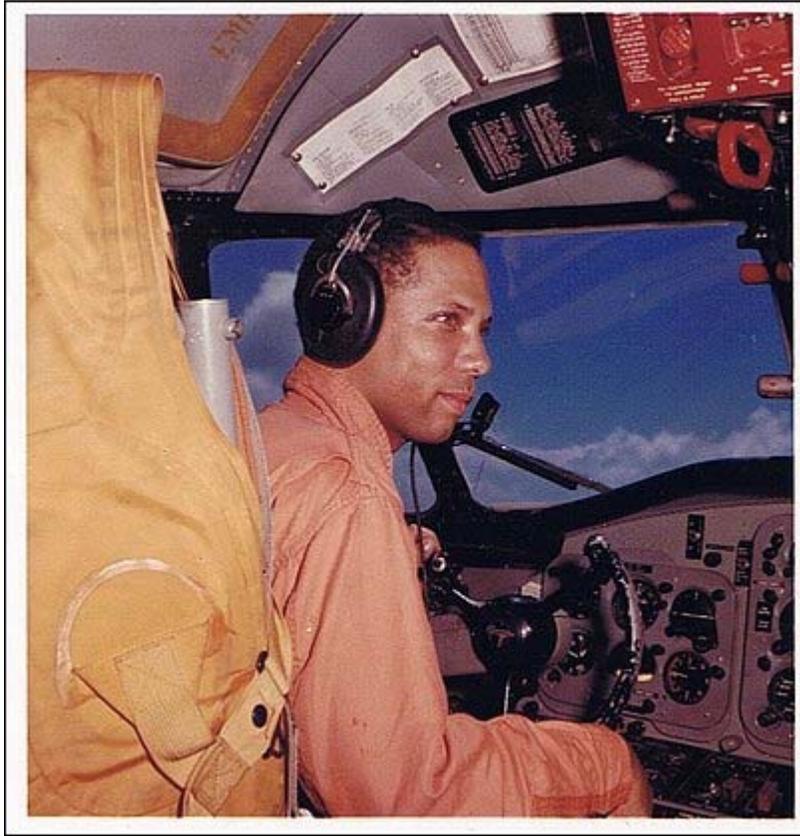


## Captain Bobby C. Wilks, USCG



**Coast Guard Aviator No. 735**  
**Coast Guard Helicopter Pilot No. 343**

**1931-2009**

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Bobby Charles Wilks was born on 12 May 1931 in St. Louis, Missouri. He attended Charles Sumner High School and received his BA degree in 1954 from Harris-Stowe Teachers College. He was very active in college, finishing his senior year as president of his class, president of the choir, president of the Alpha Eta chapter of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity as well as captain of the track team. He received his MA degree in Education Administration from the University of St. Louis in 1955.

He began his Coast Guard career with his enlistment in the Reserve on 10 October 1955, wherefore he promptly was ordered to Officer Candidate School at the Coast Guard Academy. After graduating with a commission of Ensign in the Reserve on 24 February 1956, he was assigned for a brief period at the Coast Guard Group Office at Baltimore, Maryland.

In March 1956, he was assigned as flight student at the Naval Air Basic Training Command, Pensacola, Florida, and later at the Naval Air Station, Corpus Christi, Texas, where he was graduated and designated Coast Guard Aviator No. 735 on 25 March 1957. After a brief period of advanced training he reported in August of that year for his first tour of duty as a Coast Guard Aviator at Coast Guard Air Station San Francisco, California, at which time he received his first promotion to the rank of Lieutenant, Junior Grade. Between search and rescue flights from that station, he was temporarily assigned to four months of helicopter training at Pensacola, earning the designation of Coast Guard Helicopter Pilot No. 343 on 16 September 1959. He was promoted to Lieutenant in the Reserve on 1 September 1959. His Reserve commission was terminated and he transferred to the Regular Coast Guard on 15 July 1960 with the permanent rank of Lieutenant on 15 July 1961.

In July 1960 he was assigned to the Coast Guard Air Detachment at Sangley Point, Republic of the Philippines, where in addition to piloting aircraft on search and rescue and logistics flights he served as Head of the Administrative Section for the Commander, Philippine Section and the Air Detachment.

From September 1961 to March 1962 he was stationed at Coast Guard Headquarters, Washington, D.C., as Assistant Cadet Procurement Officer during which he traveled throughout the U.S. to inform young African-American men of the opportunities in competitive examinations for cadet appointments to the Coast Guard Academy.

He served his next tour of duty as Aviator and Senior Operations Officer at Coast Guard Air Station Brooklyn, New York for three years. While there, he was assigned temporarily during the summer of 1963 to Coast Guard Air Station Miami, Florida, where he carried out extensive search and rescue missions. These ranged from landing an HU-16E Albatross amphibian in the ocean off Cay Sal Banks to rescue an injured man from the USS *Mills* (DER-383), to piloting a helicopter, hoisting to safety three men trapped in the Everglades, as well as patrolling off the Florida coast searching for Cuban refugees, many of which he assisted in their rescue.

He was selected for Flight Safety Training, attending the specialized course taught at the University of Southern California. After completing this training he was reassigned to Air Station Brooklyn as the Flight Safety Officer for the air station.

From March 1965 to July 1968, he served as Executive Officer of Coast Guard Air Station Naples, Italy, where his duties included logistic flights in support of a chain of Coast Guard-manned and operated LORAN Transmitting Stations covering the Mediterranean area. He flew extensively throughout the Mediterranean area, as well as Europe. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Commander on 1 July 1965.

During the following two years, he served as Operations Officer at Coast Guard Air Station Salem, Massachusetts. While at Salem, he received on 19 February 1970 the Federal Aviation Administration's special "We Point With Pride" plaque award for rescuing civilian student pilot Richard Wharton of Coventry, Rhode Island who became lost over the Atlantic Ocean during a night flight from Providence, Rhode Island, to Tauton Massachusetts, on 8 October 1969. Using a helicopter, Wilks guided the lost flyer to the shore and a safe landing. The student pilot landed with only five minutes of fuel remaining.

He was promoted to the rank of Commander on 1 July 1970. Later that same year in September he reported at Coast Guard Air Station Barbers Point, Hawaii, for duty as Chief of Operations as well as Aviator. While there, he was awarded the Air Medal for meritorious achievement while acting as aircraft commander of an HH-52A helicopter that executed a perilous "medico" evacuation of a heart attack-stricken master of a Soviet vessel 116 miles east of Hilo, Hawaii, in gale force winds and seas on the night of 9 December 1971.

Commander Wilks was next stationed at Governors Island, New York, where he first served as Executive Officer of the largest Coast Guard shore unit, Coast Guard Base, from September 1973 to July 1975, and then as Chief, Search and Rescue Branch in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Coast Guard District officer for the next two years. In July, 1977 he returned to Hawaii to assume the duty of Chief, Boating Safety Division, 14<sup>th</sup> Coast Guard District.

He was promoted to the rank of Captain on 1 September 1977. He was given command of Coast Guard Air Station Brooklyn in September, 1979. He served there until 1982 when he was assigned as Liaison Officer, Special Staff Assistant for Search and Rescue with the FAA. Here he helped implement search and rescue operations and air traffic control standard operating procedures.

While detailed to the FAA he also served as the Chairman for the Helicopter Operations Section of the National Airspace Review. He led a team of technical specialists that developed the Rotorcraft Master Plan, a document that the FAA used to "integrate the helicopter into the National Airspace System from the present [1985] until the year 2000."

Captain Wilks retired from the Coast Guard on 1 July 1986 after 30 years of service. When he retired he had over 6,000 flight hours in 21 different types of aircraft, including over 2,000 hours in helicopters. He was the highest ranking

African American in the Coast Guard. During his career he established a number of Coast Guard “firsts”, including becoming the first African-American to make the rank of Captain, the first African-American Coast Guard aviator, and the first African-American to command an Air Station.

Besides the Air Medal, Captain Wilks was twice recognized with the Helicopter Rescue Award with the “Winged S” Air Rescue emblem for courage and skill while piloting a Sikorsky helicopter in air rescue missions. He was also awarded the Meritorious Service Medal, Coast Guard Commendation Medal, Humanitarian Service Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, National Defense Medal, Republic of Vietnam Meritorious Unit Citation, Vietnam Service Medal, and the Expert Rifle Medal.

He married the former Aida Rena Azores of San Pablo, Philippine Islands on 15 October 1975. They had one son, Bobby Sean.

Captain Wilks crossed the bar on 13 July 2009.

