

Gunnery Meet – Las Vegas Air Force Base, Nevada

May 2, 1949

With the stroke of a pen, President Harry Truman started the process of officially desegregating all branches of the U.S. military on 26 July 1948. In July 1949, the 332nd Fighter Group was deactivated, a direct result of that Executive Order. Those who had trained for air combat at Tuskegee and remained in the Air Force postwar would be assigned to new squadrons. The slow yet steady journey to true integration had begun for the brave men of the 332nd.

However, the members of the 332nd had one last hurrah before being assigned to other units. In May 1949, two months before deactivation, the unit participated in the first-ever USAF Gunnery Meet in the Nevada desert. Each stateside FG sent three pilots and one alternate to represent their units. Those pilots were selected via an internal competition against their fellow pilots. Along with the pilots, some seventeen highly-skilled ground support personnel were sent.

Here is a “brief” about each of the 332nd Fighter Group weapons meet team members and their military rank at the time of the Top Gun Competition in May 1949.



First Lieutenant James Harvey, III,

Class 44-1-1-SE 10/16/1944 2nd Lt. 0838153 Mountain Top, PA

Harvey grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania. He was drafted into the Army in 1943 after trying to join up as a pilot cadet and being turned down because of his skin color. The train he took to basic training in Maryland stopped in Washington D.C. so “all Negroes could be moved to the last car on the train,” he said, “This was my first experience with active racism. I didn’t like it and I never forgot it.”

After taking all of the required draftee tests, Mr. Harvey was assigned to the US Army Air Corps - but not as a pilot. Rather, he was to be an engineer who would carve airstrips out of the jungles of the Pacific.

He reapplied for cadet training, was accepted and went to Tuskegee where he earned his wings in October 1944. He went on to advanced training in Walterboro.

His unit’s deployment to Europe was put on hold in April of 1945 because the war was almost over. They were scheduled to go to Okinawa to fly support for the fall push into Japan, but the A-bombs over Japan ended that war.

He remained in the USAF until his retirement in 1965 at the rank of Lt. Col. After the 332nd Fighter Group disbanded in 1949; he served at bases in Japan (where he flew F-80 jets), California, Michigan, Wisconsin and Newfoundland. Harvey said, “I really enjoyed being in Japan. There was never any reference or implication that I was anything but a U.S. soldier. My skin color didn’t matter at all.” After retirement from the military, he went to work for Oscar Mayer, retiring from that company in 1980 (in Denver.)

Harvey’s recollections of the 1949 gunnery meet are clear and pointed. He said, “B.O. Davis [Jr.] only half-jokingly told us not to come back to Lockbourne if we didn’t win. We all knew how much was riding on this contest. We flew hard to earn each point. Also, I can’t say enough about our ground crew personnel, led by Buford Johnson. We got a pretty good night’s sleep each night, but Buford and his team never rested until they had those planes in great shape for the next day’s contests. And then they were back with us early each day since we flew in the mornings to avoid the worst of the desert heat.”



First Lieutenant Harry Stewart, Jr.

Class 44-F-SE 6/27/1944 2nd Lt. 0835330 Corona, NY

Stewart grew up in Queens, New York. Although he could take the bus or subway almost anywhere, it was the fact that North Beach Airport (rebuilt in the late 1930s and now known as La Guardia) was within walking distance of his home that helped to define his life.

As a kid, Mr. Stewart spent hours watching the military and civilian aircraft at North Beach and, like so many youngsters, dreamed of taking to the skies himself. He was also a reader and made note of an article in Popular Mechanics magazine that the U.S. Army Air Corps was going to create a segregated unit to train black pilots for the first time ever in 1941. He said, "I was in my teens at the time, but right then I set my sights on becoming a member of the 99th pursuit squadron. I knew I'd have to register for the Selective Service when I turned 18 and aerial fighting sounded much better than fighting on the ground."

Having passed the Army Air Corps exam, he was inducted into the Armed Services and called to become a cadet in the flight program at Tuskegee on the same day: March 20, 1943. He had left high school to help support his family so was assigned to go to CTD (college training detachment) first.

This 6-month program featured coursework designed to give cadets college-level knowledge of mathematics, physics, history, geography, and English that they would need to help them successfully complete aviation training. The Tuskegee Institute was one of the places that offered that coursework so he didn't have to go far when he completed his schooling and took his place as a cadet in training.

He got to Europe in December 1944 and flew 43 missions between January and April 1945. On one of his last missions, he shot down three ME 109s and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. He was discharged from the USAF in 1950 and remained in the Reserves until he retired with the rank of Lt. Colonel.

Like Airman Harvey, he also clearly remembers flying in the 1949 Gunnery Meet. He said, "It was so satisfying win the propeller class because it told the entire USAF that the pilots of the segregated 332nd were really good. However, that feeling was tempered with the fact that for decades to come, when the USAF published the results of subsequent Gunnery Meets, the word "unknown" appeared next to the year "1949" when listing the propeller class winners of previous meets."

After leaving active service in 1950, he realized he needed to finish his education in order to have a good career and support his family. It took him 6.5 years, but he earned a degree in mechanical engineering from NYU. He said, "I am lucky to be able to point to a number of accomplishments in my life, but I am probably most proud of getting that degree. Since I had dropped out of school to help my family, I had to complete so many prerequisites before I could be accepted into college. It was tough but I really learned how to study."



Captain Alva Temple

Class 43-G-SE 7/28/1943 2nd Lt. 0809256 Carrollton, AL

Temple was born in Carrollton, Alabama and studied Agricultural Education at Alabama A & M University. After college he went into the Army Air Corp and then to Tuskegee for Pilot Training. He graduated in class 43-G and subsequently assigned to the 99th Pursuit Squadron. He completed 120 Combat Missions over Europe. Alva retired from the USAF with a rank of Lieutenant Colonel and owned his own business for years and died August 28, 2004 at the age of 86.



First Lieutenant Halbert Alexander (alternate pilot)

Class 44-I-SE 11/20/1944 2nd Lt. 0839082 Georgetown, IL

Alexander was eventually assigned to the 99th Fighter Squadron. He was killed in an F-86 Aircraft accident over one of the New England States.



Staff Sergeant Buford Johnson was born on August 30, 1927 in Longview, Texas. He spent his adolescence growing up in Shilo, Texas. At age 18 Buford was drafted into the Navy, but he had other ideas and enlisted in the Army Air Corp. After completing Basic Training at Sheppard Field Texas, Buford was assigned to the 99th Fighter Squadron of the 477th Composite Group at Godman Field, Kentucky. Buford quickly advanced to the rank of Corporal and within three years attained the rank of Staff Sergeant. The highlight of Buford's association with the famed Tuskegee Airmen came during the later part of April and first part of May 1949 when his P-47N was one of the four aircraft selected to be used in the "First Ever" USAF Gunnery Meet at Las Vegas AFB, Nevada. Representing the 332nd Fighter Group were Captain Alva Temple of the 301st Fighter Squadron, 1st Lieutenant Harry Stewart of the 100th Fighter Squadron, 1st Lieutenant James Harvey of the 99th Fighter Squadron flying Staff Sergeant Buford Johnson's highly maintained P-47N Thunderbolt and alternate pilot 1st Lieutenant Halbert Alexander.

Staff Sergeant Buford Johnson was sent from Lockbourne AFB, Ohio to Itazuke, Air Base, Japan. He was assigned to a P-51 Fighter Squadron and his skills and expertise earned him the privilege to maintain the 80th Fighter Bomber Squadron's first F-80C aircraft, which made him a trailblazer. Also, he was the first African-American jet mechanic and Crew Chief in the United States Air Force and the first African-American Jet Crew Chief to serve in a Combat Zone.

Technical Sergeant Buford Johnson ended his combat tour in Korea on December 19, 1951. In January 1952 he was assigned to the 6520th Test Support Wing, Air Force Cambridge Research Center, Hanscom AFB, Bedford, Massachusetts as an Aircraft Maintenance Supervisor. On April 1, 1953 Technical Sergeant Buford Johnson was promoted to Master Sergeant after serving seven years in the USAF.

On July 25, 1956, Master Sergeant Buford Johnson was assigned to the 50th Fighter Bomber Wing in Toul-Rosieres Air Base, France. He reported on August 15, 1956 and assigned to the 417th Fighter Bomber Squadron, Chuck Yeager's Squadron (Red Dorks) flying f-86H aircraft (The Hog). Master Sergeant Buford Johnson's abilities a Flight Chief and Supervisor was reflected by the condition of his assigned aircraft, the state of training of his Crew Chiefs, the amount of flying time that his aircraft logged each month and the high state of moral of his subordinates. On July 29, 1960 Master Sergeant Buford Johnson was assigned to the Air Force Test Center at Edwards Air Force Base, California. By 1961 he was a Senior Master Non Commissioned Officer with other Master Sergeants and Technical Sergeants under his direct leadership. On December 21, 1962, while stationed at Edwards Air Force Base, Master Sergeant Buford Johnson, by direction of the Secretary of the Air Force, was awarded the Air Force Commendation Medal for Meritorious Service while assigned to the 417th Tactical Fighter Squadron.

Master Sergeant Buford Johnson remained at Edwards Air Force Base until July 1965 when he was assigned to Oxnard Air Force Base, California as the Non Commissioned Officer in charge of Maintenance Control, where he remained until his retirement in August 1966 after serving 21 years of Faithful and Conscientious Service to His Country.

On Saturday April 15, 2017, MSG Buford A Johnson joined the Lonely Eagles, The [Tuskegee Airmen Inc. Buford A Johnson Chapter](#) remains dedicated and committed to carrying on His Legacy and that of the Tuskegee Airmen.

ABOUT THE GUNNERY MEET

Two different types of aircraft - jet and non-jet - competed in the 1949 USAF gunnery meet in which the Tuskegee trained pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group participated. There were five Fighter Group teams in the reciprocating (nonjet/ propeller) class and seven FG teams in the jet class.

The reciprocating class teams flew P-47 Thunderbolts, F-51 Mustangs and F-82 (twin) Mustangs. These planes could all be fitted for rockets so they competed in a rocketry category. The F-80 and F-84s flown by the jet teams could not be fitted for rockets so those teams could not compete in that category. Both groups competed in four other categories: aerial gunnery, panel gunnery, dive-bombing and skip bombing.

It would be hard to overstate the difficulty of the competition. Each Fighter Group had conducted internal competitions to select the three pilots and one alternate who would represent them. Those pilots knew the gunnery competition would be scored on shooting and bombing (and rocketry for the propeller pilots) accuracy while flying very, very fast over a desert with few landmarks to help with visual depth perception.

The team from the 332nd won the propeller-driven category by scoring 45% of 1,200 possible points. The jet team from the 4th Fighter Group won their class with 49% of 1,000 possible points. It has been said that the skilled members of the 332nd's team won the competition because they earned the most points: 536.588 vs. 490.180 for the jet class. However, it is important to remember that the gunnery competition actually had no overall winning team because there was no way to make it a head-to-head contest: The jet teams couldn't compete in the rocket class so had fewer points to work with.

The trophy for this competition is on display at the U.S. Air Force Museum in Dayton, OH. Its engraved plate clearly shows that the 1949 USAF gunnery contest was really two different competitions - jet vs. propeller - and that the 332nd handily won the propeller class, no small feat any way you look at it.



(Nonjet/ propeller) class
P-47N



Jet class
F-80



Gunnery team members, shown in this 1949 photo with their trophy, are left to right:
Lt. Halbert Alexander, Lt. James Harvey, Capt. Alva Temple and Lt. Harry Stewart

**Note from author Zellie Orr. In 2009 Orr found the missing trophy and successfully advocated for its acknowledgement.*

The 332nd winning the propeller class, was no small feat.

First, they had to summon enthusiasm when forced to deal with the loss of one of their ground support personnel, killed during the Competition while flying as a guest in the empty cockpit of an F-82 that crashed. Second, they endured scorn and humiliation because of the color of their skin. The ground crew had not taken a day off since their arrival in Las Vegas. After the death of their comrade--dressed in their military garb, these American Patriots entered the Flamingo Hotel and were 'ordered' out. Although livid, they faced the ridicule and maintaining their composure, returned to the base. While President Harry S. Truman could sign an Executive Order impacting desegregation in the military, etc., he could not legislate and change the hearts of men.

By the way, it was no less divine intervention, the "Presentation of the USAF Awards" would take place at the Flamingo, the very hotel that had only the day before, denied the black veterans [332nd] access. Buford Johnson, the crew chief on James Harvey's team, was one of some five crew chiefs of the 332nd. At the "unveiling" of the trophy in Detroit, Dec. 2004, the only known survivors of the 332nd Gunnery Meet team were pilots, James Harvey and Harry Stewart, and ground personnel Buford Johnson. Thus, there may be other survivors whom we were unsuccessful in locating.



The trophy for the gunnery meet competition went missing for 55 years. Resulting from the research of Ms. Zellie Orr, it was found in the storage area at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

For more information about the Tuskegee Airmen visit www.redtail.org

