

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

DANIEL L. HAULMAN
Chief, Organizational Histories Branch
Air Force Historical Research Agency
Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

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BACKGROUND

The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black pilots in American military history, those who were stationed at the bases where they trained or from which they flew, those who belonged to the organizations to which the pilots belonged, or those who belonged to the support organizations for those flying units. The pilots trained at airfields around Tuskegee during World War II. The Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated uses the term DOTA (Documented Original Tuskegee Airman) to define anyone, “man or woman, military or civilian, black or white, officer or enlisted,” who served at any of the air bases at which the Tuskegee-trained pilots trained or flew, or in any of the Army Air Force units “stemming from the ‘Tuskegee Experience’ between the years 1941 and 1949.”

When he was running for a third term as U.S. President, in 1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt promised to allow blacks to become military pilots. The War Department implemented his desire in 1941, but the black military pilots were first trained on a segregated basis, and served in their own segregated units, although some of the training personnel, and the first commanders of the black flying units, were white.

The first black flying unit in American military history was the 99th Pursuit Squadron, which was redesignated later as the 99th Fighter Squadron. It was first activated at Chanute Field, Illinois, in March 1941, but it did not at first have any pilots assigned, because those pilots had not yet been trained.

The first commander of the 99th Pursuit Squadron was Captain Harold R. Maddux, a white officer. In fact, the first three commanders of the 99th Fighter Squadron were white. The first black commander of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, later the 99th Fighter Squadron, was 1st Lt. George S. Roberts, who took command of the squadron on 1 June 1942. The most famous commander of the unit was Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.

TRAINING

Tuskegee was chosen as the place for the first black military pilot training because Tuskegee Institute had already been training black civilian pilots, Tuskegee Institute lobbied for the contract to operate a primary flight school for black pilots, the region had more days of good flying weather than many other parts of the country, and the area already had a segregated environment, which was consistent with the segregated training policy of the time.

The first black flying cadets were college-educated, but as the war went on, high school graduates without college credit were accepted into the program. To help provide some college-level training to those cadets, the 320th College Training Detachment was activated at Tuskegee Institute on 25 April 1943. After five months, graduates of that program were ready to become aviation cadets, and transferred to Tuskegee Army Air Field for pre-flight training.

The pilot cadets came from all over the country, and were considered the “cream of the crop.” Many of them had already learned to fly in the Civilian Pilot Training Program, which was available at certain black institutions around the country, including at Tuskegee Institute. Civilian pilot training was not a prerequisite for all the cadets, since the primary phase of flight training was designed eventually to substitute for it.

After pre-flight training, there were three phases of military flying training that most cadets had to complete before receiving their wings as Army Air Forces pilots: primary, basic, and advanced. The graduates then proceeded to transition training, to learn how to fly specific warplanes before entering combat. Those warplanes included fighters or bombers. Liaison and service pilots had fewer flight training phases.

During most of World War II, the primary, basic, and advanced flying training phases were generally nine weeks each, for a total of 27 weeks of flight training. The primary flight training phase took place at Moton Field (275 acres, 35 acres of which are now the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site). It had grass instead of paved runways. Cadets in the primary phase lived on the campus of Tuskegee Institute. Although white Army Air Forces personnel served at Moton Field, the field itself was owned by Tuskegee Institute, which operated it under a contract with the War Department.

In primary flying training, the Tuskegee Airmen flew PT-17 and PT-13 biplanes, and occasionally PT-19 monoplanes, on a grass strip at Moton Field.

The basic, advanced, and original transition flying training phases took place at a much larger airfield called Tuskegee Army Air Field (1,681 acres), several miles to the northwest of Moton Field, and today in ruins in the country between Tuskegee and Tallassee. That facility was not owned by Tuskegee Institute, but by the Army Air Forces. Cadets lived on the base, which had four large paved runways and three large double hangars, but white leaders stationed at Tuskegee generally lived off base.

Some of the cadets started with the College Training Detachment at Tuskegee Institute, moved to Tuskegee Army Air Field for pre-flight training, then moved to Moton Field for primary flight training, before returning to Tuskegee Army Air Field for basic and advanced flight training.

In basic flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, the cadets flew BT-13 airplanes, and later AT-6s. In advanced flying training, also at Tuskegee Army Air Field, future fighter pilots flew AT-6 airplanes, and future bomber pilots flew twin-engine AT-10 airplanes. Later, the AT-10 planes were replaced by TB-25s. For transition training the future fighter pilots flew P-40s and the future bomber pilots flew B-25s. Fighter pilots also flew P-39s and P-47s in transition training beyond Tuskegee.

There were many black and white flight instructors who trained the first black pilots in American military history. Most flight instructors in primary flight training at Moton Field were black, and at first flight instructors in basic and advanced flight training at Tuskegee Army Air Field were all white. Eventually, black flight instructors also served at Tuskegee Army Air Field, but they were never the majority of the flight instructors there.

One of the most important black flight instructors at Moton Field was Charles Alfred Anderson, whom the students called “Chief” because he had been the chief civilian pilot instructor at Kennedy Field for civilian pilot training before, and remained the chief pilot instructor at Moton Field. Chief Anderson served under Lewis A. Jackson, who headed Tuskegee Institute’s Division of Aeronautics, and George L. Washington, the General Manager of Moton Field. Washington, Jackson, and Anderson were all black, but the field also had some white military officers, who oversaw the military training, and who administered check rides to see who would graduate to Tuskegee Army Air Field for the basic and advanced flight training.

One of the most important of the many white flight instructors at the larger Tuskegee Army Air Field, who taught advanced flying training to single engine pilots, was Major Robert Long. The cadets affectionately called him “Mother Long.” The commander of the flight training school at Tuskegee Army Air Field was Col. Noel F. Parrish, a white officer from the South. The cadets generally remembered Parrish as a fair man who was generally interested in their success. Under Parrish, base facilities were gradually integrated. The successful integration of base facilities at Tuskegee Army Air Field contrasted with segregated facilities at Selfridge Field.

Although 13 African Americans started in the first class of flying training at Tuskegee, in 1941, only five of them graduated, in March of 1942. One of the five, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a West Point graduate whose father was the first black general in the U.S. Army, was not actually a cadet but a student officer. Davis himself would eventually become the first black general in the U.S. Air Force. The other four graduates in the first class were 2d

Lieutenants George S. “Spanky” Roberts, Lemuel R. Custis, Charles H. DeBow, and Mac Ross.

The 99th Fighter Squadron was active for about a year before it had any pilots. It had been activated in March 1941, and received its first pilots in March 1942. It was several months later before it had enough pilots to be considered an operational flying unit.

A total of 930 pilots, in 44 classes, graduated from advanced flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, either as single engine future fighter pilots (685) or as twin engine future bomber pilots (245). In addition to that, there were 51 liaison and 11 service pilots who trained at Tuskegee, giving a total of 992 Tuskegee Airmen pilots who completed their flight training at Tuskegee during World War II.

There were eleven other African American pilots, however, who completed their advanced pilot training beyond Tuskegee, but who could be considered Tuskegee Airmen because they were assigned to Tuskegee Airmen organizations before those units were inactivated in 1949. In fact, between the middle of 1946 and the middle of 1949, all new African American military pilots received their flight training at bases beyond Tuskegee, because Tuskegee Army Air Field ceased pilot training by the end of June 1946, even though they were assigned eventually to the all-black flying units. Among those other flying training bases were Stewart Field, New York; Enid Army Air Base, Oklahoma; and Williams Air Force Base, Arizona. If one considers all eleven of these pilots as Tuskegee Airmen, there were more than 1000 Tuskegee Airmen who were pilots, 992 of whom completed their pilot training at Tuskegee.

The number of black military pilots before the integration of the United States Air Force in 1949 varies depending on what is being considered. There were 992 Tuskegee Airmen pilots who graduated from flight training at Tuskegee, including 5 Haitians. Besides that, there were 4 black liaison pilots and 11 other black pilots who received their pilot training beyond Tuskegee Army Air Field, which gives a total of 1007 black pilots who trained with the Army Air Forces or the United States Air Force before the integration of the Air Force in 1949. If you subtract the 5 Haitians, who did not serve with the Army Air Forces after their pilot training, you get 1002 black Americans who completed military pilot training in the United States before the integration of the United States Air Force in the middle of 1949.

During World War II, all black military pilots belonged to the U.S. Army. The U.S. Navy (and U.S. Marine Corps) had no military pilots until after the war ended in 1945.

Over half of the more than 2,000 cadets who entered military flight training at Tuskegee failed to graduate from the advanced flying training phase at Tuskegee Army Air Field and earn their wings as Army Air Forces pilots. The ones who failed were said to have “washed out.” The ones who survived all three phases of the training were the best of those who entered.

A liaison pilot was one trained to fly light aircraft in a battlefield area for such tasks as artillery spotting for U.S. Army ground units in an infantry division. Some of the Tuskegee-trained black liaison pilots later served with the 92nd or 93rd Divisions, which were also black military organizations. A service pilot was one trained to fly aircraft other than those used in combat. Some of the Tuskegee Airmen liaison pilots deployed to combat theaters in the Pacific Ocean, but not the fighter or bomber pilots. The bomber pilots did not deploy overseas during World War II, and the fighter pilots who did deploy for combat all served in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations.

The five Haitian pilots who graduated from advanced pilot training at Tuskegee Army Air Field did not deploy to serve with American combat units, but went back to serve with the armed forces of Haiti.

Counting not only pilots, but also navigators, bombardiers, radio operators, armorers, mechanics, trainers, weather men, administrators, medical personnel, and other support personnel on the ground, there were more than 14,000 Tuskegee Airmen. For every pilot, there were at least fourteen Tuskegee Airmen who were not pilots. One of the Tuskegee Airmen, Theopolis W. Johnson, compiled a list of 14,632 Tuskegee Airmen, but there were probably many more who did not appear on his list.

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN FLYING ORGANIZATIONS

As noted before, the first black flying squadron was the 99th Pursuit Squadron, later redesignated as the 99th Fighter Squadron. It did not have any pilots until March 1942, and eventually got enough to be an operational flying unit. the 99th Fighter Squadron eventually deployed to combat overseas in the spring of 1943.

The second black flying squadron in U.S. military history was the 100th Fighter Squadron. Unlike the 99th Fighter Squadron, it did not deploy in the spring of 1943 for combat overseas, but remained for a time at Tuskegee Army Air Field.

The first black flying group was the 332nd Fighter Group, and it was first activated at Tuskegee Army Air Field on 13 October 1942, along with the 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons. At the same time, the 100th Fighter Squadron was assigned to it, giving it three squadrons. At first the 99th

Fighter Squadron did not belong to it. When the 99th Fighter Squadron deployed overseas, the 332nd Fighter Group stayed stateside while its squadrons, all activated much later than the 99th, received enough trained pilots to achieve full strength.

In late March, 1943, the 332nd Fighter Group moved from Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama to Selfridge Field, Michigan, where it continued building strength while preparing for overseas combat. Fighter pilots who graduated from advanced pilot training at Tuskegee Army Air Field were transferred to Selfridge. Selfridge was near Detroit, which endured racial riots during the summer of 1943.

The first commander of the 332nd Fighter Group was Lt. Col. Sam W. Westbrook, a white officer. The second commander of the group, who took command on 16 May 1943, was another white officer named Col. Robert R. Selway, Jr. Selway was a West Point graduate.

Colonel Selway was not popular with the 332nd Fighter Group black officers at Selfridge Field because he enforced racial segregation there, a policy that had been started under base commander Col. William Boyd and backed up by Brig. Gen. Frank O. D. Hunter, the First Air Force commander, before Selway arrived at Selfridge. Selway refused to challenge the policy. For example, the officers club on the base was reserved for whites, despite U.S. Army Regulation 210-10, which required officers clubs to be open to all officers at any particular base. Racial tension in nearby Detroit also affected race relations on the base.

The first black commander of the 332nd Fighter Group was Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who had commanded the 99th Fighter Squadron in combat overseas. He returned to the United States to take command of the group in October 1943, about a year after the group was first activated. Col. Robert Selway, the previous 332nd Fighter Group commander, remained at Selfridge, where he later commanded the 477th Bombardment Group, the first black bombardment group.

Additional transition training for the fighter pilots took place in the 553rd Fighter Squadron which was originally at Selfridge Field, Michigan, but which later moved to Walterboro Army Air Field, South Carolina.

After graduation from advanced flight school, bomber pilots deployed from Tuskegee Army Air Field to the 477th Bombardment Group, which initially served at Selfridge Field, Michigan, after the 332nd Fighter Group deployed from there to Italy. The 477th Bombardment Group eventually moved to Godman Field, Kentucky, then still later to Freeman Field, Indiana.

THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN IN COMBAT

The 332nd Fighter Group and the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302nd Fighter Squadrons were the only Tuskegee Airmen organizations that took part in combat overseas. There were other Tuskegee Airmen organizations overseas that provided support for the flying organizations, but their personnel did not fly aircraft in combat. Certain Tuskegee Airmen liaison pilots also took part in combat overseas, but they were assigned to Army ground organizations, and not their own black flying units. Some of those liaison pilots served with the 93d Division in the Pacific.

The 99th Fighter Squadron deployed from Tuskegee to North Africa during April 1943, a little more than a year after its first pilots graduated from advanced flying training, and more than two years after the squadron was first activated. Within the next few months, the squadron moved from North Africa to Sicily and then to the mainland of Italy.

The 99th Fighter Squadron flew its first combat mission on 2 Jun 1943, more than a month after it arrived in North Africa. 1st Lt. Charles B. Hall was the first black American military pilot to shoot down an enemy airplane in combat. He scored the first 99th Fighter Squadron aerial victory credit on 2 Jul 1943, a month after the squadron entered combat.

The 99th Fighter Squadron faced varying degrees of opposition from white Army Air Forces personnel overseas. For example, Col. William W. Momyer, commander of the white 33rd Fighter Group, to which the 99th Fighter Squadron was sometimes attached, tried to have the 99th Fighter Squadron taken out of combat, claiming that it was performing poorly. His recommendation was supported by his immediate superiors. The 99th Fighter Squadron was attached to other white fighter groups after the complaint was sent. The War Department subsequently undertook a study to compare the combat performance of the 99th Fighter Squadron with the other P-40 fighter squadrons in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, but found no significant difference, and did not take the 99th Fighter Squadron out of combat.

The average fighter group had three fighter squadrons assigned to it. When the 99th Fighter Squadron was attached to various white fighter groups at different times, those other groups also had three other assigned white fighter squadrons. It was understandable that sometimes the members of the 99th Fighter Squadron felt as if they were an outside organization, not only because they were the only black flying squadron at first, but because they were the only squadron attached but not assigned to the white fighter group.

Some of the white officers overseas supported the 99th Fighter Squadron. For example, Colonel Earl E. Bates, commander of the white 79th Fighter Group, to which the 99th was sometimes attached, encouraged the

black pilots who served under him, and welcomed the squadron. When the 99th Fighter Squadron was attached to the white 324th Fighter Group for two different periods (c. 29 Jun-19 Jul 1943 and 1 Apr-6 Jun 1944), under the command of Colonel William K. McNown and Colonel Leonard C. Lydon, it shared two of the 324th Fighter Group's Distinguished Unit Citations, because it was flying missions with them at the time. Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker, who, as commander of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, exercised some control over both the Twelfth and Fifteenth Air Forces stationed in Italy in 1944, helped prepare for the 99th Fighter Squadron to join the 332nd Fighter Group and move the 332nd Fighter Group from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Air Force to perform bomber escort duties, which gave the Tuskegee Airmen more opportunity to engage in combat with enemy aircraft over central Europe.

The 99th Fighter Squadron first flew P-40 Warhawk airplanes in combat. While the P-40 was inferior to many other kinds of fighter airplanes of the time, the 99th Fighter Squadron was attached to white fighter groups whose assigned squadrons also flew the P-40s for the Twelfth Air Force. The black pilots were flying the same kind of aircraft as the white pilots in the fighter groups to which they were attached.

The 99th Fighter Squadron was successful in combat. Under the Twelfth Air Force, it flew effective missions in support of Allied land and sea forces in Italy. For example, on 27-28 January 1944, while protecting Allied surface forces at Anzio, Italy, pilots of the 99th Fighter Squadron shot down thirteen enemy airplanes, more than any other P-40 unit involved. Before it was assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, the 99th Fighter Squadron shot down eighteen enemy airplanes.

The 332nd Fighter Group deployed from Michigan to the mainland of Italy between 22 December 1943 and 3 February 1944. Elements deployed first by train to Virginia and then by ships from there to Europe. Not all the black fighter pilots at Selfridge deployed, since some of them belonged to the 553rd Fighter Squadron, which would provide the 332nd Fighter Group with replacement pilots.

At first the 332nd Fighter Group flew missions to protect Allied shipping in the Mediterranean Sea and around southern Italy. It served the Twelfth Air Force, like the 99th Fighter Squadron, which had already been in Italy for some time.

At first the 332nd Fighter Group flew P-39 airplanes in Italy. Those planes had the engine behind the pilot because the front to that airplane type included a cannon and its ammunition. The P-39 was very good at hitting targets on the ground or sea, but not very good against enemy fighters in air

combat. At first the 332nd Fighter Group, because of its missions and its aircraft, had little opportunity to shoot down enemy airplanes.

BOMBER ESCORT MISSIONS

The 332nd Fighter Group began flying bomber escort missions in June 1944, after being transferred from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Air Force. The Twelfth Air Force had flown tactical missions, with fighters, but the Fifteenth Air Force flew strategic bombing missions deep into enemy territory, using heavy bombers escorted by fighters.

When it began flying bomber escort missions, the 332nd Fighter Group flew P-47 Thunderbolt airplanes. Sometimes a P-47 was called a Jug. It had a very large air-cooled engine, and was excellent in a dive. Many Tuskegee Airmen liked the airplane because it was less vulnerable than airplanes with water-cooled engines, which would overheat if their water lines were hit and cut. The P-47 pilots also appreciated the large engine in front of them, which helped protect them against enemy fire from the front.

For the Fifteenth Air Force, the 332nd Fighter Group escorted B-17 Flying Fortresses and the B-24 Liberators. Those four-engine bombers were comparable in size, but the B-17 could fly higher and was more durable in combat, and the B-24, depending on the model, was generally a little faster and could fly a little farther. Each heavy bomber had a crew of about 10 men. They also were equipped with machine guns in the nose, in the tail, in a top turret, in a bottom turret, and one on each side. Each bomber had at least ten machine guns and flew in large formations, but they still needed the protection of escort fighters.

The 99th Fighter Squadron was assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group in May 1944, but did not physically join the group at the same base until July 1944. In the meantime, the 99th Fighter Squadron continued to be attached to other fighter groups that were white, and continued to fly P-40s.

The 332nd Fighter Group began flying P-51 Mustang airplanes in combat during July 1944. The P-51 could fly faster and farther than any previous fighters assigned to the group, but they were more vulnerable to enemy fire than the P-47 fighters, with their air-cooled engines. The P-51s could fly faster than other Allied fighters, but not faster than the German jets.

Each of the four P-51 fighter escort groups in the Fifteenth Air Force had its own identifying color or pattern on the tails of its aircraft. The 31st Fighter Group had striped red tails, the 52nd Fighter Group had solid yellow tails, the, the 325th Fighter Group had black and yellow checkered tails, and the 332nd Fighter Group had solid red tails. The different colors for the

different fighter escort groups helped the bombers to recognize to which of the escort groups their accompanying fighters belonged, and helped distinguish them from enemy fighters.

For its bomber escort missions for the Fifteenth Air Force, the 332nd Fighter Group was based at Ramitelli Airfield, which was on the Foggia Plain near the Adriatic Sea, on the east coast of central Italy.

The 332nd Fighter Group was the only black fighter group, and it was also the only one to have four squadrons instead of three. That gave it more pilots and more airplanes than the average fighter group. That factor might help explain why the 332nd Fighter Group lost fewer escorted bombers to enemy aircraft than the average of the other groups.

There were always many more bombers to escort than there were fighters to escort them. By the summer of 1944, the Fifteenth Air Force had 21 bombardment groups, but only 7 fighter groups to escort them. There were three bombardment groups for every fighter group. Furthermore, each fighter group had 3 squadrons assigned (except the 332nd Fighter Group, which had 4), and each bombardment group had 4 squadrons assigned. In other words, the Fifteenth Air Force had 84 bombardment squadrons, but only 22 fighter squadrons to escort them. It is no wonder that sometimes bombers under fighter escort group protection would sometimes be shot down by enemy aircraft, because usually there were many more bombers than fighters to protect them, and sometimes also more enemy fighters than fighter escorts to fend them off.

The Tuskegee Airmen sometimes lost bombers under their protection to enemy aircraft fire, but such cases were rare. It happened on 7 of the 179 bomber escort missions they flew, and possibly a few more for which there is no documentary confirmation. At least 27 Tuskegee Airmen-escorted bombers were shot down by enemy airplanes. Most were lost on one mission, on 18 July 1944, when there were a great many more bombers to escort than fighters to escort them, and when the fighter escorts were vastly outnumbered by enemy fighters. All but three of the 27 bombers lost while under Tuskegee Airmen escort during World War II were shot down by enemy aircraft during the summer of 1944.

The 332nd Fighter Group performance compared favorably with the other fighter groups with which it served overseas during World War II. The group lost significantly fewer bombers to enemy airplanes than those other fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force. The 332nd Fighter Group lost a total of 27 bombers, but the average number of bombers lost by each of the other fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force was 46. In the period between early June 1944 and the end of April 1945, the 332nd Fighter Group was fifth of the

seven fighter groups in the number of aerial victories it achieved. The 332nd Fighter Group shot down more enemy fighters in that period than two of the other fighter escort groups, but those other groups were flying P-38 airplanes. During the period between the beginning of June 1944 and the end of April 1945, when it was flying for the Fifteenth Air Force, the 332nd Fighter Group shot down fewer enemy airplanes than the other three P-51 fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force, and fewer than one of the P-38 groups. The 332nd Fighter Group pilots, as instructed by their commander, Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., refused to chase after enemy airplanes that were no longer threatening the bombers they were assigned to protect. Davis did not want his fighters to abandon the bombers to seek enemy fighters to shoot down. The 332nd Fighter Group lost fewer bombers but also shot down fewer enemy airplanes than the average other P-51 fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force.

The 99th Fighter Squadron flew 577 missions before joining the 332nd Fighter Group, and the 332nd Fighter Group flew 914 missions, for a total of 1491 combat missions flown by the Tuskegee Airmen. The 332nd Fighter Group flew a total of 312 combat missions for the Fifteenth Fighter Group between the beginning of June 1944 and the end of April 1945.

The 332nd Fighter Group flew a total of 179 bomber escort missions for the Fifteenth Air Force. 172 of these were heavy bomber escort, or escort for 4-engine bombers such as B-17s or B-24s. The other 7 escorted medium bombers, twin engine bombers such as B-25s or B-26s. The Tuskegee Airmen had escorted medium bombers before, for the Twelfth Air Force, but bomber escort was not their primary job before they were assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force.

The 99th Fighter Squadron sometimes lost bombers it was escorting to enemy aircraft even before it was assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group and the Fifteenth Air Force. For example, the 99th Fighter Squadron escorted medium bombers on July 3, 1943, when it was attached to the 324th Fighter Group of the Twelfth Air Force, and two of those bombers were shot down by enemy airplanes during the escort mission.

The most memorable mission of the 332nd Fighter Group was a mission to escort B-17 bombers to Berlin on March 24, 1945. It was the only Fifteenth Air Force mission to the enemy capital, and it was the longest mission flown by the Fifteenth Air Force. During that mission, three Tuskegee airmen each shot down a German Me-262 jet airplane. The Berlin mission is the one for which the 332nd Fighter Group earned its only Distinguished Unit Citation. Five other Fifteenth Air Force fighter escort groups also flew on the Berlin mission, and one of those other groups, the 31st Fighter Group, shot down five

German jets in the target area that day. The Tuskegee Airmen were not the only ones to shoot down German jets on that mission.

The Tuskegee Airmen flew four different kinds of aircraft in combat: P-39s, P-40s, P-47s, and P-51s. The 99th Fighter Squadron at first flew P-40s in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy, in 1943 and 1944. The 332nd Fighter Group and its 100th, 301st, and 302nd Fighter Squadrons at first flew P-39s and then P-47s in 1944. By the end of July 1944, the 99th Fighter Squadron had joined the 332nd Fighter Group, and all of its squadrons were flying P-51s.

Besides campaign streamers, the 332nd Fighter Group earned one Distinguished Unit Citation, for the Berlin mission. The 99th Fighter Squadron earned two Distinguished Unit Citations before it was assigned to the 332d Fighter Group. The 99th Fighter Squadron earned a total of three Distinguished Unit Citations, because it earned a third one after being assigned to the 332d Fighter Group.

The 99th Fighter Squadron shot down 18 enemy airplanes before it was assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, and the 332nd Fighter Group and its squadrons shot down 94 enemy airplanes, for a total of 112 enemy airplanes shot down by the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II.

None of the Tuskegee Airmen became aces for having shot down at least five enemy airplanes. During World War II, none of the Tuskegee Airmen claimed to have shot down any more than four enemy airplanes, and none received any more than four aerial victory credits. However, three Tuskegee Airmen (Lee Archer, Joseph Elsberry, and Edward Toppins) each shot down a total of four enemy airplanes, and four of the Tuskegee Airmen (Joseph Elsberry, Clarence Lester, Lee Archer, and Harry Stewart) each shot down three enemy airplanes in one day. One reason there were no Tuskegee Airmen aces is that their units deployed to combat later than the white fighter units, and by the time they entered combat German fighter opposition was in decline. Most of the 332nd Fighter Group mission reports indicate no enemy fighters encountered.

The most important commander of the 99th Fighter Squadron, and later the 332nd Fighter Group, was Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. He was a West Point graduate whose father was the first black general in the Army. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. later became the first black general in the Air Force.

355 Tuskegee Airmen pilots deployed overseas for combat. According to researcher Craig Huntly, 81 Tuskegee Airmen were killed overseas. Not all of them were killed in combat. Some were killed in accidents. 95 Tuskegee Airmen earned Distinguished Flying Crosses, but one of them earned two, so the Tuskegee Airmen earned a total of 96 Distinguished Flying Crosses. 31

Tuskegee Airmen became prisoners of war after having been shot down over enemy territory.

The War Department inactivated the 332d Fighter Group in October 1945, just after it returned from Europe. It was activated again in 1947.

The 553rd Fighter Squadron, which served at Selfridge Field and Oscoda Field in Michigan between 1 November 1943 and 5 May 1944, trained replacement pilots for the 332d Fighter Group and its squadrons deployed overseas. Fighter pilots who graduated from Tuskegee Army Air Field after the deployment of the 332nd Fighter Group were assigned first to the 553rd Fighter Squadron, and not directly to the deployed 332nd Fighter Group. Pilots of the 553rd Fighter Squadron were often later assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group.

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN BOMBER ORGANIZATIONS

The 477th Bombardment Group was the first black bombardment group. It had been active briefly in 1943 as a white bombardment group, but when it was activated again, at Selfridge Field, Michigan, on 15 January 1944, it was a predominantly black bombardment group. It received its pilots from twin-engine training at Tuskegee. Between January and May 1944, both the 477th Bombardment Group and the 553rd Fighter Squadron served at Selfridge Field, Michigan.

The first commander of the 477th Bombardment Group, after it was activated as a black bombardment group in January 1944, was Col. Robert Selway, a white officer who had commanded the 332nd Fighter Group at the same base, Selfridge Field, Michigan, before it deployed overseas. Selway remained the commander of the group for a year and a half. He was not popular with the black officers, since he attempted to enforce segregation on the bases where the group was stationed. At Selfridge, he wanted to keep the officers club restricted to whites, but reluctantly agreed that a black officers club could also be established. At Godman Field, Kentucky, blacks used the officers club, but only because the white officers used the officers club at Fort Knox next door. At Freeman Field, Indiana, Selway set up two officers clubs, one for whites and one for blacks.

The 477th Bombardment Group, like other bombardment groups, had four bombardment squadrons assigned to it. The 616th, 617th, 618th, and 619th Bombardment Squadrons were assigned to the 477th Bombardment Group.

The 477th Bombardment Group never deployed overseas for combat partly because it was activated so late in the war (in January 1944); partly

because a bombardment group took longer to train than a fighter group; and partly because it was transferred from base to base because of racial trouble.

The most important event in 477th Bombardment Group history was later called the “Freeman Field Mutiny.” On 5-6 April, 61 black officers were arrested for trying to enter the all-white officers club. All but 3 of them, who were accused of using force, were released on 9 April. Colonel Selway, commander of the 477th Bombardment Group and the base commander, then ordered all black officers at Freeman Field to sign a new base regulation to acknowledge the separate officers clubs policy at the base. 101 black officers, most of whom were in the original group of 61, refused to sign, and were arrested. A total of 120 black officers of the 477th Bombardment Group were arrested in April, many of them twice. On April 13, they were flown to Godman Field, Kentucky, and kept in confinement. On April 23, 101 of them were released because War Department regulations did not authorize segregated officers clubs. The three who had been accused of using force were later court martialed, but two of them were acquitted. Roger Terry, was convicted. All who had been arrested in the final round were given letters of reprimand.

At the time of the “Freeman Field Mutiny,” there were more than 400 black officers assigned to the base, and 120 of them were arrested either for trying to integrate the officers club reserved for whites and/or for refusing to sign a document acknowledging the separate officers clubs. Only about one in every four black officers at Freeman Field took part in the “mutiny.” Daniel “Chappie” James, who would later become the first black general in the American armed forces, was stationed at Freeman Field at the time. He was not among those who were arrested.

In the summer of 1945, the Army Air Forces reassigned all the white officers in the 477th Bombardment Group, including its commander, Col. Robert Selway, to other organizations, and replaced them with black officers. The group became all black. Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who had commanded both the 99th Fighter Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group, became commander of the 477th. The group itself was redesignated as the 477th Composite Group at the same time, because the 99th Fighter Squadron was reassigned to it, and it then had both bombers and fighters.

The 477th Composite Group remained active for a couple more years, and moved to Lockbourne Air Force Base, Ohio, in March of 1946. For two years, it was the only black flying group. In 1947, it was replaced by the 332nd Fighter Group, which was activated again after having been inactivated in 1945.

INTEGRATION OF THE AIR FORCE

The United States Air Force became independent from the U.S. Army in 1947, but it was not integrated from the start. That took place, however, within two years.

A 332nd Fighter Group team won the conventional (propeller) aircraft category at an Air Force gunnery meet in Las Vegas in 1949. Another fighter group won the jet airplane category. The names of both groups were later engraved on a large trophy. The names of two other groups, that won the meet in 1950, were also later engraved on the trophy, but by 1950, the 332nd Fighter Group had been inactivated.

The Tuskegee Airmen were not the only black personnel in the Army Air Forces during World War II, but, except for a handful of liaison pilots, they were the only ones flying in combat. Other black organizations in the Army Air Forces during the war included members of a host of engineer aviation battalions, who constructed airfields for the service all over the world, and not just in the Mediterranean Theater.

Fourteen of the black liaison pilots of the black 93rd Division trained at Tuskegee, and the 93rd Division served in the South Pacific. Other black liaison pilots who had trained at Tuskegee served with the 92nd Division in Italy. None of the fighter or bomber pilots among the Tuskegee Airmen served in the Pacific.

The Tuskegee experience began in 1941, when the first military black flying unit was activated, and ended in 1949, when the last segregated all-black flying units were inactivated. Certainly there have been a great many black pilots who have served in the Air Force since 1949, but unless they served in Tuskegee Airmen units or at Tuskegee Airmen bases between the years 1941 and 1949, they were not technically Tuskegee Airmen. There were no “second-generation Tuskegee Airmen,” because during the years 1941-1949, there were no fathers and sons who both took part in the program.

President Truman is usually given credit for racially integrating the armed forces of the United States, by issuing Executive Order 9981 on 26 July 1948. He was motivated partly because A. Philip Randolph, a leading spokesman for blacks, urged them to resist the draft as long as the armed forces were segregated, partly because Truman wanted black votes in the upcoming Presidential election, and partly because he appreciated the contributions of black service members during World War II. However, the armed forces did not immediately implement Truman’s mandate.

The United States Air Force, which had become independent from the Army in 1947, had already announced that it would racially integrate months

before Truman's action, and in 1949, it became the first of the armed services to achieve significant racial integration. On 11 May 1949, the Air Force issued letter 35-3, which prescribed racially integrated United States Air Force organizations. On 1 Jul 1949, the all-black 332nd Fighter Wing and its 332nd Fighter Group were inactivated, and their personnel were reassigned to formerly all-white flying organizations. Col. Benjamin O. Davis, commander of the 332nd Fighter Wing, and the most famous of the Tuskegee Airmen, was reassigned to Maxwell Air Force Base, where he attended the Air War College. Davis wrote in his autobiography, "The large number of black units in the Air Force, -more than 100 in June 1949- was reduced to nine by the end of December 1950. By that time, 95 percent of the black airmen in the Air Force were serving in integrated units." (Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., *Benjamin O. Davis, American* [Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991], p. 164). The Army and Navy took significantly more time than the Air Force to achieve a great degree of racial integration.

There were no black pilots in either the U.S. Navy or the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II. The first black pilot in the U.S. Navy, Ensign Jesse L. Brown, earned his wings in late 1948, more than six years after the first black military pilots in the Army Air Forces. Ensign Brown began serving in a Navy flying unit in 1949, but the Navy, like the Army, was slow in implementing full racial integration.

THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN AFTER WORLD WAR II

Many Tuskegee Airmen pilots wanted to continue flying. Most commercial airline companies would not hire black pilots just after World War II, partly because there were so many white transport pilots returning from war service, who had more experience in airliner-type aircraft, and partly because of racial prejudice. There were no black transport flying units during World War II. In order to keep flying as their vocation, many of the Tuskegee Airmen chose to remain in the Air Force. Of course, many of them enjoyed serving their country, and wanted to remain in the service, despite whatever opportunities there might have been beyond military service.

Three Tuskegee Airmen eventually became generals in the United States Air Force. The most famous of these was Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the most famous of the Tuskegee Airmen, whose own father was the first black general in the U.S. Army. Daniel "Chappie" James, who had served in the 477th Bombardment Group, and who later flew fighters in Korea and Vietnam, became the first four-star general in any of the military services. Lucius

Theus, who served at Tuskegee Army Air Field just after World War II, and later in Vietnam, also eventually became a general in the Air Force.

Another famous Tuskegee Airman was Col. Charles McGee, who flew fighter airplanes in combat in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, and who accumulated a total of 409 combat missions, more than any other Tuskegee Airman, but not the highest of any Air Force pilot. Another example of a Tuskegee Airmen who flew in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, was Lt. Col. George Hardy. His experience was in fighters, then bombers, then gunships.

Three Tuskegee Airmen shot down German jets during World War II, but they were not the first American pilots to shoot down German jets. They were Roscoe C. Brown, Earl R. Lane, and Charles V. Brantley. Roscoe Brown eventually earned a doctorate and became a leading educator in New York.

There were no Tuskegee Airmen aces, who shot down at least five enemy airplanes, but three Tuskegee Airmen shot down four enemy airplanes each. They were Lee Archer, Joseph Elsberry, and Edward Toppins. 1st Lt. Charles B. Hall was the first Tuskegee Airman to shoot down an enemy aircraft (on 2 July 1943). 1st Lieutenant George S. Roberts became the first black commander of the first black flying unit, the 99th Fighter Squadron, on 1 June 1942. 1st Lt. Joseph D. Elsberry was the first Tuskegee Airman to shoot down three enemy airplanes in one day, on 12 July 1944. There was a total of four Tuskegee Airmen who shot down three enemy airplanes in one day. Besides Elsberry, they were Clarence Lester, Lee Archer, and Harry Stewart.

Four African American Tuskegee Airmen graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Two of them, Benjamin O. Davis and Robert B. Tresville, served in combat during World War II. Two others, Ernest J. Davis, Jr. and Andrew A. McCoy, Jr., graduated too late to go overseas, but they both served in the 99th Fighter Squadron after it returned from Italy. At least two of the white commanders of Tuskegee Airmen organizations, Robert R. Selway, Jr., and Col. Frederick V. H. Kimble, were also graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Selway commanded both the 332nd Fighter Group and the 477th Bombardment Group before Benjamin O. Davis Jr. did, and Kimble was an early commander of Tuskegee Army Air Field.

In August, 1972, in Detroit, some of the Tuskegee Airmen veterans got together and decided to form a national organization to meet periodically. In 1975, they transformed their veterans association into an educational and charitable corporation called the Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated, whose

membership would include persons who were not Tuskegee Airmen. Over the course of many years of research, Theopolis W. Johnson, a Tuskegee Airman pilot, developed a list of thousands of Tuskegee Airmen, to help the Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated identify which of its members were documented original Tuskegee Airmen. Much later, the Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated adopted the term “Documented Original Tuskegee Airman,” those members on the Theopolis W. Johnson list, or others who could document their having been Tuskegee Airmen.

The first book written about the Tuskegee Airmen was called **THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN**, and it was first published in 1955. The author, Charles Francis, called the first black military pilots Tuskegee Airmen because they had trained at Tuskegee. For many years after World War II, the primary sources of Tuskegee Airmen history were, like the histories of the white units, classified. Once those documents were declassified, the units became better known.

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN SOURCES

Many of the primary sources of Tuskegee Airmen history are located at the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base. Agency documents include original paper copies of the monthly histories of the various Tuskegee Airmen groups and squadrons, written by Tuskegee Airmen themselves during the war, the daily narrative mission reports of the combat organizations, also written by Tuskegee Airmen during the war, orders that awarded the first black military pilots honors such as aerial victory credits and Distinguished Flying Crosses and other awards, orders that awarded Tuskegee Airmen organizations honors such as Distinguished Unit Citations, reports on missing air crews, escape and evasion reports, and Twelfth and Fifteenth Air Force mission folders, including the daily mission reports of all the fighter and bomber groups that took part in particular combat missions. The agency also has some oral history interviews with some of the Tuskegee Airmen such as General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. and Colonel Noel Parrish. The National Archives and the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. also contain important Tuskegee Airmen documents, such as the personal papers of General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Many other primary sources of Tuskegee Airmen history are personnel records of individual Tuskegee Airmen, stored at the National Personnel Records Center at St. Louis. However a fire there years ago destroyed many of those personnel records. Other repositories have oral history interviews with individual Tuskegee Airmen, and some personal

papers they donated. For example, there is a Tuskegee Airmen archives at the University of California at Riverside, California. Tuskegee University's archives is also a good source for primary source documents about the Tuskegee Airmen, such as copies of *Hawk's Cry*, the newsletter of Tuskegee Army Air Field. For artifacts pertaining to the Tuskegee Airmen, the best places are the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site at Moton Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, The Tuskegee Airmen National Museum in Detroit, The National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., (a component of the Smithsonian Institution), The National Museum of the United States Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, and The National World War II Museum in New Orleans. Tuskegee Airmen artifacts will also be included in the new National Museum of African American History and Culture which is to open in Washington, D.C. in 2016.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

The most common inaccurate claim about the Tuskegee Airmen is that the 332nd Fighter Group was the only fighter escort group never to have lost a bomber to enemy aircraft. In fact, enemy aircraft shot down at least 27 bombers under Tuskegee Airmen escort. There were at least seven missions during which Tuskegee Airmen-escorted bombers were shot down. In 2010, the Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated passed a resolution endorsing the conclusion of its Harry Sheppard historical research committee that sometimes bombers under Tuskegee Airmen escort were shot down by enemy airplanes.

Another inaccurate claim is that Tuskegee Airman Lee Archer was the first and only black ace. In reality, there were no Tuskegee Airmen aces during World War II, and Lee Archer claimed and earned credit for a total of four aerial victory credits. Archer was one of three Tuskegee Airmen to have shot down a total of four enemy airplanes during World War II.

A third inaccurate claim is that the Tuskegee Airmen were the first American pilots to shoot down German jets. Three Tuskegee Airmen shot down German jets on March 24, 1945, on the Berlin mission, but there were many other American pilots who had shot down German jets before that date. Still, to shoot down a jet with an aircraft flying about 100 miles per hour slower is a remarkable achievement for anyone.

A fourth inaccurate claim is that the Tuskegee Airmen sank a German destroyer. Eight Tuskegee Airmen, flying P-47s, did indeed attack a German ship in the Adriatic Sea one day, and caused a huge explosion on the ship which they interpreted as having caused it to sink, but research shows that the

only German ship hit at the same time and place as the claim was the TA-22, the former Italian destroyer *Giuseppe Missori*, and it did not sink that day. In fact, it was not scuttled until the next year, according to enemy naval records.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

The historical significance of the Tuskegee Airmen is that among them were the first black pilots in American military history, and by performing well in combat, proved that they fully deserved the same opportunities offered to white pilots and servicemen. The 332nd Fighter Group lost significantly fewer bombers than the other fighter escort groups with which they served in the Fifteenth Air Force, saving the lives of countless bomber crews. The 477th Bombardment Group, during the Freeman Field Mutiny, demonstrated to the entire nation the absurdity of segregated facilities on military bases. The record of the Tuskegee Airmen encouraged the Air Force to integrate before the other services, a course recommended by Col. Noel Parrish, who had commanded Tuskegee Army Air Field. The Tuskegee Airmen provided role models for others, demonstrating how determination and persistence can overcome many obstacles. They risked their lives for their country even at a time when they were denied equal opportunities, and their actions helped open the door of equal opportunity to others of their race. In recognition for their World War II service, the Tuskegee Airmen were collectively awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by President George W. Bush in March 2007, after it had been approved by Congress in 2006. The Tuskegee Airmen fought two enemies, the Nazis overseas and racism at home, and truly fought so that others would be free.

Daniel Haulman
Air Force Historical Research Agency
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