



### **John W. Rogers, Captain, U.S. Army Air Corps**

**A**s a boy growing up in Knoxville, Tennessee, John W. Rogers' head was in the sky. He dreamed of flying and built model airplanes out of cheese boxes and copper wire and walked miles to a local airport to watch the real things take flight. But, it would take persistence, patience and the pressure from civil rights organizations before he would realize that dream of flight as a member of the valiant 99th Fighter Squadron—a Tuskegee Airmen.

Rogers began his flight training in the first Civilian Pilot Training Program offered to African Americans in Chicago, and received his pilot's license in September 1940. He attempted to join the U.S. Army Air Corps, but was rejected because he was black.

The "Tuskegee Experiment" gave Rogers his opportunity and, on December 19, 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he was sworn in as an aviation cadet. He graduated from flight training at Tuskegee Army Airfield, on August 5, 1942, and was assigned to the original 99th Fighter Squadron. He began his combat tour in April 1943 and flew more than 100 combat missions in North Africa, Sicily and Italy.

This courageous member of the Fighting 99th earned an Air Medal with an Oak Leaf Cluster and the European, African and Mediterranean Ribbon with three Bronze Stars. He was discharged as a Captain on August 13, 1945.

After the war, Rogers earned his law degree and practiced law in Cook County in Illinois, before serving in the judicial system. He retired, after a long career, on December 7, 1998, from the Circuit Court of Cook County, Juvenile Division, where he served as Supervising Judge of the Delinquency Division.

Rogers lives in Chicago with his wife, Gwendolyn D. Laroche, whom he married on February 3, 2001, after a long friendship.

### **William R. Thompson, Lt. Col., U.S. Air Force (Ret.)**

**O**n June 2, 1941, William R. Thompson entered the military to serve his country and, after 35 years of service, retired from the United States Air Force as a lieutenant colonel on Jan. 26, 1976.

Thompson earned his wings as one of the first members of the Tuskegee Airmen, who trained at Tuskegee Army Airfield in Alabama. After graduation he was assigned to the trailblazing 99th Fighter Squadron.

He, like the other Tuskegee Airmen, waited impatiently to prove themselves in combat abroad, until April 1943 when the unit was shipped to North Africa under the leadership of Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Thompson, a young lieutenant, was assigned to Davis' staff.

During his tour of combat duty in the sky over North Africa, Thompson earned an African Middle Eastern Medal with nine Battle Stars and an American Unit Citation.

Prior to joining the military, Thompson graduated from Hampton Institute in Virginia, where he earned a bachelor of science degree in Business Administration and also took pilot training. After retiring from the military, he was a teacher and school administrator.

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on January 26, 1916, Thompson now makes his home in Chicago, Ill., with his wife, Vera. The Thompsons have two sons, William and Kenneth.

