

**Tuskegee Airmen Condensed History
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For more than thirty years after the U.S. Army obtained its first airplane and its first pilots, in 1909, no African American pilots were allowed in the American armed forces. The first African American pilots in the American military were the Tuskegee Airmen. This is their story. The term Tuskegee Airmen today refers not only to the first black pilots in the U.S. armed forces, but also to personnel on the ground who served in their units or at their bases. The ground personnel outnumbered the pilots more than ten to one. There were almost 1,000 Tuskegee Airmen pilots, but more than 14,000 Tuskegee Airmen.

In 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was running for an unprecedented third term. His opponent was Republican Wendell Willkie, who appealed to many African American voters. During the campaign, Roosevelt promised to allow African Americans to be trained in the Army Air Corps. After his election and inauguration, in 1941, Roosevelt fulfilled his pledge. In March, the War Department constituted and activated the first black flying unit, the 99th Pursuit Squadron, later to be called the 99th Fighter Squadron, at Chanute

Field, Illinois. The squadron did not yet have any pilots, but the War Department had already announced, in January, that the pilots would be trained at Tuskegee.

Why Tuskegee? There were a number of reasons. One was the climate. There were more days of good flying weather in Alabama than many other parts of the country. Tuskegee Institute, which had a reputation of pioneering African American achievements in higher education, lobbied for the training to take place nearby, in hopes of securing a contract for the primary flight school. Another reason was racial. Tuskegee was located in a part of the country where segregation was enforced, and the War Department insisted that the military training of black pilots be segregated. The black pilots would not be trained at the bases where white pilots were already being trained, but at their own bases around Tuskegee. Another reason Tuskegee was chosen is that African American civilian pilots were already training in the area, as part of a civilian pilot training program that was part of Roosevelt's New Deal.

Primary flight training, with mostly PT-13 and PT-17 biplanes on grass runways, took place at Moton Field, a Tuskegee Institute facility under contract with the War Department. Almost all of the flight instructors who taught there were African Americans. The most important of them was Charles Alfred

“Chief” Anderson, who had taught at the civilian pilot training facility at what was called Kennedy Field. Many of the other primary flight instructors at Moton Field had come from the civilian pilot training program at Kennedy Field, another Tuskegee Institute facility.

Cadets who graduated from the primary training at Moton Field, after about nine weeks, went on to nine weeks each of basic and advanced flight training, which took place at a much larger Air Corps base called Tuskegee Army Air Field, a few miles northwest of Moton Field. For basic flight training, most of the cadets flew BT-13 monoplane airplanes. Advanced flight training for future fighter pilots took place in AT-6 airplanes. Future bomber pilots trained in twin-engine AT-10 airplanes. At first, all the flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field were white, and the majority of them were white throughout the war. Colonel Noel F. Parrish, who was white, commanded the flight school at Tuskegee Army Air Field during most of World War II and immediately after the war. Tuskegee Airmen flight cadets remember him as a fair man who was truly interested in their success. They felt the same way about many of their white flight instructors, too.

The flying training was rigorous, and the washout rate was high because of the high standards applied. Less than half the African American cadets who

entered flying training at Tuskegee graduated from the advanced phase, and received their wings. At the same time, the graduates became officers in the Army Air Forces. Almost 1,000 African American pilots completed the flight training, some to be future fighter pilots, some to be future bomber pilots, some to be liaison pilots, and some to be flight instructors. This was about half of one percent of the pilots trained in the Army Air Forces during World War II, but the Navy and Marine Corps trained no black pilots at all during the war.

After graduation from advanced flight training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, the new pilots were sent to military units such as the 332nd Fighter Group and one of its squadrons or the 477th Bombardment Group and one of its squadrons. After the 332nd Fighter Group and its squadrons deployed overseas, newly graduated fighter pilots from Tuskegee Army Air Field deployed to Walterboro, South Carolina, and became replacement pilots to fill vacancies in the black units overseas.

The 99th Fighter Squadron, the first black flying unit, was not originally assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group. The 99th Fighter Squadron was the first of the Tuskegee Airmen units to deploy to combat overseas. In the spring of 1943, it left Tuskegee Army Air Field and voyaged to North Africa, where it was attached to a white fighter group that already had three white fighter

squadrons assigned. Like the group to which it was attached, the 99th moved from North Africa to Sicily and then to the mainland of Italy. It flew P-40 fighters of the Twelfth Air Force. Their main missions at first were to protect Allied shipping in the Mediterranean Sea, and to attack enemy targets on islands such as Pantelleria and Sicily. The commander of the 33d Fighter Group, to which the 99th was at first attached, tried to get the 99th Fighter Squadron removed from the front lines, but his efforts ultimately failed. The squadron was subsequently attached to other fighter groups of the Twelfth Air Force in the Mediterranean Theater, and flew as well as the other P-40 squadrons.

After the 99th Fighter Squadron deployed to the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, fighter pilots who trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field were assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group and one of its three fighter squadrons, the 100th, 301st, and 302d. At first, all of them were stationed also at Tuskegee Army Air Field, making the base very crowded. The group and its squadrons at first moved to Selfridge Field, Michigan, in the spring of 1943, around the same time the 99th Fighter Squadron deployed overseas. In early 1944, the 332nd Fighter Group also deployed to Italy, with its three squadrons. At first they flew P-39s. Like the 99th Fighter Squadron, they flew mostly tactical air support missions to protect ground forces, or help them take out enemy targets on the ground. Like

the P-40, the P-39 was more suitable at that time for air to ground attack than for air-to-air combat. The Tuskegee Airmen at first had very few aerial victories because they had little opportunity to shoot down enemy airplanes. 1st Lt. Charles B. Hall of the 99th Fighter Squadron was the first black pilot to shoot down an enemy aircraft in World War II, on July 2, 1943. The next aerial victories of the Tuskegee Airmen did not occur until January 1944. Lack of opportunity, rather than lack of skill, was the reason.

In the summer of 1944, the 99th Fighter Squadron was reassigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, making it the only fighter group in World War II with four fighter squadrons. After June 1944, it had more squadrons, pilots and planes than the other fighter groups. Around the same time, the 332nd Fighter Group was reassigned from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Air Force, which also flew heavy four-engine bombers such as B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators. The fighter squadrons were needed to protect the bombers against enemy aircraft. For the escort missions, the Tuskegee Airmen were assigned P-47s and then P-51 Mustangs, aircraft with more speed, maneuverability and range than the P-39s and P-40s the Tuskegee Airmen had flown before. Now they had a chance to shoot down more enemy aircraft and to fly deep into enemy territory.

The Fifteenth Air Force had a total of seven fighter escort groups by the middle of 1944, four that flew P-51 Mustangs, and three that flew P-38 Lightnings. Each of the four P-51 groups had its own tail color and pattern, to distinguish them from each other when flying with the bombers, and to distinguish them from enemy aircraft. The 332d Fighter Group's assigned tail color was solid red. The colors of the other three groups were striped red (for the 31st Fighter Group), solid yellow (52d Fighter Group), and yellow and black checkerboard pattern (the 325th Fighter Group).

The Tuskegee Airmen are remembered most for their missions to escort bombers into central Europe, over Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, and other Nazi-occupied countries, a job they did extremely well. They flew 179 bomber escort missions, and lost bombers to enemy aircraft on only seven of those missions. Twenty-seven Tuskegee Airmen-escorted bombers were shot down by enemy airplanes, but the average number of bombers lost by the other fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force, during the same period, was 46. The Tuskegee Airmen lost significantly fewer bombers than the other fighter groups of the Fifteenth Air Force. One reason is that they took very seriously their job of sticking with the bombers and protecting them. Another reason is that the 332d Fighter Group had one more fighter squadron

than the other groups. By the time the Tuskegee Airmen began escorting heavy bombers, in June 1944, German fighter opposition had declined, and most of the 332d Fighter Group mission reports indicate no enemy fighters encountered.

Despite their best efforts, sometimes the Tuskegee Airmen lost bombers to enemy aircraft. Such cases were very rare. Of the bombers they lost, more than half went down on a single mission, to bomb an enemy airfield at Memmingen, Germany, on July 18, 1944. On that mission, the 332nd Fighter Group red-tailed Mustangs were vastly outnumbered by the bombers they were assigned to escort, and by the number of enemy fighters that emerged to shoot them down. In addition to that, the bomber groups were widely scattered, making the job of protecting them very difficult. The Tuskegee Airmen proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that they could fly the most advanced combat fighters as skillfully and effectively as the white pilots, and probably no other group could have lost fewer bombers that day, given the circumstances of that tragic day.

The most memorable mission the Tuskegee Airmen flew was to Berlin on March 24, 1945, the longest mission ever flown by the Fifteenth Air Force. Three Tuskegee Airmen each shot down a German Me-262 jet that day.

Another fighter escort group flying on the same mission also shot down five of the jets. It was not the first time American pilots shot down German jets, but it was the first time that the Tuskegee Airmen did so. The three Tuskegee Airmen to have shot down the German jets were 2d Lt. Charles V. Brantley and 1st Lts. Roscoe Brown and Earl R. Lane, all of whom belonged to the 100th Fighter Squadron. The day was not unmitigated triumph, however. Three of the escorted bombers were also shot down.

The 332nd Fighter Group did not only fly bomber escort missions. They flew strafing missions as well, sometimes destroying enemy targets on the ground or on the sea. On one mission eight of their P-47s, in June 1944, struck a German ship, causing a huge explosion. While the ship did not sink, it was effectively taken out of the war.

By the end of the war in Europe, Tuskegee Airmen pilots had shot down 112 enemy airplanes. None of the Tuskegee Airmen was an ace, since none of them shot down at least five enemy aircraft, but three Tuskegee Airmen each shot down four enemy airplanes, and four Tuskegee Airmen each shot down three in one day. The 332nd Fighter Group and its squadrons also damaged many more enemy aircraft in the air, or destroyed them on the ground. Ninety-five Tuskegee Airmen earned Distinguished Flying Crosses. One earned two. A

total of Ninety-six Distinguished Service Crosses were awarded to the Tuskegee Airmen.

The bomber pilots who trained at Tuskegee served in the 477th Bombardment Group and its four squadrons, the 616th, 617th, 618th, and 619th. Since the group was activated late in the war, and it took longer to train bomber crews than fighter pilots, the 477th never deployed overseas. It was training for deployment to the western Pacific theater when the war ended in August 1945. The 477th Bombardment Group trained with twin engine B-25s, the same kind of airplane the Doolittle Raiders had flown in the first attack on Japan. The B-25 had a five-man crew. Among the 477th Bombardment Group crew members were pilots, copilots, navigators, bombardiers, and gunners. While the pilots trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field, the navigators and bombardiers, also officers, trained at other bases in Texas and Mississippi and elsewhere. Many of the navigators and bombardiers were originally flying school cadets who washed out of the pilot training.

Although the 477th Bombardment Group did not enter combat overseas, it should be remembered for a famous episode: the Freeman Field Mutiny. More than 100 black officers at Freeman Field, Indiana, refused to go along with a segregated officers' clubs policy of its white commander, and were arrested and

reprimanded. All the arrested African American officers were eventually exonerated, and the white commander was replaced with the most famous Tuskegee Airmen of all: Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who had earlier commanded the 99th Fighter Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group in combat overseas. Davis had attended West Point, and his father, Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., was the first black general in the U.S. Army. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. eventually became the first black general in the Air Force, after World War II. The first four-star black general in the Air Force, or in any of the armed forces of the United States, was also a Tuskegee Airman. He was Daniel “Chappie” James, who had been a member of the 477th Bombardment Group during World War II.

Although much of the Tuskegee Airmen story is about the pilots, most of the Tuskegee Airmen were not pilots, but served on the ground, as crew chiefs, other maintenance personnel, armorers, intelligence officers, clerks, transportation personnel, and in other functions. There were even some women, such as those who served as nurses at Tuskegee Army Air Field. On the training bases, there were also instructors, parachute riggers, staff officers, and weathermen. There were almost 1,000 Tuskegee Airmen pilots, but more than 14,000 other Tuskegee Airmen who were not pilots, but on whom the pilots depended to accomplish their missions.

By demonstrating they were the equal of the whites in the Army Air Forces, and could fly the same kinds of airplanes on the same kinds of missions, and do that as well as anyone else, the Tuskegee Airmen helped convince the leaders of the Army Air Forces and the Air Force, which emerged in 1947, that there was no good reason for segregation in the service. When President Harry S. Truman issued his Executive Order 9981 in 1948, mandating the desegregation of the Armed Forces, the Air Force was already in the process of integrating, partly because of the experience of the Tuskegee Airmen. In fact, the Air Force was already training black pilots with white pilots at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona before Truman's order.

In March 2007, President George W. Bush presided at a ceremony in the Capitol in Washington, D.C. at which a Congressional Gold Medal was presented collectively to the Tuskegee Airmen, recognizing their achievements. Congress had voted to strike such a medal the previous year, in 2006, and it is now on display at the Smithsonian Institution. The Tuskegee Airmen fought two wars, one against the Nazis overseas and one against racism at home. Theirs was truly, in the words of the Pittsburgh Courier, a black newspaper during World War II, a "double victory."

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