

FREEMAN FIELD MUTINY: VICTORY FOR INTEGRATION OR SEGREGATION?

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The “Freeman Field Mutiny” is usually depicted as a victory for integration over segregation. After all, more than 100 black officers risked their careers, and perhaps even their lives, to defy an order to sign a base regulation requiring segregated officers’ clubs, and the commander who issued that order and regulation was replaced. The incident is often hailed as a forerunner of the modern Civil Rights Movement, in which peaceful non-violent resistance resulted in the desegregation of facilities. The more immediate consequence of the Freeman Field incident, however, was more segregation. An organization with both black and white personnel was converted into one with only black personnel, and a base with both blacks and whites was converted into one with blacks only.

In April of 1945, one hundred and twenty black officers of the 477th Bombardment Group and associated organizations at Freeman Field, Indiana, were arrested, in two waves, for protesting the attempt of the group’s white commander, Colonel Robert R. Selway, Jr., to have two separate officers clubs, one restricted to whites only, and one for blacks only. The arrestees were eventually all exonerated, and the white commander of the group, who had attempted to enforce the segregation policy despite Army regulations, was replaced by another commander who threw out his predecessor’s policy. Eventually, the 477th Bombardment Group was reassigned to its former base, Godman Field, Kentucky, redesignated as the 477th Composite Group, and all of its white personnel were reassigned to other units at other bases. How did that happen?

The 477th Bombardment Group was the first black bombardment group in American military history. Like the 332nd Fighter Group, the first black fighter group, its pilots were trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field, and were thus eventually called Tuskegee Airmen. The group was first active as a white bombardment group in Florida in 1943, before it was a Tuskegee Airmen organization, and it was inactivated after only three months. When it was activated again, on January 15, 1944, at Selfridge

Field, Michigan, it had a white commander, Colonel Selway, a West Point graduate who had commanded and helped train the black pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group at Selfridge before that group moved overseas. Top officers in the group were also white, but most of the group's new personnel, during its second period of activation, were black. The group was designed to train 5-man black crews to fly B-25 twin engine medium bombers and prepare them to deploy overseas for combat. After the training was finished, the group was designed, like the 332nd Fighter Group, to become all black.

The 477th Bombardment group moved from Selfridge to Godman Field, Kentucky on May 6, 1944. Godman Field was next to Fort Knox. It had one officers' club, but only black officers of the group attended that club. The white officers of the 477th went next door to the all-white Fort Knox officers club. After all, the Army Air Forces was still part of the Army, and the two bases were adjacent to each other. The group's white officers were used to attending a club without blacks, while the group's black officers were used to attending the only officers club at Godman Field.

When the 477th Bombardment Group moved from Godman Field to Freeman Field, Indiana, during the first week of March 1945, there was no other white base next door. Freeman Field was a larger base than Godman Field. It was large enough to hold all four bombardment squadrons assigned to the group, and also the 387th Air Service Group and a Replacement Crew Training Program. It had formerly been a white base, and there was only one officers club. The white officers of the 477th, who had used the all-white Fort Knox officers club when the group was stationed at Godman Field, wanted an officers' club of their own, while the black officers expected to use the only officers' club on base. Colonel Selway was eager to accommodate the white officers, partly because he was one of them. He had had some experience enforcing segregated facilities at Selfridge, for both the 332nd Fighter Group and later the 477th Bombardment Group. He established a policy of having two officers clubs at Freeman Field, one for trainers, who were almost all white, and for trainees, who were all black.

On March 7-9, several black officers of the 477th Bombardment Group entered the officers' club at Freeman Field that was assigned to "base and supervisory" personnel, and were told to leave. They were later called together and told that they were to use the other officers' club. For a time, they complied, and the policy of segregated officers clubs at Freeman Field prevailed.

More black personnel, assigned to the 115th and 118th Army Air Forces Base Units, arrived at Freeman Field on April 5. On the evening of the same day, 36 of them attempted to enter the white officers' club. Three of them pushed Assistant Base Provost Marshal out of the way and forced their way into the club, insisting they were base personnel. The next day, twenty-five additional black officers attempted to enter the officers' club reserved for white "base and supervisory" personnel. They and the 36 officers who attempted to enter the "white" club the day before, a total of 61, were arrested in quarters and charged with disobeying an order of a superior officer, three of them also charged with using violence.

Colonel Selway, who was then commander of both the 477th Bombardment Group and Freeman Field, needed to fortify his legal position, because there were those who argued that Army Regulation 210-10 regarding officers clubs said nothing about separate clubs for blacks and whites, and even stated that an officer at a base was entitled to join the officers club on the base. On April 9, all but 3 of the 61 black officers who had been arrested were released. The other three were kept for court martial because of alleged use of violence. Selway then issued Base Regulation 85-2 spelling out which recreational facilities were for which groups of officers. He was careful to use non-racial terms, dividing the facilities between trainers (whites) and trainees (blacks). All officers were required to sign the new regulation, acknowledging it, so that if they violated it later, they could be charged with disobeying an order.

At the time, there were about 400 black officers at Freeman Field. Most of them signed the segregation regulation, many of them stipulating their objections. One hundred one of the other black

officers, members of the 477th Bombardment Group and the Army Air Forces Base Unit on the base, refused to sign. For insubordination, they were arrested. Forty-two of the 101 arrested in the second wave of arrests had been among the 61 who had been arrested earlier.

On April 13, the 101 black officers who had refused to sign Base Regulation 85-2 were flown in six C-47 airplanes to Godman Field, Kentucky, the old base of the 477th Fighter Group, and kept under arrest there. The news of the arrests of the black officers spread like wildfire in the black press, and the War Department came under scrutiny for inconsistent policy. Officers higher than Selway, some of them supporting of his segregationist policy, came under pressure to intervene in favor of the arrested officers. On April 23, Major General Frank O'D Hunter, commanding general of the First Air Force, reluctantly ordered release of the 101, but not without administrative reprimands by Colonel Selway, black marks on their records that would haunt them for many years to come.

On April 26-27, the 477th Bombardment Group was moved back from Freeman Field to Godman Field. The group continued to have both black and white officers. The black officers would use the only officers club at Godman Field, and the white officers would use the white only officers club at Fort Knox, next door, as was the policy when the group was at Godman before. The officers' club issue was temporarily resolved.

On May 18, the War Department's McCloy Committee published its report on the Freeman Field incident. It determined that Selway's issue of the segregated officers' clubs base regulation on April 9 violated Army Regulation 210-10 and was therefore invalid. Selway knew then that his continued command of the 477th Bombardment Group was in jeopardy, and he had to wait only about another month for the other shoe to drop.

On June 21, 1945, Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the black officer who had commanded the 332nd Fighter Group in combat before the war in Europe ended, the previous month, arrived at Godman Field to assume command of the 477th Bombardment Group, which on June 22 was redesignated as the

477th Composite Group, because a fighter squadron was assigned to it, and it already had a bombardment squadron. Colonel Selway was reassigned, along with all the other white officers of the group. The 477th became an all-black organization, and would remain so even after it moved to Lockbourne Field on March 13, 1946. Lockbourne Field, later Lockbourne Air Force Base after the creation of the Department of the Air Force in September 1947, became the only all-black Air Force base in the Air Force, as Godman Field had been since the Davis became commander. Like Godman in late 1945 and early 1946, Lockbourne became the only base in the service under a black commander.

The three black officers that were still being held, from the original 61 arrested, for allegedly using violence while attempting to enter the “white” officers club at Freeman Field in April, were court-martialed on July 2 and 3. The military court acquitted two of them, but convicted Lt. Roger C. Terry, a pilot who had trained at Tuskegee. The sentence was confinement to base for three months, and \$50 fine for each of those three months, for a total fine of \$150. It was a far lighter sentence than it could have been, but it plagued Terry for decades. In a sense, the conviction became a badge of courage, and Terry was eventually elected president of the Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated, partly because of his reputation for opposing segregation and risking his career in the name of justice.

In July 1947, the 477th Composite Group was inactivated, and the 332nd Fighter Group was activated in its place, at Lockbourne. The squadrons were reassigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, and an all-black fighter wing, the 332nd Fighter Wing, was established and activated over the 332nd Fighter Group, at the same base. Lockbourne Air Force Base, the only all-black Air Force Base, was the home of the only all-black wing and the only all-black group, with the only all-black squadrons. Segregation remained the rule until the middle of 1949, when the Air Force finally implemented President Harry S. Truman’s Executive Order 9981, issued in 1948, that mandated the desegregation of all the military services.

One might say that the Freeman Field Mutiny resulted in not a victory for integration but a victory for segregation instead. The black and white 477th Bombardment Group, while not completely integrated, was transformed into the all-black 477th Composite Group, and it remained all-black until it was inactivated on 1 July 1947, when it was replaced by another all-black group, the 332nd Fighter Group. From June 21, 1945 until July 1, 1949, the black flying units were concentrated on only one base at a time, first Godman and then Lockbourne, and that base was all black. There was no question of whether or not blacks could use the officers' club at either base, because there was only one officers' club on the base, and all the base personnel were black. Segregation seemed to have won.

But in a larger sense, the Freeman Field Mutiny contributed to the integration of the Air Force, because in 1949, all the all-black organizations at the only all-black Air Force Base were inactivated and their personnel were transferred to formerly all-white organizations. While the heroic resistance of those black officers who defied segregation at Freeman Field had to wait four years for the integration of the Air Force as a whole, the ultimate result was a victory for integration.

On August 12, 1995, more than fifty years after Roger C. Terry's conviction in court martial, the Air Force set aside the verdict and exonerated him. At the same time, the Air Force removed the reprimands from the records of all the black officers who had received them, if they requested such removal. Some of the officers refused to request that the reprimands be removed, because they were proud to have suffered for the cause of freedom. The Freeman Field Mutiny demonstrated the lengths to which persons on both sides of the segregation/integration question would go for their cause. Although the early results were an apparent victory for segregation, the ultimate victory belonged to the advocates of racial equality and integration.

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