

Tuskegee Airmen – Soaring over segregation

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An experiment performed at the famed Tuskegee Institute, in Tuskegee, Ala. involved the training of about 450 black pilots under a program to see if blacks were capable of flying and maintaining combat aircraft.

These Airmen later became known as the Tuskegee Airmen that included pilots, navigators, bombardiers, maintenance, support staff, instructors, and all the other personnel responsible for keeping planes in the air.

This experiment came on the cusp of the Jim Crow laws of the 1880s that discriminated against blacks, and were designed to keep blacks segregated from whites. Blacks were prevented from entering public places such as libraries, restaurants, and movie theaters. Although these laws were practiced more heavily in the South, they also were executed and supported throughout the United States.

Although blacks participated in every war of the United States, these laws affected and changed the way blacks and



Tuskegee Airmen; Lt. Dempsey W. Morgan, Lt. Carrol S. Woods, Lt. Robert H. Nelson, Jr., Capt. Andrew D. Turner and Lt. Clarence D. Lester were pilots with the 332nd Fighter Group

whites fought in combat. While blacks were allowed to participate in the role of defending the country, they had to do it separately, in sub-standard living and training conditions.

To set the stage, back in the late 1930s, it was estimated that there was more than 920,000 blacks serving in the military, and though they were serving extremely well, it was widely believed that black

Soldiers were still inferior to whites in combat.

During that time period, there were three major services in the military, the Army and Army Air Corps, the Navy and the Marine Corps. The



Courtesy Photo

Tuskegee Airmen became known as the Red-tail Angels by U.S. allies, because of the red paint on the tail assemblies of their P-51 Mustang. The Germans learned to fear them, giving them the name, "Schwartz Vogelmenshen," or Black Birdmen.

Army had the most blacks serving in the military. The Navy came in second to the number of blacks they had in their ranks, but they restricted blacks to certain assignments such as cooks and stewards. The Marine Corps and the Army Air Corps did not allow blacks to participate in their services.

Before World War II began, U.S. Congress passed the Civilian Training Pilot Act in 1939, which authorized selected schools to begin teaching flight training to college students in order to build a reserve of pilots in case of war.

This Act opened the door for blacks to train and become military pilots at the Tuskegee

See TUSKEGEE AB25

Tuskegee Airmen

TUSKEGEE from AB19

Institute in 1940. The Tuskegee Institute received a contract from the military to set up a segregated base. In January 1941, the Army Air Corps began accepting blacks for pilot training and mechanics.

July 1941, the Tuskegee Army Air Field officially opened, and the first class of 13 potential pilots began training. During the inauguration of the program, Maj. James A. Ellison, the first commander of the Tuskegee Army Air Field said, "The eyes of your country and the eyes of your people are upon you. You cannot be inoculated with the ability to fly. The life of a flying student is not bed of roses."

Nine months later, the class of 42C -- George Roberts, Benjamin Davis Jr., Charles BeBow Jr., Mac Ross and Lemuel Custis --were the first pilots of Tuskegee to graduate and receive their silver wings.

In Washington, D.C., concerns were growing regarding an increase in military conflicts in Germany, Italy and Japan, the U.S. Congress passed the Burk-Wadsworth Bill, Sept. 14, 1940, and the first peacetime draft was signed into American history. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed it into law as the Selective Service and Training Act.

Under the Burke-Wadsworth Act, all American males, including blacks, between 21 and 35 years of age had to register for the draft.

The draft didn't change conditions much for blacks in the military. The Airmen, even though they were trained under Army Air Corps standards, could not be assigned to white units. As a result, the Airmen were assigned to the

99th Pursuit Squadron, an all-black squadron.

In August 1942 Benjamin O. Davis Jr., a graduate from the first class from Tuskegee, assumed command of the 99th Fighter Squadron (formally the 99th Pursuit Squadron). The squadron flew to combat missions in North Africa and Sicily.

While in these arenas, the 99th was one of eight fighter squadrons defending Anzio, Italy. They shot down 32 German aircraft, with the 99th having the highest score among the eight squadrons, with 13 aerial victories. The Tuskegee Airmen won its second Distinguished Unit Citation, while also demonstrating that black fighter pilots could perform as well as their white counterparts.

During World War II, the 99th Fighter Squadron was joined by three all-black squadrons, the 100th, 301st, and 302d Fighter Squadrons, together, they were known as the 332nd Fighter group and came home with 150 medals.

On March 24, 1945, the 332nd became the first Italy-based fighter unit to escort all B-17s to Berlin and back, completing the full 1,600-mile mission. For this operation, the unit earned the Distinguished Unit Citation.

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The 332nd Fighter Group flew 179 bomber escort missions from June 1944 through the end of the World War II. They flew 15,000 combat sor-



Maj. James A. Ellison, base commander at the advance flying school at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee Ala., returns salute of Mac Ross as he passes down the lined during the review of the first class of Tuskegee cadets.

ties, including 6,000 plus sorties for the 99th, prior to July 1944.

Despite their victories in War World II, when the Airmen returned to the States, they still faced racial discrimination. The United States was still in the grips of segregation, blacks still had to serve separately in the military.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and black leaders such as A. Philip Randolph, along with Benjamin O. Davis Sr., had to "fight for the right to fight." They argued that blacks should share with whites the burden of defending the United States and should be treated equally.

Finally, three years after War World II, on July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981, establishing equality of treatment and opportunity in the armed services. Truman said, "It is essential that there be

maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standards of democracy, with equality of treatment and opportunity for all those who serve in our country's defense.

"It is hereby declared to be the policy of the president that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin."

In 1949, the U.S. Air Force became the first armed service to integrate.

When the war ended in Europe, the 332nd Fighter Group had shot down 112 enemy aircraft and destroyed another 150 on the ground. In addition, the Airmen destroyed more than 950 railroad cars, sank one destroyer and 40 boats and barges. Their losses included approximately 150 killed in combat or in accidents, and 32 pilots downed and captured.

Members of the 332nd

Courtesy Photo National Museum
99th Fighter Squadron ground crew in Sicily

earned 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 744 Air Medals, numerous Purple Hearts, and 14 Bronze Stars.

On March 29, 2007, President Bush and Congress awarded the Tuskegee Airmen the Congressional Gold Medal for fighting to defend the United States in the face of racism.

Bush said, "These men in our presence felt a special sense of urgency. They were fighting two wars. One was in Europe and the other took place in the hearts and minds of our citizens."

The Tuskegee Army Air Field Flying School trained 994 pilots.

During World War II, the Tuskegee Airmen fought with great distinction, despite adversity. Through the Tuskegee experiment, they proved to the world that blacks were equal to whites in combat, soared over segregation, and won.