

History of the tuskegee airmen history essay

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



Today's United States military allows the aviation field to be filled regardless of gender or race the courageous military of today has not always been so open-minded nor understand. In 1925, an Army War College study came to the conclusion that blacks would never have what it takes to fly aircraft of any type because they lacked intelligence and were cowardly under combat conditions.[1]The 1925 Army War College study of " Negroes in combat" had also said that negroes " lacked ambition and courage; they were unsuitable to serve in the military, much less as fighter pilots". That document was used to deny flight training, as well as many other potential leadership positions to African Americans in the U. S. armed forces. At this time there were already several licensed black pilots flying in the United States, it would be more than 20 years before this utterly harmful notion jump the shark and the dream would become a reality where countless hero's would be born.

Although African Americans served in the armed forces, they were limited to which types of jobs and positions they could adventure in. On April 3, 1939 Public law passed which allowed for growth of the Army Air Corps. One section of the law offered the possibility for any African American who wanted to further their military careers besides simply working the chow hall or in the motor pool. It called for the " creation of training programs to be located at black colleges which would prepare African Americans for service in a large range of areas in the Air Corps support services." [1]While the 1939 law required the Army Air Corps to expand, they did not do so as quickly as the minority population wanted. By the end of 1940 the Army Air Corps had still not created an aviation manning document for colored Americans because they felt that the Army War College study was valid and did want

new colored unit interfering with their missions. On January 16th, 1941 in response to pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People the War Department formed the all-Black 99th Pursuit Squadron of the U. S. Army Air Corps. The new colored recruits were to be trained using planes at the segregated Army Airfield at Tuskegee, Alabama. [2]

Tuskegee Army Airfield officially opened on July 19, 1941. Tuskegee, Alabama, became the center of attention for the training of future black military pilots during World War II. During this time, the military issued Tuskegee Airfield a contract and taught flight training while a separate segregated base was being built for aerial training. " Support personnel were trained at Chanute Field." [3] The first training program was conducted at the Tuskegee Institute's Moton field using civilian planes. After the cadets completed their primary training they were sent to Tuskegee Army Air Field for further training on combat aircraft. The training of colored pilots had an increasing element of difficult times because there were no blacks instructors in the military during these times. [1] Eleven white officers were assigned to instruct the 429 enlisted men and 47 officers, which originally introduced one of the first examples of an integrated military unit. The first aviation cadet class began in July 1941 and completed training nine months later in March 1942. Training in meteorology, navigation, and instruments was conducted at bases that provided ground training, those who weren't becoming pilots. The Air Corps was in charge of training at Tuskegee Institute from providing aircraft, uniforms, literature, and flying safety

equipment while Tuskegee Institute made sure that their facilities were proper and well supplied for the trainer planes and airmen.[2].

The under estimated black aviators began their fighter pilot training using the BT-13 Valiants. The BT-13 used the newly developed retractable landing gear. The plane that was first proposed to the unit was the Vultee V-54 basic combat trainer. It was said to be “ too lavish for the cash-strapped United States Army Air Corps” of 1938. The aircraft manufacturer redesigned the plane and made it less complicated. The V-54 was then transformed to the BT-13 and a order for 300 new BT-13 Valiants was placed in September of 1939. The BT-13 would become a major American training aircraft during World War Two.[3]During the initial dates of training, each BT-13 cost the Army Air Corps \$20, 000.[4]

Thirteen started in the first class of future black aviators and five successfully completed the program. One these five lucky men was Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a West Point Academy graduate. The other four were commissioned second lieutenants, and all five received Army Air Corps silver pilot wings. Benjamin Davis was a special individual who would later become the first black commander of the 99th Fighter Squadron. Davis was born in Washington, D. C. on December 18, 1912, born to Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. and Elnora Dickerson Davis. According to the writings by Col. Alan L. Groupman, it is said that his the future four star general's love for flight began at the age of 13, in the summer of 1926. Adolescent Benjamin Davis Jr. went for a flight with a barnstorming pilot at Bolling Field in Washington, D. C. After attending the Chicago, Davis entered the United States Military Academy 1932. Like all

potential cadets, Davis needed to gain sponsorship from a congressman or the president. Davis was fortunate to gaining this through Representative Oscar De Priest (R-IL) of Chicago, the only black member of Congress.[1]

During the four year term at the West Point, Davis in his autobiography says that he was snubbed by fellow classmates. “ Davis never had a roommate and he ate by himself because his classmates hoped that this would drive him out of the Academy.” The shunning did the opposite, it fueled Davis to graduate.[2]While relief should have been a thought in the mind of Davis, now a senior year at West Point, Davis instead was filled with disheartening emotions after being rejected by the Army Air Corps because of zero tolerance towards the acceptance of colored people. Instead of being able to flourish into his early life’s dream, he was assigned to the all-black 24th Infantry Regiment (the original Buffalo Soldier unit) at Fort Benning, Georgia.

1936 marked the year that Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. was the first African American to graduate from West Point Military Academy in 47 years. When he was commissioned as a second lieutenant, the Army had a grand total of two black line officers – Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. and Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. (Davis).

Davis was assigned to the 99th Fighter Squadron, a new all black squadron. [1]In August of that year, Captain Davis Jr. became squadron commander of the 99th Fighter Squadron. Although new, the 99th was transported to Casablanca, Morocco, on the USS Mariposa. From Morocco they traveled by train to Oujda, Morocco then to Tunisia. This would be the location that they

would operate against the world renowned and German Luftwaffe. The 99th's first recorded combat mission was to attack the crucial island of Pantelleria in the Mediterranean Sea, in preparation for the Allied invasion of Sicily. Lieutenant Bill Campbell became the first black airman to drop a bomb on an enemy target. After having a lack of experience and still being able to apply such discipline on the ground and in their air, the 99th Fighter Squadron earned the Distinguished Unit Citation for its miraculous combat performance. Colonel William W. Momyer told U. S. media that the 99th was a failure. In response, the House Armed Services Committee summoned a hearing to determine if the Tuskegee Airmen experiment should be allowed to continue. Momyer made the recommendation to scrap the project. Placed into evidence was the "scientific" report by the University of Texas that was said to prove that "African Americans were of low intelligence and incapable of handling complex situations." [1] Colonel Davis denied the claims by committee members, but "General Hap Arnold ordered an evaluation of all Mediterranean Theater P-40 units be undertaken to determine the true ability of the 99th Fighter Squadron." Future results showed that the 99th Fighter Squadron to be "at least equal to other units operating the fighter."

After the investigation brought upon by Momyer four new all black squadrons were combined for the creation of the 332nd Fighter Group. The 332nd demanded respect while flying missions in their P-40 Warhawks, P-47 Thunderbolts, and finally with the P-51 Mustang. The P-51 was become the aircraft that would be glorified by all and artist would marvel over with their canvas and paint brushes.

“ The 99th flew many combat missions under Davis’ command. Capt. Davis returned to the United States in September 1943 to assume command of the 332nd Fighter Group. Major George S. “ Spanky” Roberts remained in Europe and became the commanding officer of the 99th Fighter Squadron.”[2]

One of the most thrilling missions was conducted on January 27 and the 28 of 1944. The German Luftwaffe flew their fighter bomber aircraft in Anzio, Italy where only days prior, the allies successfully completed amphibious landings. Although out trained by the Germans the Tuskegee Airmen gave their all and provided their best efforts. Because of this, the 99th fighter squadron won its second Distinguished Unit Citation in May of 1944.[1]

It was 1945 when Squadron Commander Lieutenant Roscoe Brown led the all black fighter group on a bomber escort mission to Berlin.[2] During that mission the squadron was to fly north and turn the bombers over to another Fighter Group who were to finish escorting the B-17’s onto their target. This flight was so long that it would require two different escort fighter groups to fly cover. As the group neared the rendezvous area they scanned the sky looking for their relief. The relief escort fighters did not show up. They knew that they could not send the bombers to their target without fighter protection. This critical moment forced tension on the decision of the fighter group. They decided to proceed with the escort despite their being a low fuel supply. This was the longest escort mission of any 15th Air force squadron. The Tuskegee Airmen flew sixteen hundred miles round trip.[3] Lt. Brown spotted an incoming flight of new modern day German jets. Although Lt. Brown was 2000 feet away he fired two long burst from his 50 caliber

cannon. According to Lt. Brown who was alone with the jet, one of the wings caught fire which enveloped the entire wing. The German Messerschmitt Me 262 lost an engine and the pilot was forced to eject as the plane went down.[1]“ The Tuskegee Airmen did not lose a bomber”[2], even though the Germans had the most modern and quicker aircraft during this mission. The pilots were credited with dog fight kills of a Me-262 which came from the all jet Jagdgeschwader and was part of the German Luftwaffe. Initially the 332nd claimed 11 Me 262s kills during the mission. After the war, German documents’ were examined, Jagdgeschwader unit show that only four Me 262s were shot down and all four pilots survived.[3]Although the rumors of victories swirl, the 332nd won a Distinguished Unit Citation for the mission. [4]

The final day for the Tuskegee Airmen aerial victories was April 26th. Three of six group P-51 Mustangs escorting surveillance aircraft redirected to investigate an unidentified aircraft that turned out to be an Allied Mosquito. On their way back, they encountered five ME-109s that rocked their wings so that they would appear as friendly aircraft. The P-51s, sporting their red tails, were not fooled. The Mustangs pilots turned toward the German enemy, who took action and retreated.. After coming in contact with the enemy and doing battle, only one of the ME-109s escaped. Days after this head to head battle, the war ended.[5]

At the end of the war, Airmen of the 332nd were credited shooting down 112 Luftwaffe aircraft, a destroyer TA-23 was sunk by machine-gun fire, and many fuel dumps, train, and trucks were destroyed. The pilots who were part

of the 332nd Fighter Group flew more than 15, 000 sorties and conducted 1, 500 missions.

Two post-war myths have circulated throughout the world about the Tuskegee Airmen through the media, movies and have become somewhat like folk tails. One is that Lieutenant Colonel Lee Archer was an ace and was denied credit for his fifth victory due to his race.[1]The second and most popularized myth is that the 332nd never lost a bomber that they were escorting. The mission reports from the 332nd note that its pilots witnessed friendly bombers going down mostly to anti-aircraft fire.[2]

In 1946, Truman established a Committee on Civil Rights, which reported back to him in 1947. The committee documented civil rights infractions and racial violence and urged Truman to take steps to rid the country of the “disease” of racism. One of the points that the report made was that African Americans who serve their country did so with pride and honor. African-American activist and leader Philip Randolph told President Truman “that if he did not end segregation in the armed forces, African Americans would start refusing to serve in the armed forces.” In desire need of support from African American politically and wanting to promote U. S. reputation overseas, Truman decided to desegregate the military.[1]African Americans have served in the U. S. military since the days of George Washington, but it took until July 26, 1948, for the country to begin living up to the ideas which highlight freedom and equality for which they fought to defend.[2]Truman did not believe his proposed bill would make it through Congress. So instead, Truman used an executive order to end military segregation. “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.”[3]Soon veterans of the Tuskegee Airmen found their selves to be in high demand in the United States Air Force. Since the civilian world in civilian side of the country had not moved so fast, they were also in demand at flight schools, like the black owned and operated, Columbia Air Center in Maryland.[4]

Today’s Air Force continues to have airmen and women that are part of the 332nd; it is not considered the 332nd Fighter Group but is not the 332nd Expeditionary Group. “ In 2005, Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Carter, Colonel Charles McGee, group historian Ted Johnson, and Lieutenant Colonel Lee Archer, all who were former Tuskegee Airmen, flew to Balad, Iraq to speak to airmen serving in the current 332nd.[1]The wheel of time continues to turn and the original Tuskegee Airmen are hard to find. Age has finally taken its toll on these once spunky and determined young men but fortunately even in their older age they continue to share their stories and inspire men, women and children, regardless of their race or gender. As commissioned officers in the Air Force they proved to be magnificent and equally capable during aerial battles and will always be remembered as heroes for the battles they won on the front lines at home.