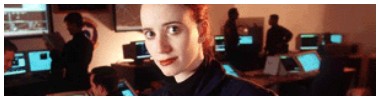

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African American History Month: Setting the bar sky high

Story and photo by Tech. Sgt. Cheresa D. Theiral

Lt. Col. Julian "Juice" Clay inspects his F-16 Fighting Falcon prior to taking off for a mission in the skies over Iraq Dec. 21, 2007.

Air Force Lt. Col. Julian "Juice" Clay is the 140th Wing Air Sovereignty Alert officer in command, responsible for air defense for the Rocky Mountain region. He also commands the fighter pilots of B Flight and is responsible for scheduling and tracking all ground training for 120th Fighter Squadron pilots.

"My experience in the Colorado Air National Guard has been nothing short of spectacular," said Clay, who has spent well over half his life as a Guardsman. "I utilized the GI Bill to complete my degree, and contacts that I made here assisted me with getting jobs at Martin Marietta and United Airlines. I attribute a great deal of my success in life to the solid foundation that the Air National Guard has provided me, both financially and with the mentors and friends I have networked with along the way."

The Clay family hails from a small town in Mississippi and according to the fighter pilot, it was a very segregated community. "My father joining the military as a young man and leaving that environment was the beginning of a chance for a better life," he said.

His father, Jimmie, retired after 20 years in the Air Force, where he worked as a propeller mechanic on C-130s in Vietnam, then later cross-trained into the medical field. His mother, Josephine, worked as an accountant at the Defense Finance and Accounting Service until she retired from civil service. Both earned their college degrees while working and going to school part time. Their son would follow that trend.

While a student at Gateway High School in Aurora, Colo. Clay worked part-time in the dining facility at the former Lowry Air Force Base. Although he had taken the ACT, he had not applied to any colleges.

"My father asked me what I planned to do upon high school

My father asked me what I planned to do upon high school graduation and I gave him the deer in the headlights look," said Clay. "Buckley [Air Force Base] was basically in my backyard and I routinely saw the A-7s [fighter jets] flying and it gained my curiosity. One day I was discussing it with my father and he told me he had a friend who was a recruiter at Buckley. … The next day we went to see him and the rest is history."

Clay began his 26-year Colorado Air National Guard career as an enlisted Airman, celebrating his eighteenth birthday during Basic Military Training at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. As a traditional Guardsman, he worked as a flight simulator technician and in avionics, all the while working as a civilian at Martin Marietta and attending college at night. In 1989, Clay earned his B.S. in Electronics from Chapman University, and in 1990, he was selected to become a pilot for the 120th Fighter Squadron.

He volunteered to work as an active duty Guardsman assigned to air defense in 2002.

"I have not experienced any blatant racism or prejudice while here in the Guard. The people that I have met here encouraged me to follow my dreams and helped pave the way to my success," said Clay. "[But] being the only African American pilot in the COANG comes with added self-imposed responsibility. As a young man and not having officer [pilot] role models that were of similar race and background, I wondered if I even had a chance to achieve my goals. After being encouraged by the Guardsmen that I have met and worked with along the way I soon found out that it wasn't true. It is my responsibility to pay it forward."

In addition to the professional experience he's gained through the years, he also has bragging rights aplenty, such as completing three combat tours with the 120th Fighter Squadron and completing several other deployments to Panama, Southwest Asia, Europe, Australia and Korea to name a few.

"I have great admiration for my mother and father who gave me the encouragement, discipline and support I needed to make it this far," said Clay. "Black History month is a reminder of the sacrifices that African Americans before me have made to give me such great opportunities. MLK, the Tuskegee Airmen and many others have paved the way with their blood, sweat and tears."

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