forces' Base's band which Davis asked to play for the black dances, and they did so with no problems or resistance to the idea in a time of militant and legally enforced racial separation. A picture such as this reveals a certain racial democracy and liberalism in a time when this was not the norm and this is why this picture has historical value as evidence. Note the jukebox in the corner that was supplied by Robert "Rivers" Williams who owned the nightclub called the "Top Hat." This was his way of supporting the troops at Bowman Field.

Photo from *Images of America Louisville in World War II* by Bruce Tyler

officers. They came here with the Fifth Service Command. The Blacks there were of the lower rank. They cleaned up. They were not mechanics and did not do any technical work. They gave them an examination there. The Blacks, I think, they came from Cincinnati under the Fifth Service Command. I did see the work that they did because I was with the Fifth Service Command. I know that they worked in the airline hangers. They cleaned the airline hangers. You see, the Army took over the airline hangers too. And the worst accident I ever saw, I was in the Day Room next to the hanger—I shouldn't tell you this one. See, the Black boys forgot to remove some civilian tubs parked on the runway. They left them there instead of moving them. An airman tried to land and before he realized the tubs were there and he turned sideways and crashed into the side of the building. The building lit up. Blacks were in the hanger. I was in the Day Room when it happened. The worst thing I ever

experienced was to smell flesh burning. The men should have moved the tubs out of the way. Another thing, there should have been some apparatus to put out the fire. They were helpless. There was nothing to put out the fire. There was no fire department or fire detail there. Nothing. Those Black boys should have been court-martialed. Don't say I said it! Whoever owned those tubs had no business parking them there either. The military took over Bowman Air Field and they did not have enough time to get organized. They did not have any money to pay me there. The men slept in tents. They put a whole lot of men out there in tents. Some kind of fever broke out. They were red, red, red! Men got sick; I don't know. I don't know how many got sick before I got there. I got there two months after Pearl Harbor [after December 7, 1941 or about February or early March in 1942]. I had to cross the field to get to the hospital.

We (the 43rd Aviation Squadron) had a skating party once at the Madison Skating Rink. I think the USO gave the party and Bowman Field (troops) went there. Our trucks took us there. Army trucks. They had



A portrait of Cpl. Willie Ford who served at Bowman Field.

Photo from
Images of America Louisville in World War II
by Bruce Tyler



Marguerite Davis in wheelchair.

Original photo by Bruce Tyler

several Black companies and it was top secret as far as how many men were in a company. They had a lot of men for a field the size of Bowman Field. They had Black sergeants there. They didn't have any Black pilots there. There was a Black sergeant who used to—on pay day night—would check the men coming back from Louisville. If any of his men were drunk, he'd take them around to the hospital to have them checked out. They did not need any Black MPs there. He checked his own men out. The sergeant told me that he never went to town. His words were: Miss Davis, I don't ever take a vacation on pay day night. I stay here and my men in my company go to Louisville; if any of them are drunk or sick, I take them to the hospital so they won't catch venereal disease. Evidently, the Black men who had a good IQ were set aside to go to some kind of school for Blacks. The highest rank Blacks held there was sergeant. There were quite a number of sergeants.



L. D. Byers of the 926th Quartermaster Squadron was the first to buy war bonds at Bowman Field under new federal guidelines. He was from Statesville, N. C. Capt. Francis L. Linton, the Base Finance Officer, is selling a \$50 bond to Byers who has been at Bowman Field for the last eight months. Byers said his bond would help to “slap a Jap.” Byers’s commanding officer 1st. Lt. Daniel W. Austin said Byers was thrifty and patriotic. The Bowman Bomber, January 21, 1943.

Photo from Images of America Louisville in World War II by Bruce Tyler

Eddie Smith got me the job there and he had two white assistants in the Special Services branch. I had to write up my reports to Mr. Smith for everything I did. Mr. Smith was my supervisor. I got a whole lot of athletic supplies for basketball, volley ball, horse-shoe throwing set, but there was no baseball diamond or stuff like that. This was an emergency operation. The United States was not expecting Pearl Harbor and it was not prepared. Two months after Pearl Harbor, it was nothing like what they had out at Fort Knox—nothing like that. The only way I had any equipment—they didn’t even have any money to give me supplies to work with. My equipment came from Coca Cola (The Coca Cola Company). Coca Cola gave me playing cards and checkers. The white Air Force Band (The Bowman Bombers Band)—I took it for granted that they would play for our dances. I used the white Air Force Band (The 567 Army Air Force Band) for all of my dances at Bowman Field. I had learned the Grand March at the Pythian Temple on Tenth and Chestnut (Streets). I was a young girl. In the afternoon dances when I was about sixteen, I went to the Pythian Temple dances. I think I paid fifty cents and I could go in there and dance. Blacks could dance at the Parrish House at the Episcopal Church of Our Merciful Savior, a black branch church. They used to dance there and they had parties there. People rented it and held dances. I learned the Grand March at the Pythian Temple. The Pythian Temple had a

little theater in the back. Black people went to the Pythian Temple for everything (in the 1930s). My mother told me when I was a little girl that Pythian Temple members collected money and somebody stole the money. (There were rumors about the role Roscoe Conkling Simmons played with speculation by some critics that he stole the money. He was the nephew of Booker T. Washington).

The white Junior League had a float in parades and their neophytes had to play tennis and have activities with those patients at Central State Mental Hospital. When they pulled out, I told Mr. Smith about the opening at Central State and Camilia Atherton told her father, Judge Peter Lee Atherton, because the Junior League gave me a thousand dollars, not to me personally, up in the office for recreation equipment because the State did not have any recreation money. They put a thousand dollars up there for me to buy crayons, construction paper, paint and glue and things like that so we could have something for the patients. I had to have a receipt for everything. I had to take the receipts back to Dr. Louis M. Foltz (Clinical Psychiatrist at State Mental Hospital). I worked under the head medical psychiatrist, Peter Lee Atherton of the white Junior League put me in at Central State Mental Hospital. They paid me a thousand dollars for recreational equipment. Eddie Smith was head of the WPA then. My relationship with him goes way back. I think he was in love with me; he never said he was.



These two jitterbug dancers are in full swing to the music of the 567th Army Air Forces Bowman Field Base band at a dance on the base in 1943. Note that the black soldiers and USO girls are standing behind and literally among the band members in a very relaxed and joy-filled dance despite racial separatism by laws in much of the country and military bases as a rule. Photo from *Images of America Louisville in World War II* by Bruce Tyler

But when the Black troops pulled out of Bowman Air Field, he went with them. They went south. Eddie Smith told me, Marguerite, after I get settled there and we get straight, I'll send for you. I didn't hear from Eddie Smith. And I wondered why. A guy I knew came to my door and told me that Eddie Smith was dead. He caught pneumonia down there in the South and died. Another white northern man said he was sure glad to be back here in Kentucky because white southerners in the Deep South hated white northern men. We were in Kentucky. He said, I never been treated so badly. I didn't ask him what happened.



An African-American soldier guarding the Bowman Field planes. This was one of the duties of the Black soldiers. Photo from *Images of America Louisville in World War II* by Bruce Tyler