

**AFEHRI File 19-10**

**Research Materials/Source Documents  
ENLISTED FIRSTS**

**FILE TITLE: 1st Black MSgt: MSgt Ellsworth H. Dansby**

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## Black pilot relays childhood dreams of flight

DECATUR (AP) — Ellsworth H. Dansby, who made history as the first black master sergeant in the U.S. Air Corps, said he caught the flying bug by watching bugs fly.

Dansby said that in early childhood, he began "reading anything about flying and watching anything that flew — from bugs to fruit flies.

"You can get it out of books, but I like to watch a housefly do a half-roll off the ceiling to get going and do the same to land.

"It is also a good maneuver to do if you are flying," said Dansby, 72, who will be honored Friday with several other members of the 99th Squadron at a Black History Month ceremony in Chicago.

During World War II, Dansby became the U.S. Air Corps' first black master sergeant in the nation's first black fighter squadron. After the war, he returned to Decatur to campaign actively for racial integration.

Dansby's earliest flying experience involved launching himself from a steep hill on a frame strung with bedsheets. He and friends built countless models and even a full-size airplane powered by a motorcycle engine.

In 1927, without any formal classes, Dansby first flew alone at a farm airstrip near Dalton City. He was 12 years old.

"A buddy had been taking lessons, but I was always there to listen and observe," he said.

"His parents were gone and we got the ship a-going and he got it off the ground and back. Then it was my turn.

"I never saw a smaller landing strip in my life. It was a fraction of a postage stamp."

Dansby continued building and experimenting with aircraft in high school — "winning every trophy in this part of the country for design of aircraft and power structures.

"It was for the fun of doing, of competing and being as good or better than anyone else."

After high school, he was ready for formal training, but he was denied entrance to air schools because he was black.

His chance came in early 1941 under a new U.S. Army Air Corps enlistment program.

"I borrowed my dad's car and drove to Chanute Airfield — and sure enough, they would take my application," he said.



**Ellsworth H. Dansby**

AP

Dansby passed a battery of tests and was sworn in the same day — the second black in the nation admitted to the Air Corps.

He started as a technical school instructor and gained flight status after World War II broke out.

Other doorways opened after President Roosevelt signed an order integrating the armed forces, though blacks and whites were kept in separate units.

Dansby joined the country's first black fighter squadron, the 99th, formed at Tuskegee (Ala.) Air Base.