

Soaring, My Improbable Life is the inspiring story of a poor, African American boy growing up in the Great Depression, who dreams of traveling the world. With audacity, focus, and resilience, he navigates obstacles to lead a truly remarkable life.

Soaring, My Improbable Life

By Major Alphonso B. Jones, Co-author: Kim Nelson

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Soaring

My Improbable Life



Major Alphonso B. Jones,
Co-Author: Kim Nelson

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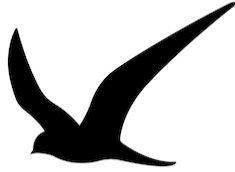
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HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

I was born on January 25, 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression. My father, Beverly Jones, was the son of a Baptist minister from Virginia. He was a tall, handsome man with a good job and a car. He had an athletic build, brown eyes, and a mustache. He had a pleasant voice, winning smile, and sense of humor that instantly put you at ease. He didn't talk much, but when he did, you felt it was worthwhile to listen.

My father worked as an automobile mechanic in a garage, fixing the cars of wealthy owners, so his job was not affected much by the Depression. He'd sometimes earn extra money as a taxi driver in his spare time. He was always busy working. My father always seemed to be preparing my brother and me for a life of hardship for black boys living in a white man's world. We grew up understanding that we were expected to work hard, pray, have a good sense of humor, and do our best at all times. And even if life sometimes seemed too hard to bear, we were to never give up but to persevere and continue to do our very best. We understood these lessons later in life, but at that time we didn't have a clue what he was talking about. My twin brother and I loved him very much and tried to measure up as best we could.

My mother was a very special woman. The daughter of a Catholic family from Maryland, she was short and slim, with long black hair and beautiful brown eyes. Her voice was soft and loving. We knew she believed we were special by her attitude toward us. She always made excuses to my father for my curious nature. My father would say,

“Honey, what’s wrong with that boy?” whenever I did something he didn’t approve of, like taking the clock apart to see how it worked.

“There is nothing wrong with him,” she would say with a smile. “He is just curious.” She solved the problem by getting old clocks from the thrift store for me to tinker with.

Mother was always neat and tidy and made sure we were too. She prayed a lot and taught us to kneel before her and say our prayers daily. My brother and I were the recipients of multiple hugs and kisses daily. Her love surrounded us all the days of our lives.

My parents met and fell in love in Washington, DC, in 1931. They were not accepted by either family because of differences in religion, but also because my father was from Virginia and my mother was from Maryland. In those days, folks from Maryland and Virginia did not mix and Baptists did not marry Catholics. Catholics had to get special permission to marry someone outside of the faith. Permission would be granted if it was agreed that the children would be raised in the Catholic faith. My father agreed, so the Catholic Church sanctioned the marriage, which finally earned the acceptance of Mother’s relatives. They were married by a Catholic priest. Later in life, my father converted to Catholicism.

Dad was “Mr. Fix It.” The parishioners would ask for help, and he would fix whatever needed fixing with a smile, even if they couldn’t pay. Mother took in kids after school and watched them until their parents could pick them up after work. I remember the cakes and cookies she made for the church; there were always plenty left for us. Much later, when my mother died, the director of the funeral home told me of the fond memories he had waiting for his parents to pick him up at Mother’s house when he was a child.

My mother became pregnant with twins, which she had prayed for, thinking it would unite the families. In answer to her prayers, on January 25, 1932, my brother and I were born—identical twins. To make life interesting, she named us both Al! My birth name is Alphonsus Beverly Jones, and my twin brother’s name is Aloysius Fredroy Jones, but we both went by Al.

When we were younger, it was nearly impossible to tell us apart, though I was born with a small extra finger on my left hand next to my little finger. Old-timers said this was a special blessing and a sign of

good luck. They were right because when I was older, the girls loved to touch my extra finger. They would go crazy with excitement! Later, in the Air Force, they had to cut my extra finger off because it got in the way.

My mother and father's families could not resist coming to see the identical twins, and in this way, the two families were indeed united.

When we would visit my grandfather, the Reverend Beverly F. Jones Sr., during his church revivals once a year, he always had my brother and me stay with him. The rest of the family stayed with other relatives. We knew he loved us, and we were as glad to be with him as he was to see us. Later, as teens, we enjoyed discussing matters of faith with our grandfather. Those visits with him remain some of my fondest memories.

Washington was a great city to grow up in. Many African Americans were able to get in the many government and business offices. My father got a job in the Government Printing Office. My Uncle Tommy, who worked there first, sponsored him.

In DC, the history of our country was laid out before us in the many museums of the Smithsonian. I visited these museums as well as many other historic sites when I was young, but I still wanted to see the world.

I still remember my first day of school. My brother and I were excited to be going and couldn't understand why our mother was crying. The school was a single-story building made of red bricks with a lawn in the front yard, located a few blocks from our home. My mother left us in the classroom and went home.

Our teacher was a bespectacled black woman with the stern air of a disciplinarian. When she saw my brother and me talking to one another, she shouted, "No talking!" That was the first time someone had ever yelled at us like that.

When she was not looking, we ran back home. We knocked on our front door, and our mother swept us up in her arms with kisses. She gave us cookies and milk and waited for us to tell her what went wrong. We told her how the teacher shouted at us! Mother took us back to school the next morning and told the teacher not to shout at her boys. She said, "Just separate them, and everything will be fine." The teacher soon found that we were good students, among the best in the class.

Outside of class, my brother and I were inseparable! We went everywhere together, did everything together, and seemed to agree on just about everything. I know it's hard to believe, but we seldom argued or fought. We were incredibly close and loved exchanging thoughts and ideas with one another. It was as if we were two halves of the same person. In all of our conversations, each person's aim was to meet the other halfway. Whenever we reached a spot where we could not agree, we dropped the topic and never talked about it again. We were entirely sympathetic to each other as twins.

Our family was growing rapidly. After Al and I were born, my sister Beulah came a year later. There was a break of a few years, and then sister Fredia, brother Robert, and another sister, Doris, were all born.

Both of my parents worked extremely hard to earn enough money to pay all the bills and take care of us. My mother worked from 4 p.m. to midnight cleaning Amtrak passenger trains, and my father worked from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. Mother said, "You three kids need to learn how to help take care of the house and each other" and Beulah, Aloysius, and I were expected to chip in on household chores like shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundry, and the dishes to help our household run smoothly. My brother and I got jobs delivering newspapers before school to help out. As I was the oldest child, I was in charge, followed by my twin brother and my sister, who was a year younger than him.

We loved our parents very much and were eager to please them. They were happy together and with us. I cannot ever remember my mother getting really angry with us. If we had to be disciplined, she would do it, but it was rarely necessary.

One evening, I let my mother down. When she came home from work, the dishes were not done. She washed them and put them away before going to bed. The next morning, I cried when I saw the kitchen clean. She never mentioned it, but I promised myself I would try not to let her down again. I knew that she had to depend on us to do our part. The life skills I learned as a child would carry well into my adult life and even my marriage. I grew up understanding that everyone needs to share responsibility for housework when both parents are working and only later realized that this belief was not universally held by my male peers.

Mother took us to church to be altar boys when we were eleven years old. Holy Redeemer Catholic Church was a large building with a

big staircase leading up to the entrance. Beautiful organ music played during Mass and six large lighted candles graced the altar.

The church custodian, Ishmael, taught us all that we would need to know in order to serve as altar boys at Mass. Ishmael looked like he was from Egypt. He was of medium height with wavy black hair and a calm and pleasant voice. He was extremely knowledgeable about the Catholic Church, and Mother knew we were in good hands with him. He liked us, and we liked him.

Father Kelly, our pastor, was a tall, slightly overweight man with a ruddy face, white hair, and a twinkle in his eye. He spoke with an Irish accent, which we thought was funny. He seemed wealthy to our young eyes, but had mastered the art of helping others in a way that did not hurt their dignity. He was the first white person we really spent time with, and we liked him very much. We helped Father Kelly at the daily 8 a.m. Mass before school. We liked weddings and funerals best of all because we were excused from school for a few hours and always got a tip from the family after the service.

Father Kelly knew that most of the parents couldn't afford the special black shoes that were required at Mass, so one day he took all his altar boys to the shoe store and bought us each a pair (plus ice cream and lunch afterward). I will never forget Father Kelly's kindness toward us. Mass was in Latin, which we studied in the sixth grade. The kids in our school thought we were rich. We had new shoes; black, fur-collar leather coats; and money in our pockets. We didn't tell them the shoes had been given to us at church and the expensive-looking coats were "hand-me-downs" from our aunt, who worked for a rich family who had twins. Our newspaper route allowed us a little extra pocket change and we felt very rich indeed.

We lived most of our lives one block from our church, together in a big house with the families of some of my mother's sisters to share expenses. It was a three-story, walk-up row house in a working-class neighborhood. It was home to us and always filled with the noise of kids running around and the wonderful aroma of home-cooking. It smelled like home. We grew up very close to our cousins, even when we moved a few blocks away to our own home years later.

Our household was full of love and laughter—and lots of boys. Sometimes, my mother's brother, Uncle Richard, would babysit us.

Uncle Richard was tall and medium-built. He was a pleasant person who loved all of us, and everyone loved him. Once a day, he would line up the boys and give each of us a whack on our behinds.

I said, "What's that for?! We haven't done anything wrong!"

"That's just in case you do!" he answered.

Once, when we boys had grown to be teens, we visited Uncle Richard on his birthday. We planned the visit carefully. We invited Uncle Richard to come out to the backyard to receive his gifts from all of us boys. We sang "Happy Birthday," but as we ended the song, we all grabbed him at once! We didn't hurt him, but he couldn't move. We told him our first gift for him was a few whacks to pay him back for the whacks we received when we were younger. We really did have gifts, but we were going to give him the whacks first. After Uncle Richard got his whacks, he started to laugh and said we got him good.

As children, we loved to go riding in our father's car, especially to the zoo or to the airport. The car was black with soft seats. With the windows down, the air smelled clean and breezy. I couldn't understand how my father could make the car go and stop by pressing the correct pedal on the floor without looking. It was magic.

On those outings, we would typically pack a picnic and enjoyed sitting under a tree in the shade having our lunch, then walking around the zoo to see all the different animals we read about in books. At the airport, we would watch the people getting on and off the planes. In those days, people dressed up when they traveled. I knew they came from or were returning to all of the wonderful places I read about in books. I dreamed of traveling around the world one day and visiting those places too.

During summer and winter school breaks, my twin and I lived on our Aunt Pearl and Uncle Clem Dyson's tobacco farm in Bushwood, Maryland, to keep us away from street gangs in Washington and, I suspect, to offset the cost of feeding two growing boys. We loved it! Aunt Pearl was tall and thin with a kind voice and a loving personality. She always made everyone feel at home around her and was an attentive listener who treated us like her own children. Aunt Pearl took my mother into her home when my mother was young, and my mother often shared stories of living with her sister Pearl. Uncle Clem had an

aura of health and industry about him that came from working hard on a farm all of one's life.

Uncle Clem welcomed my brother and me staying with them because we were strong, hard workers—city boys who saw farm work as new and exciting. He also saw us as companions for his son, Richard, who was around our age.

Richard was a little shorter than us and was smart and tricky. One day, we asked if we could help with the farm work. He said he didn't know if we could do it right since we were city boys. He was so sneaky! We said we would each give him a dime if he let us help. Imagine—paying him to do his work! How dumb can you get? But the truth was his chores were fun for us city boys. There were other benefits too: Aunt Pearl and Uncle Clem allowed us to glean vegetables from their farm. It was fun picking berries because we could eat as many as we wanted while we picked.

The farmhouse was spacious, with a big wood oven used for cooking meals and, in winter months, it provided heat for the whole house. Aunt Pearl had a frying pan with a cover on it, suspended over the fire on a long pole. When we visited in the winter, she put hot charcoals in the pan and stuck the pan under the covers until the bed was toasty and warm. My brother and I would jump in the warm bed and pull up the covers to stay warm until morning.

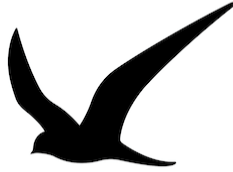
We cut wood for the stove that provided heat and a place for cooking because there was no gas. We drew water from the well for drinking, cooking, and taking weekly baths because there wasn't running water in the house. The toilet was outside the house. At night, we only had an oil lamp to see by. The people in the country did not have electricity. Visiting the tobacco farm made us appreciate all the modern conveniences we enjoyed at our home in Washington, DC.

Just because we lived in the city didn't mean we didn't know how to make the most of what we had. My mother was so clever. She made her own wine for our family and canned food in the summer to be eaten in the winter. Mother went to a community cannery that had all the supplies for canning (which always seemed an odd choice of words to me because actually they used jars). Mother would put so much food in jars. It lasted quite a while. One summer, there were explosions in the pantry. The heat was causing some of the jars to explode! What a mess!

My mother gave us the responsibility of looking out for our sister Beulah. Beulah was so beautiful that we knew it would not be easy. Beulah was a petite girl with a very fair complexion; long, wavy brown hair; and striking green eyes. She was a headstrong young lady and had a voice that could shatter glass if she was angry with you! Beulah always stood out in a crowd of students because of her unique appearance, her confidence, and her natural intelligence. She was smarter than me, but I made up for it by working harder. We never told Beulah that our mother had told us to look after her. We would have protected her anyway because we loved our baby sister so much. Growing up, Beulah and I were as close as a brother and sister could be.

One day, we had to fight a big high school football player who had been annoying Beulah. He was a big kid, definitely someone you did not want to mess with. We were small and light, but we were fast. We went outside after school and danced around him, taking turns hitting him and then dancing out of his way. His heavier weight worked against him. He slowed down quickly, while we could dance around him all day.

When he was exhausted, we told him we were willing to stop and shake hands and that we actually didn't want to fight but we had to protect our sister. So, he offered to call it even, and we stopped fighting and became friends.



A BIG DREAM

The world was at war in the '40s. Every movie theater showed newsreel updates of the war. President Roosevelt's fireside chats had a calming effect and gave us the feeling that everything was going to be okay, but it was a time of great uncertainty. It was during this time that I began to think about my own possibilities.

In 1943, when I was eleven years old and in the sixth grade, I decided I wanted to travel and see the world when I grew up. I had read books about different countries and wanted to visit them. I especially wanted to see the Holy Land and experience the places where Jesus walked. I had read about places where people said Jesus' mother appeared to someone with a message about the future. Maybe I could find a job that would allow me to travel.

I was so excited by this dream that I told my science teacher, Mr. Jackson, a slim, smart-looking man, about it and asked him if he thought it would be possible for me to find a job that would allow me to travel the world.

Mr. Jackson said, "Boy, you better get yourself a good mop and a good broom so you can become a good janitor." I was devastated. It was as if he had taken a pin to the big balloon of my dream and all of my hopes slowly began to seep out.

Later that day, I asked my English teacher, Mrs. Catlett, if she thought I could ever find a job that would allow me to travel the world. Mrs. Catlett had a medium build and a nice voice that made you feel that

she loved and cared about you. You somehow knew she would always be there to help you.

“Of course, you do!” she exclaimed. “Let me do some research to give you some ideas.”

She came back to me with a list of books to read and told me it would require hard work, but my dream was achievable. She had contacted an Air Force recruiter, who said that if I could graduate high school with a grade point average of 3.0 or higher and complete at least one year of college, I could enter the Air Force and take a test to enter the Officer Flight Training School.

Mrs. Catlett put the thought in my head that a career in the US Air Force would allow me to see the world. Her aspiration was not just for me to join the Air Force but for me to become an officer. What could have possessed her to think such a thing could be possible for a poor, black boy in 1943?

“Is this a path you want to pursue, Alphonso?” Mrs. Catlett asked. The question buzzed around in my head all day long and throughout the weeks that followed.

I talked it over with my twin brother, and he was interested too. Neither of us could have imagined how Mrs. Catlett’s idea would take up residence in our minds and provide us with motivation, focus, and purpose in the coming years.

Mrs. Catlett kept providing us with books to read and even passed the reading list to our seventh-grade teacher. I later realized she had inspired me to be a teacher when I eventually left the Air Force. I’ve never forgotten the power of one committed, positive adult to change a child’s life forever. I came back to visit Mrs. Catlett over the years to update her on my career and thank her again and again for believing in me and helping me see a future I could not have imagined on my own.

Now, my brother and I had a powerful dream and clarity on how to achieve it. But how were we going to pay for college?

“There are options,” Mrs. Catlett told us. “You have two ways: through a sports scholarship or through an academic scholarship.”

This had implications for our choice of high school. When it came time to select ours, we had a couple of choices. The closest high school to our home was Dunbar, which had a reputation for excelling at preparing black students for higher education, but my brother and I had

different plans. We were inspired by Jesse Owens winning four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics and became fixated on the idea of becoming track athletes and going to college on an athletic scholarship. This was not an unreasonable goal; we were both thin as rails and had always been fast. We had heard that Cardozo High School had the best track coach in Washington, DC—Sal Hall. Coach Hall had a proven record of training black boys to become champions.

We talked it over with our parents, and learned they didn't really want us to go to Cardozo; after all, we lived a couple of blocks from the best college prep school for black kids in Washington. First, we had to convince our parents to allow us to go to Cardozo High School, then we had to convince Coach Hall that we had what it took and to get a district exception to attend his school.

We called Coach Hall and asked if we could come and visit him. My brother and I walked the thirty minutes to the school from our home, brimming with all the confidence that fifteen-year-old boys could muster. Coach Hall was our ticket to college, and we could not fail. Coach Hall's office was small and cramped, but what captured our attention at once was the case of trophies along one wall. We opened the conversation, saying directly, "Coach Hall, we want to become champions!" Coach Hall had an athletic build, the ability to size you up in one glance, and a no-nonsense voice that was used to giving orders that were obeyed instantly. He looked down at the two scrawny twins before him with skepticism. We hardly looked like championship material.

"Are you willing to work hard, as hard as necessary, to become champions?" he asked in his customary no-nonsense tone.

Somehow, when we both enthusiastically shouted "Yes!" he saw our determination. He sat up in his chair and decided, "Well, I can make you champions!" He got us assigned to Cardozo.

Coach Hall worked our butts off. He had us run a golf course in boots to build our leg and lung capacity. If one of us complained, "Coach, my legs are sore," he would shoot back, "Get your parents to rub your legs down—keep those boots on!"

Or if we said, "Coach, my side is hurting," he'd respond with: "Good. That means your body is developing. Run through the pain. You can't be a champion if you don't run through the pain. I'm going to

tell you the secret between a champion and a wannabe. A champion runs through the pain, and the wannabe just can't."

Coach Hall understood that becoming a champion had nothing to do with size; it had everything to do with determination, growth, and ability. And sure enough, in time, the pain disappeared as our bodies grew stronger and faster.

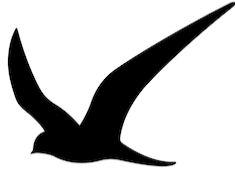
We also joined the High School Cadet Corps our first two years of high school. We learned about the military and wore magnificent uniforms with sabers. We joined the United States Navy Reserves our last two years in high school. We only had to meet one Saturday a month and two weeks a year training on Naval aircraft carrier CV-42, called the *FDR*.

Between training and studying for our classes, we didn't have much time for other things, but I enjoyed high school very much. We were very popular. The girls would hang around us and always wanted to feel my extra little finger. They got so excited that I started putting my left hand in my pocket when they were around.

By the time I graduated, I had won the national high school indoor mile championship at the Penn Relays and was one of the best high school milers in America. My brother and three others had set the world record for the high school mile relay. We spent most of our time studying and running track. We traveled to track meets up and down the East Coast, competing and winning. Because we were identical twins and both went by Al Jones, we were sometimes mistaken for being the same person.

Spectators and other coaches would criticize Coach Hall for overworking "the poor track star," as we ran and won both sprint and distance races. He finally had to show us together to make it clear that we were two different people.

We graduated from Cardozo in June 1950 with high honors. In the end, the grueling effort and constant hard work paid off: Between my brother and me, we were offered scholarships to seventeen colleges: three scholastic and fourteen athletic for track. Learning that if I worked hard, I could achieve my goals was a lesson I would apply again and again throughout my life.



AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN

I had been a member of the Navy Reserve since high school, and in 1952, upon leaving Michigan, I applied to take the test for admission to the Navy's flight program. I felt I was well-positioned to be considered for the program because I had three and a half years in the Naval Reserve (while in high school and college), and I had completed all of the requirements at a top-notch academic institution, but I was not accepted into the program. The Navy did not want me. I felt betrayed, devastated, and angry. I had worked so hard for so long to realize my dream, and the Navy had thrown it back in my face.

In 1948, President Truman desegregated the Army and the Navy, but it had only been eighty-three years prior—one person's lifetime—that slaves had been emancipated, and it was still sixteen years before the passage of the Civil Rights Act. It would take time for Truman's groundbreaking decree to be fully implemented in the Navy, our nation's oldest branch of the military.

Fortunately, in 1947, President Truman established the US Air Force, through the National Security Act, ordering that it be desegregated from the start. I was in the right place at the right time. Because the Navy had rejected my application to flight school, I decided to explore my possibilities with the new branch.

Unbeknownst to the Navy Reserve, I enlisted in the United States Air Force in 1952 under the name of Alphonso B. Jones (my birth name is Alphonsus B. Jones) and was sent to basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas. One of my first jobs was on a detail to

mop the floors at the officers' club. When I mentioned to the white sergeant in charge that I was going to be an officer one day, he laughed like this was one of the funniest things he had ever heard. After I became an officer, I went back and greeted the sergeant, reminding him how I had worked for him mopping floors a few years back. He said he remembered me and that he never thought I could do it.

Within a month of graduating from basic training, I signed up for the entrance exam, passed the test, and was assigned to the Aviation Officer Candidate School, the precursor to our current Air Force Academy. At last, my dream was beginning to come true, and I would be forever grateful to the Air Force for giving me a chance to serve my country as an officer—an honor the Navy seemed unwilling to bestow on black men at the time.

As soon as I was accepted into the Air Force aviation school, I sent the Navy a copy of my orders, requesting a discharge from the Navy Reserves (since they didn't want me in *their* air corps). With my determination to fly, I was a bit of a hot potato, and I think they were glad to be rid of me. I received an honorable discharge from the Navy Reserve "for the convenience of the government" dated the day I was accepted into the Air Force aviation school.

When I first arrived on the base, I was impressed seeing a group of young men walking around the base so sharp and spick and span. I asked who they were and was told they were men training to be officers. They even walked a special way and were never seen moving in a relaxed manner or running anywhere. I wondered if I could be trained to be as disciplined as they were if I were accepted into their ranks. I had to work hard to meet their standards. Those who did not were "washed out" of the officer training program.

In many respects, the Air Force aviation school was like a finishing school for men. We learned how to wear our uniform, how to walk, talk, eat, sit, and so many other things that made us into an elite group called "officers." We had to remove any loose threads on our uniforms, and at our daily inspection, superior officers checked to make sure these "cables" were cut off. They also checked that we had on a pristine, properly creased uniform and that our ties and belt buckles were worn in a standard manner. Our shoes had to be highly polished daily. We learned how to give commands and lead men and how to conduct

ourselves as representatives of our country and the United States Air Force.

The task was daunting, and I wondered if I would be able to rise to the challenge. I was willing to give it my best effort. If I could successfully complete the program, I would then go on to flying school and earn a commission as Second Lieutenant. I was grateful that the US military was giving me this opportunity. I made a commitment to do my very best.

Shortly after I arrived on the base, I met a fellow incoming black cadet named George Lomax. George was soft-spoken and knowledgeable and had a studious air about him. We became fast friends.

While the cadet program was “integrated,” there were only a total of five or six black cadets out of a total population of maybe two hundred. A few of us were incoming, and a few were upperclassmen. As we ran into one another, we became friends.

One day, George and I were having lunch in the main dining hall when suddenly someone yelled, “Cadets, ten-hut!” We all snapped to attention at once, wondering what was going on. Imagine our surprise when a black man walked through the room to his reserved chair, where he sat with his staff and said, “At ease,” and everyone sat back down.

I asked in amazement, “Who is that guy?!”

George replied, “That is Cadet Colonel William Crouch. He is the cadet commander in charge of the entire cadet corps. His job is to look out for the welfare of all of the cadets on the base.”

I exclaimed, “Get out of town! We’ve got to figure out how to meet that guy!”

This turned out not to be as simple as it sounded because, as underclassmen, we were under strict guidelines regarding how to interact with senior officers. We knew that we would need to find an informal setting where we could strike up a conversation and not be in violation of the code of conduct for new cadets. We felt certain that if we found the right environment, he would be receptive.

We began to hang around the base exchange because we’d come to the conclusion that it was the only place where we could all be completely relaxed and informal. Finally, our paths crossed.

George was timid and bashful while I was brash and assertive; so, I made my approach, saying, “Colonel Crouch, we’re new cadets, and we’ve been wanting to meet you. We just arrived on base a few months ago.”

He greeted us warmly and asked where we were from, and we had a very nice conversation. What we didn’t know at the time was that part of his job was to have a relationship with all two hundred of the cadets on the base so that if there were any problems, the cadets would bring them to him. This was an essential function of the cadet commander role. We just were happy to meet him.

I started a cadet drill team. I thought about the great drill team I could create with the sharpest and smartest cadets in the Air Force. I mentioned the idea to a group of my classmates, who were willing to give it a try. In a short time, we were ready. I got advice from one of our instructors, who suggested we wear a white cover over our dress brim hats, along with white gloves and scarves as part of our drill team uniform. He had us audition before a panel of officers that included the school commander. They were excited over the idea of our cadet drill team leading the march of the entire cadet corps in the next base parade and performing special maneuvers that I learned from a book about the Queen of England’s special drill team. I was promoted to cadet captain, and we were invited to perform at all the base parades. I kept pushing myself to the limit of my ability. I was always grateful that the Air Force took my ideas seriously and allowed me the room to grow. This support followed me throughout my career.

After completion of the Aviation Officer Candidate School, George Lomax and I were sent to the same Cadet Flying School at Ellington AFB, San Antonio, Texas. We were given tests to see if there were any physical problems that would disqualify us from flying. I failed the eye test and was disqualified for pilot school. I was told that I had a condition called “atmospheric apparition,” which means that I have trouble gauging the distance of an object, which could impact my ability to land a plane safely. I was disappointed, but I wasn’t crushed because they immediately suggested an alternative that would allow me to fly. I could become a navigator. I passed all the tests that qualified me for the navigation school at James Connally Air Force Base in Waco, Texas. In 1951, the base was converted to an academic and flight training facility

for navigators who were slated for eventual assignment to the Strategic Air Command. My friend Cadet George Lomax and I went into training together at Waco. I graduated with high potential and was promoted to Second Lieutenant, Navigator.

Master navigators were always in demand and in short supply. So, of course, I decided to become one. I wanted to be one of the very best navigators in the Air Force. I knew I had reached this goal when high-ranking officers started recommending me for difficult missions for which only the best were considered. And when they came up with the idea of refueling bombers mid-air so that they could bomb a target anywhere in the world, they started looking for the best navigators who could deliver 100-percent accuracy every time. The top brass started putting together a short list of officers who could get the job done, and my name was on the list. I was the only black officer included on it.

Word got around. Lieutenant Jones? He's damn good! The best we got! These words were even written down on a list of airmen given to the commander to guide his selection of his crew—praise I was unaware of until the day of our first mission when the aircraft commander teased, "Al, are you really that good?" to which I had to answer in truth, "Yes, sir. I am. That's why I am here with you. You asked for the best, and I am among the best we've got."

The other aircraft commanders I flew with repeated the joke. After flying with me for a few weeks, some event would inevitably prompt them to say, "You know, you're the damn best I have ever seen. I didn't believe it until I saw it with my own eyes." I always thought what he really meant was, "You are the best *black* navigator I have ever seen." But you take what you can get.

A general asked me why I was so driven to be among the best. He said, "It's got to be hard to keep up." Growing emotional, I said, "The Navy turned me down. I am glad the Air Force took a chance on me, to see what I could do, and I will always give everything I have out of appreciation."

I was assigned to Altus AFB in Oklahoma in 1954. When I arrived at the Altus airport in regular clothes, waiting for a staff car to pick me up, I saw an old man who looking around like he was lost or confused. He was shabbily dressed, about my size, but heavier.

I asked, "Can I help you?" He said I could and that he was looking for the Majestic Hotel. I looked in the phone book, but I couldn't find anything, and said, "There's no Majestic Hotel listed."

He took out a large wad of cash and began to explain why he was looking for the Majestic Hotel, and I said, "Put that money away! Don't show that much money in public!" I told him to convert his cash into a cashier's check and change just enough into traveler's checks to get him back home. Then I showed him my own traveler's checks.

"Where do you live?" I asked him.

"Alabama. My pappy died, and he gave me this money," he said.

As we were talking, the old man distractedly stopped another man walking out of the airport to get a cab, again, pulling out his wad of money. The newcomer then pulled me to the side and proceeded to try to get me to help him con the old guy's money from him.

Wanting nothing to do with the scheme, I told the old man that I was going to go back into the airport and find a police officer to help him. I waved down the first policeman I found, explaining that there was an old man with a fistful of money who appeared to need help.

"Which way?" he said excitedly. I pointed toward the airport exit I had come in from, and he took off running in that direction! I followed in close pursuit, but by the time we reached the spot where I had been talking to the two men, they had both disappeared.

Laughing, the officer told me, "Those two rascals were working a con game on you to cheat you out of your money! The way it works is that the second man talks you into putting the old man into a cab where you can rob him. But what really happens is the cab driver is in on the con, and they rob you." The police officer went on to say, "You must be honest, because the con only works on dishonest people." They were very good at what they did because I never suspected a thing.

While stationed at Altus AFB, I was sent to Elmendorf AFB, Anchorage, Alaska, to learn Arctic navigation over the North Pole. Altus AFB and Elmendorf AFB were both part of the classified mission to refuel airplanes in the air. We were sent to Alaska for special training, where we wore special warm clothes for weather twenty degrees below zero in the winter. It stayed dark for nearly twenty-four hours during that month of the year. (In June, it was the opposite: nearly twenty-four hours of daylight.)

Our heavy winter gear protected us from the elements, and I wore special goggles to protect my eyes. The cloth over my nose and mouth collected ice crystals. I had to move slowly to keep from overheating under my clothes. If I started sweating, I had to go inside and change my underwear to keep the sweat from turning to ice.

Once, I flew a mission to the North Pole and back using special electronic navigation equipment. The pilots became frightened when the compass needle started spinning. They had never seen a compass spin like that. As part of my navigator training, I knew that the compass would *always* behave this way near the North Pole. The purpose of the flight was for me, as navigator, and the pilots to experience polar navigation near the magnetic north, firsthand. Once we flew past the North Pole, the needle slowly came back into proper operation. The pilots had great respect for my navigation skills after that.

Life in Alaska involves certain dangers that you don't have to worry about elsewhere. Elmendorf AFB was in the middle of nowhere, and there were no fences defining the perimeter of the base or keeping wild animals out. Directly adjacent to the buildings were large, wooded areas on all sides. One day while I was out walking on base, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise, but as I looked around, I saw nothing amiss. My mind went into alert status, and I thought, *Am I in trouble? Am I being stalked? By what? A bear? A wolf? Maybe.* I started to reason my way through the situation. A bear or a pack of wolves would have made enough noise at a distance to alert me to run safely to a building. I began to suspect it was a lone wolf on my scent—likely one too old to run with the pack, who now had to hunt alone.

What to do?! Run? No, anything stalking me could catch me before I reached safety. I still could not see the wolf, but I could now hear the sound of branches breaking as he approached my location. I began to realize that I was too far out to make a run for the closest building and would need to somehow distract the wolf to allow myself a few seconds more to make the run. I started picking up rocks, thinking that if the wolf showed himself, I would throw rocks and scare him away.

The wolf came into view, and I made a short charge toward him and threw the rocks I had gathered at its face, shouting for help. A couple of the rocks landed, striking the wolf's snout and causing it to yelp like a frightened dog. I immediately turned and began running toward the

building. All of the commotion attracted a few GIs in the building who immediately grabbed their rifles and raced out to help me.

I ran into the building and to safety as my rescuers ran past me, chasing the wolf and killing it. Later, they said I had done everything right, but that walking in Alaska can be dangerous to your health. They also said, “You’d have to be an idiot to walk around Alaska without a rifle.” My answer: “You got that right!” The funny part was I was actually a trained marksman—I just hadn’t carried a weapon because I hadn’t known any better.

I returned to Altus Air Force Base in Oklahoma to continue my training, but soon I had to deal with a problem of a different sort. Some of our enlisted men came to my office with a problem. They said that in the segregated town, there were not enough homes on base or in town for black families, though there were plenty of lovely homes in town for white families. As the first black officer ever assigned to Altus Air Force Base, they thought I was in a position to exert some influence.

Right away, I called the Junior Chamber of Commerce and asked to speak at their next meeting. I asked if the city was planning on building a black home development as the black military community was struggling with a severe housing shortage. I told them that black members of the military were paid the same as white members and could afford good housing.

“Our ‘Nigras’ are very happy with the way things are!” one lady piped up.

“No, they’re not,” I said. I explained that I had met some of the leaders of the black community in town. They wanted better housing too. They would not tell her their true feelings because they did not want to lose their jobs.

I was so angry, I got up and left the meeting. I can’t stand stupid people.

A friend in town called that afternoon and told me not to come back to town after dark. I lived on base, so I felt safe, despite the warning. Meanwhile, I sent a copy of my report about the incident to a high-ranking friend in Washington and asked him to see that President Truman got it. My sister, Beulah, worked in the White House answering and sorting the mail. My report was put on the president’s desk.

The Air Force sent a special team to Altus to check out the housing situation mentioned in my report. The following week, I received orders transferring me to Bergstrom AFB, Austin, Texas. Clearly, the Air Force was concerned for my safety. Years later, I visited Altus and saw that excellent housing had been built for black local and military families. An officer is supposed to do all he can for the welfare of his men and their families. I was happy to see the concerns I had raised had, eventually, been addressed.

Bergstrom AFB was designated as a Strategic Air Command base within the military and housed many critical, top-secret activities. I arrived a few days early to get settled in before my start date. I drove through the gates to enter the base in a brand-new Ford convertible (my present to myself for my promotion to Second Lieutenant). I was dressed in civilian clothing. The guard on duty glanced at the military ID card I offered and casually waved me through. I drove a few feet, then slowly came to a stop, shaking my head, and reversed the car back through the gate.

I addressed the guard harshly: “Stand at attention, airman!” He immediately snapped to attention.

“Do you realize you are in gross dereliction of duty?” I exclaimed. “Either you failed to render proper courtesy to an officer or you failed to accurately read the identification I presented. Which is it?”

The guard began to stammer out a response, but I interrupted him. “Do you know what would happen if I reported this infraction? This is a highly classified facility and laxity this morning is inconsistent with base protocol and entirely unacceptable. I will not tolerate insubordination or mediocre performance! Do you understand me?” And I drove on through the gate onto the base.

I knew full well that I was likely the first black officer the guard had ever seen, but failure to salute an officer, in or out of uniform, is a serious breach of military courtesy. I also knew that other black officers were being transferred from Altus, Oklahoma to Bergstrom and believed it was important to establish from the get-go that we would not tolerate being treated differently than any other similarly ranked officer.

The military was a unique integrating institution in America at this time in our nation’s history. It was a “society within a society” that operated according to its own unique hierarchical code. Where you

stood in the hierarchy was broadcast to all, via badges and insignia on your uniform, and was clearly indicated on the military identification you carried with you at all times. Rank was the great equalizer. It shredded the norms of race relations prevalent in the broader society by superimposing a new framework for accruing, distributing, and demonstrating authority and respect. The rules for how junior and senior military personnel were to interact were clearly codified in handbooks that detailed proper military protocol. Infractions were punishable within the closed society's disciplinary system. The playing field was still not entirely level, promotions could still go to the candidate who "felt like a better fit," but the day-to-day racial microaggressions supported in the broader society were not tolerated in the military. Young black men, such as myself, joined the military in droves for the opportunities for career advancement and skill acquisition that were on offer, but often stayed for the benefits of working in an environment where, for the first time, racial prejudice was not tolerated as a matter of official policy.

When I reported to duty to my commanding officer, he looked at me sternly and said, "Oh, so you are the one who is causing so much trouble. The whole base is in an uproar! You chewed out a gate guard and word has gotten around that you are not taking any @#%\$ from anyone." I swallowed hard and waited for him to continue. "By the way, you were entirely correct to reprimand that gate guard, Lieutenant Jones. Security protocols on this base are critical, given the strategic nature of our work." I sighed with relief that my superior officer, and by extension the US military, had my back, once again. When I rose to leave his office, he looked up at me with a sideways grin and said, "You're a feisty little fellow, aren't you?" I just smiled and continued on my way.

My mission at Bergstrom was to be prepared at any moment to refuel bomber aircraft anywhere in the world, over the ocean, so that they could fly on to bomb a Russian target. The KB29 plane I flew was developed to solve the problem of refueling long-distance bomber aircraft. When the B29s first came out, they could fly higher, further, faster, and with more bombs than any plane the Germans had. The US was very successful in bombing German airfields and factories and dominating the skies. But by the mid-1950s, the B29 had become obsolete as a bomber and was modified to become a refueling aircraft

and rechristened the KB29. The KB29 could carry aircraft fuel for air-to-air refueling on a grand scale. With the KB29, we could fly so far that we sometimes utilized two crews—one that worked while the other slept on the plane.

There was no room for error in air-to-air refueling. Accuracy needed to be 100 percent because the bombers we met were always very low on fuel. We performed mid-air refuels again and again, never knowing if we were participating in a live engagement or simply a training exercise. Either way, the planes we were refueling were actually low on fuel, and so the mission was critical. Fortunately, our country never had to use this capability on a wartime footing—but we were ready.



LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

1955 was the year Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama. It was a time when the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was starting to emerge as a great leader fighting for equal rights. Progress was slow, but we were, indeed, making it.

Like many places in the US at that time, the city of Austin, Texas was plagued with racial injustice and highly segregated. I remember, one day, my friend Melvin Peeples drove by and invited me to join him and two blonde women for a drive. I said thanks, but declined, saying I had an appointment. I just thought that driving with two blonde women in a car wasn't a good idea in a segregated Texas city. I felt no need to go looking for trouble.

Despite segregation, Austin was a great place to live. It had a large black community, the Huston-Tillotson University, and many black restaurants, stores, and bars. My fellow black officers and I took evening courses at the university and met the local students. We attended the university dances and were very popular.

One day, I saw a beautiful young student walking across campus, and my life hasn't been the same since. The campus was full of beautiful young women. I don't know why I was so attracted to this particular one, but it was love at first sight. This young co-ed was slim and had a fair complexion, with hazel eyes and light brown hair. I caught sight of a beautiful smile and thought I'd be the happiest and luckiest person in the world if I could see that smile for the rest of my life.

I found out that she was friendly with a young man named Foxy, a very popular guy on campus. “Friendly” was about all she could be because I later found out that her father drove her to school each day and picked her up after her classes were over. Foxy was about my height, with an easy manner. I knew that Foxy was interested in hanging out with the young officers in town. We were both from Washington, DC. I had a car and a house, and he wanted to be friends.

I approached Foxy and asked him if he knew this beautiful young woman, I had seen walking across campus. He said, “Oh, yes. Her name is Muriel Warren, and she lives on a dairy farm.” He was actually more interested in being friends with me than hanging out with Muriel, if you can imagine that.

The next time I saw her, I said, “Hi, Miriam!”

“My name is Muriel,” she said shyly with a soft Texas accent and walked on down the street. I would have to do better than that.

Muriel had an older sister, Jeffrey, who was married to a sergeant named Archer. I looked Sergeant Archer up and asked him if he knew someone who would rent me a room in town. He said he had a house and that his wife was away at college, so he had plenty of room. So, I moved in with Archie and bided my time, waiting for him to invite me out to his wife’s family farm.

In the meantime, I read books on milk cows so that I would be ready to impress Muriel’s father when the time was right. At long last, Archie invited me out to the farm. I knew Muriel would be there. Archie introduced me to the family, and her father, Otho B. Warren, took me on a tour of his dairy farm. Mr. Warren was my height, was in excellent health, and had a sunny disposition. I liked his easy manner and great smile.

Mr. Warren was a successful businessman who owned fifty acres in Travis County, Texas and operated a dairy farm containing between fifty and one hundred cows that supplied Superior Dairies with milk. He was also the chef at Breckenridge Hospital and the owner of a restaurant. He was an educated man who taught adult education at night at the Pilot Knob School. He was known locally as ‘Fessor Warren. Otho was a hard worker but always wore a smile and appeared to enjoy life very much.

While on the tour, I asked him about his milk yield per cow.

“You know about dairy cows?” he asked, surprised.

“A little,” I said modestly. (That was true.) And just like that I was “in” with Mr. Warren.

When we got back from our tour of the farm, he handed me a can of beer. I didn’t even drink beer but I drank that one happily.

Archer had told Muriel’s parents that I was one of the new black officers on base. Mrs. Warren clearly thought I would be a good “catch” for her youngest daughter, Muriel. Mrs. Warren was a beautiful woman in excellent health with straight black hair that she wore pinned up in a pleasing arrangement. She had a medium build and very fair skin because her grandfather was white. Muriel’s parents did not know that Muriel and I had already met.

The visit went well and I was invited back. The next time I visited, Muriel greeted me with an apron around her waist and a wooden spoon in her hand, as if to suggest she had cooked the meal, but I could tell by the way Mrs. Warren was checking on the progress of the food that she had done the cooking. After all, my mother had taught me how to cook, so I knew about these things. I thought to myself, *This child can’t cook...but what the hell. I can hire a cook.*

When I next saw Muriel on campus, I approached her and struck up a conversation. “Hi, Muriel, how are you?” I asked, making sure I pronounced her name properly.

“I’m just fine,” she said.

“Would you like to go out to the movies sometime?” I asked.

“Yes, but you have to check with my parents first,” she replied.

“Well, I’ll just come on out to the farm and see them,” I suggested.

I drove out to the farm the next evening. Mr. Warren was not there, but Mrs. Warren welcomed me warmly and cut me a slice of pecan pie. I asked her, “How did you know this was my favorite kind of pie?” I probably would have said that no matter what kind of pie she had served me, but pecan actually was my favorite. As she piled a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top of my slice, I remarked, “This pecan pie is so fresh-tasting.” She said, “The reason it tastes so fresh is because we have our own wild pecan trees on the farm.” I was sold!

After a while, I said, “Do you think it would be okay if I took Muriel out to the movies sometime?”

She said, “Well, that would be just fine.”

Muriel and I began dating with her parents' blessing, and many more visits and delicious homemade meals followed. Muriel's mom spoiled me to no end, preparing special dishes that she knew I liked. Muriel told me that her mom and dad liked me very much, and I got along with them very well.

One of our first dates was to a drive-in movie about an hour away. By the time the film was over, Muriel had fallen asleep. I drove back to the farm. After an hour, I didn't recognize the area, so I woke Muriel up.

I said, "Muriel, I don't recognize this area. We should be at your house by now."

Muriel answered, "Al, you are going the wrong way. How long have you been driving?!"

I said, "About an hour."

Muriel exclaimed, "Oh, my goodness, it's going to take us two hours to get back to the farm from here. We are going to be really late! I am in big trouble. We have to think up something to tell my parents that they will believe!"

I said, "No, we are going to tell them the truth."

Muriel cried, "Nobody's going to believe the truth!"

"I can't help what they believe, but I'm going to tell the truth. You fell asleep in the car and I took a wrong turn and ended up driving an hour out of the way." After a few minutes, I asked nervously, "What about your father? Do you think your father will be waiting for me with his shotgun?" I was never so acutely aware of what it meant to be in Texas bringing a farmer's daughter home two hours late.

Muriel replied, "He hasn't got a shotgun."

I suspected she was only trying to relieve my fears.

We got to the farm and both of her parents were standing outside the house. Mercifully, Mr. Warren was not, in fact, holding a shotgun, but he did have a belt strap in his hand. With my heart pounding, I explained what had happened, and to Muriel's great surprise, her parents believed me. They had been scared to death for our safety. They thought we had been in an accident, or worse, a run-in with locals who didn't like the idea of a black man driving a brand-new car.

I was relieved that her parents believed me because by that time, I had secretly decided I was going to marry Muriel, and I didn't want to

do anything to mess things up with her parents. I was just waiting until we knew each other better to pop the question.

I had been shy around girls all my life. I was so busy working toward my dream of traveling around the world all those years that I really hadn't given girls much thought. For the first time, I was in love. I found someone I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. I was as surprised as anyone by this turn of events. I thought about her all the time, and for the first time, my dream expanded to include her. I needed her in my life or it would no longer have meaning.

One evening after a date, we found a location not far from her house where we could park the car and talk and kiss.

I said, "Muriel, my dream is to travel the world as an officer in the US Air Force. I want you to come along with me on this adventure. Will you marry me?"

Muriel smiled coyly and said, "Yes! What took you so long to ask?"

I asked, "Do you think your father would approve?"

Muriel said, "Oh, yes. Daddy likes you very much. I'll set up a meeting with him, and I'll call you and let you know when you can come by to ask him yourself."

When the appointed day and time arrived, as I drove out to the farm, I was surprised to realize how nervous I was, and my head was filled with thoughts of what I should say to convince Mr. Warren to give me his precious daughter's hand in marriage.

When I arrived, Mr. Warren was sitting down in the kitchen drinking a beer, and he smiled in greeting, which gave me a glimmer of hope.

I said, "Mr. Warren, I want to marry your daughter, and I want you to know that I love her and will take care of her for the rest of her life."

Mr. Warren paused and said, "I am okay with that, but I need for you to promise me one thing. I want Muriel to complete her college studies here in Austin and graduate with her degree."

I replied, "Of course."

He handed me a beer, and that was that. I drank the second beer of my life sitting in his kitchen, and I almost liked it. After a moment, he called Muriel in and told her he had given permission for us to marry. She smiled and gave me a big hug and kiss.

To my surprise, Muriel had been studying with Father Dayberry to become a Catholic for some time. She had secretly set her sights on me

all along. Muriel and I were married on April 14, 1956, at Holy Cross Catholic Church.

My parents drove down from Washington for the wedding. I think they were relieved that I had found someone special since I had been so driven and obsessed with my career that I had never had time for girls before.

Muriel's father took them on a tour of Austin at night. He liked to yank people's chains. He told my parents before the wedding that he was going to attend in a clean pair of overalls and dye the gray in his hair with Easter-egg coloring. He, of course, had already rented a tux.

I had invited my all-white military crew to attend our all-black wedding in the heart of an all-black community in Texas. Their presence created a bit of a stir because, while the US Air Force was fully integrated at this time, Texas was not. In 1956, if you were to walk through Austin, Texas, you would have seen "whites only" signs at restaurants, hotels, pools, and water fountains.

Bergstrom Air Force Base, however, had been fully integrated since 1948. I had been assigned to a racially integrated crew, and we had lived together, slept together, and relied upon each other to be ready to fly to any point on the earth at a moment's notice if our country called on us. We were truly a band of brothers. My crew included some of the most important people in my life, and I wanted them to be present at my wedding.

After an initial ripple of surprise as my white groomsmen arrived in full military dress uniform complete with sabers, sashes, and white gloves, the wedding proceeded without incident. At the conclusion of the service, my crew formed an honor guard outside with their sabers upheld, creating an archway Muriel and I walked through as we exited the church. This was a great honor they bestowed upon us to show their love and support for me as a fellow crew member. In many ways, this archway was a metaphor for how the military created a path forward into an integrated future for so many young black men such as myself.

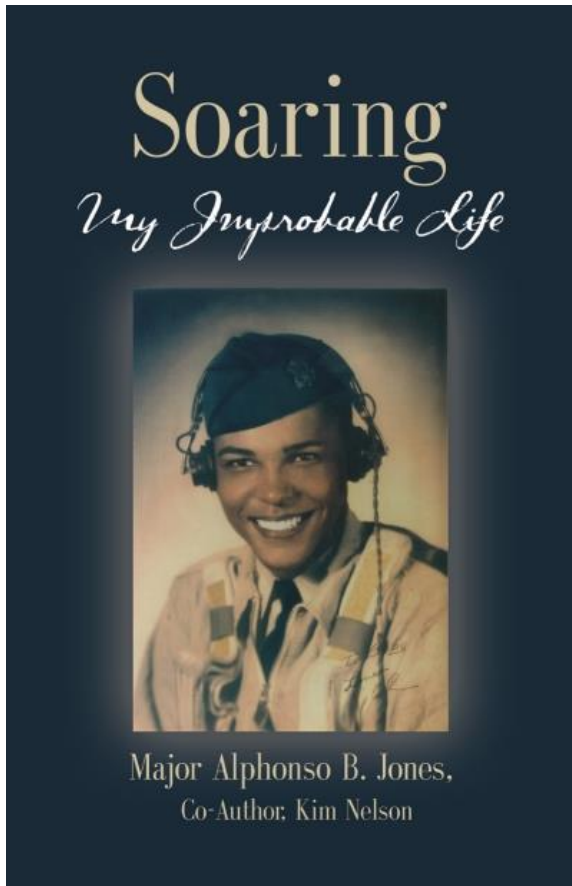
Muriel and I held our wedding reception in the church hall. Family and close friends were invited back to the house for a party and cards. We were so happy that we had found one another. We were blessed.

After our honeymoon in Monterey, Mexico, Muriel and I moved into a beautiful home in Austin. I couldn't wait to come home after work every day. We just loved to be together.

My career in the military began to really accelerate as the Vietnam conflict heated up. During my first two years of marriage, I was reassigned to the 96th Air Refueling Squadron, which was part of the elite United States Strategic Air Command (SAC), commanded by General Curtis LeMay, to secretly fly bombers nonstop from bases in America anywhere in the world at a moment's notice and destroy any enemy that attacked us or our allies. His tanker planes could carry enough fuel to secretly rendezvous with the bombers and their fighter escort planes to make sure they had enough fuel on their return home.

I was at the right place at the right time for my career aspirations. Could I do my part? I was going to give it my best effort.

The Cold War was raging in 1953, and I was part of a top-secret scheme of air-to-air refueling of B52 bombers with a range of 8,800 miles, far superior to the B25's range of 3,000 miles. A few years later, we had the B36, which had a range of 9,941 miles! We liked it so much, we built a total of 384 B36s! I was training to navigate tanker planes to rendezvous with the bombers. I set a goal to become known as a Master Navigator who could get the job done.



Soaring, My Improbable Life is the inspiring story of a poor, African American boy growing up in the Great Depression, who dreams of traveling the world. With audacity, focus, and resilience, he navigates obstacles to lead a truly remarkable life.

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