

A TALE OF TWO COMMANDERS by Daniel L. Haulman

When people talk about the Tuskegee Airmen, they usually refer to the first black pilots in American military history, and the black members of their squadrons and groups. The Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated defines a documented original Tuskegee Airman, or DOTA, more broadly, as anyone, black or white, male or female, who was involved in the Tuskegee Airmen experience between 1941 and 1949. This would include some of the white commanders of the Tuskegee Airmen organizations, and of the flying schools where they learned to fly. Two of those white Tuskegee Airmen were Colonel Noel Parrish and Colonel Robert Selway.

Colonel Noel Parrish was the commander of the Tuskegee Army Air Field and the flying school there. After the black cadets completed primary flight training at Tuskegee Institute's Moton Field, they moved to the much larger Tuskegee Army Air Field, an Army Air Forces facility, where they undertook basic and advanced flying training. If they graduated from advanced flying training, they became Army Air Forces pilots, ready to move on to transition flight training or combat overseas. Most Tuskegee Airmen remember Colonel Parrish, despite his white skin and southern roots, as a friend rather than an enemy, who was genuinely interested in their success. Colonel Parrish favored the racial integration of the Air Force just after the end of World War II, and wrote an Air University thesis to promote that idea. The Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated later instituted a Noel Parrish award to honor a member of the organization, almost always an original Tuskegee Airman veteran, for his outstanding accomplishments. When Parrish faced an integration crisis at Tuskegee Army Air Field in August 1944, his actions determined his future in the eyes of black pilots.

Colonel Robert Selway might have also been remembered as a friend of the Tuskegee Airmen, if he had not been responsible for resisting the integration of the training bases where he commanded, first the 332nd Fighter Group, before it deployed overseas to take part in combat as the first black fighter group, and later the 477th Bombardment Group, the only black bomber group, which

never deployed overseas or took part in combat during World War II. If Selway had handled the integration issue at the bases he commanded the way Parrish did, Selway might have gone down in history as a friend of the Tuskegee Airmen. After all, he had commanded the only two black flying groups in World War II, and helped train them for combat. This paper explores the difference in the way Parrish and Selway responded to the integration crises at their bases, which left one a hero and the other a villain.

Before August 1944, Tuskegee Army Air Field maintained segregated dining facilities. On either side of the post exchange restaurant kitchen was a dining room. The larger one on the east was reserved for blacks, and the smaller one, on the other side of the kitchen, toward the west, was reserved for whites. The segregation policy at the base was consistent with the segregation policy of the surrounding community in central Alabama, where racial segregation was the norm, and where it had been the norm for generations.

On August 3, 1944, twelve black officers led by Captain Willard B. Ransom entered the west dining room of the Tuskegee Army Air Field post exchange restaurant, which had been reserved for white officers, and demanded service. When 2nd Lt. George D Frye, Assistant Exchange Officer, asked the black officers to go to the larger east dining room reserved for them, Captain Ransom showed Frye two War Department letters that noted service at base recreational facilities and post exchanges would not be denied any personnel because of race. With Col. Noel Parrish's support, Lt. Frye agreed to let the black officers be served in the west dining room, effectively integrating the restaurant without violence.

The integration of the post exchange restaurant at Tuskegee Army Air Field was non-violent, but it was still very controversial. Many white officers stopped eating at the facility, refusing to eat with the blacks they trained. Some of the white flight training officers lost their enthusiasm for training blacks, and became more strict. The elimination rate for black cadets increased. Some white

officers asked for transfers, and within two months, Tuskegee Army Air Field received its first black flight instructors, partly to make up for the white flight instructors who were leaving. Although he was under pressure from white officers to restore segregation at the post exchange restaurant, Colonel Parrish refused to do so, although he assured the white leadership of nearby towns that integration of the base facilities would not affect areas outside the base. (History of Tuskegee Army Air Field, 1 July to 31 August 1944, pp. 12-15, call number 289.28-5 at the Air Force Historical Research Agency).

Colonel Parrish's handling of the integration crisis at Tuskegee Army Air Field contrasted sharply with the integration crisis at Freeman Field in April of 1945. At that base, the commander resisted racial integration on the base. The result was the "Freeman Field Mutiny," which is assuming a greater importance in the history of civil rights in America. Many more people know about the Freeman Field mutiny than about the much quieter integration of Tuskegee Army Air Field the previous year.

Colonel Robert Selway commanded the predominantly black 332nd Fighter Group, which included the 100th, 301st, and 302nd Fighter Squadrons, at Selfridge Army Air Field, Michigan, before the group went overseas. He was a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and under his leadership most of the black fighter pilots prepared for combat operations, flying P-40 and P-39 airplanes. The preparation those pilots received at Selfridge helped prepare them for success in battle, and some of the credit must go to Selway, who was a strict disciplinarian. Members of the 99th Fighter Squadron did not train at Selfridge under Selway, because that squadron had already deployed overseas in the spring of 1943 for combat operations in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy.

In late 1943, Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a black West Point graduate who had commanded the 99th Fighter Squadron in combat, returned to the United States from Italy to take command of the 332nd Fighter Group and take it overseas. Selway's experience with the Tuskegee Airmen did not end

at that point, however. When the 332nd Fighter Group left Selfridge for Italy, at the opening of 1944, the Army Air Forces activated the 477th Bombardment Group at Selfridge. The 477th was the first black bombardment group. Selway, who had commanded the first black fighter group, became the first commander of the first black bombardment group. In fact, during World War II, there were only two black flying groups, and Selway commanded both, but not at the same time. One might think that Selway would be remembered as a great leader of the Tuskegee Airmen, but his resistance to integration at the bases he commanded established him as their enemy.

Even at Selfridge, Selway faced an integration crisis. For example, when movies were shown, blacks and whites were expected to sit on different sides of the theater. When the lights dimmed for the feature, however, some blacks moved over to the side reserved for whites. When the lights came back on, officers demanded that the blacks move back to “their side” of the theater. Selway wanted to preserve segregation on the base, possibly because he was aware of racial riots that broke out in nearby Detroit during the war. By keeping blacks and whites separate, he hoped to avoid racial confrontations and violence. The violence in Detroit contributed to the Army Air Forces’ decision to move the 477th Bombardment Group from Selfridge Field, Michigan, to Godman Field, Kentucky. Godman Field was next to Fort Knox, which was filled with large numbers of white soldiers, who might be called upon to help quell any racial trouble that might develop. Godman Field and Fort Knox were also farther from the smoldering racial cauldrons of the big cities like Detroit.

Segregation of base facilities was less an issue at Godman Field. There was only one Officers Club, but blacks did not need to integrate it, because only blacks went there anyway. The white officers at Godman Field got used to going to the white Officers Club at Fort Knox, where they were welcomed with open arms.

When the 477th Bombardment Group moved to Freeman Field, Indiana, however, trouble developed. The minority of white officers in the group, who had gotten used to going to a segregated

white-only Officers Club demanded their own club, separate from that of the black trainees. Freeman Field was significantly larger than Godman Field, and had plenty of room for two officers clubs, one for whites and one for blacks. The black officers club could even be larger, because there were more blacks than whites, just like the post exchange restaurant at Tuskegee Army Air Field had its larger dining hall reserved for blacks.

Keeping the black and white officers at Freeman Field separate was not only Selway's idea, but also that of his superiors. Most notable of these was Major General Frank O. D. Hunter, commander of the First Air Force, under which the 477th Bombardment Group operated. As early as 1943, when the 332nd Fighter Group was still in training at Selfridge, Hunter had encouraged segregated facilities there, including separate officers clubs. In December 1944, Hunter wrote that "racial friction will exist in a marked degree if colored and white pilots are trained together" and that "the doctrine of social equality cannot be forced on a spirited young pilot preparing for combat." Selway was well aware of his commander's racism, and was not eager to challenge it. (Alan L. Gropman, *THE AIR FORCE INTEGRATES, 1945-1964* [Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1985], pp. 17-18)

On April 5, Selway became commander of Freeman Field, where the 477th Bombardment Group was stationed, in addition to his remaining commander of the group. Selway approved two officers clubs on the base, consistent with General Hunter's policy. Officers Club 1 was to be for black officers of the 477th Bombardment Group, "E" Squadron (Trainee), and the 118th Army Air Force Base Unit, while Officers Club 2 was to be for base and supervisory personnel who were white. (History of Freeman Field, Indiana, 1 Mar-15 Jun 1945, AFHRA call number 283.28-6). Selway tried to make the segregation appear to be non-racial, pretending that the separation would be between trainers and trainees, not necessarily between whites and blacks. On the same day, the 115th Army Air Forces Base Unit, which supported the 477th Bombardment Group, moved from Godman Field, Kentucky, to

Freeman Field, Indiana, where the 387th Air Service Group was already located. (115 AAF Base Unit organization record card).

On the late evening of the same day, 36 black officers from the unit attempted to enter the officers' club assigned to white "base and supervisory" personnel, since they believed they were "base personnel". The assistant base provost marshal, who attempted to block the entrance of the black officers, was pushed. Three black officers were accused of doing the pushing: Lieutenants Roger C. "Bill" Terry, Marsden A. Thomson, and Shirley R. Clinton. (History of Freeman Field, Indiana, 1 March-15 June 1945, AFHRA call number 283.28-6; J. Todd Moya, *Freedom Flyers* [Oxford University Press, 2010], p. 133 and 138)

On April 6, the next day, 25 additional black officers attempted to enter the officers' club at Freeman Field that had been reserved for white "base and supervisory" personnel. They and the 36 black officers who had attempted to enter the club the day before, at total of 61, were arrested in quarters and charged with disobeying an order of a superior officer, some with violence. (History of Freeman Field, Indiana, 1 March-15 June 1945, AFHRA call number 283.28-6). Freeman Field was made a Control Base, and base functions changed. The 387th Air Service Group was made responsible only for the supply and maintenance of the 477th Bombardment Group, and its squadrons were moved to another part of the base, which lowered group morale. (387th Air Service Group history for the period February-April 1945).

Three days later, on April 9, on the advice of his superiors, including General Hunter, Selway decided to release all but 3 of the 61 black officers who had been arrested in quarters at Freeman Field for attempting to enter an officers' club closed to them were released. The three not released had been accused of disobeying the orders of a superior officer and offering violence to him. They included Lieutenants Roger C. "Bill" Terry, Marsen A. Thomson, and Shirley R. Clinton. At the same, Colonel Selway issued a new base regulation, 85-2, noting which personnel were to use each of the

two base officers' clubs. Of the 422 black officers at Freeman Field, 101 refused to sign the regulation, and were taken into custody. 321 of the other black officers signed the regulation, some of them adding notes that they disagreed with the segregated officers club policy. (History of Freeman Field, Indiana, 1 March-15 June 1945, AFHRA call number 283.28-6; J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers* [Oxford University Press, 2010], pp. 133, 135, 138)

The crisis intensified. On April 10-11, the 101 African-American officers of the 477th Bombardment Group refused again to sign a paper stating that they acknowledged the new base regulation directing separate officers clubs, and were confined. (Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., American* [Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991], pp. 142-143; Alan L. Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates* [Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1985], pp. 22-25; Ms. Zellie Rainey Orr) Two days later, the defiant black officers were transported on six transport planes from Freeman Field back to Godman Field, where the 477th Bombardment Group had been stationed before, and confined at the old base. (History of Freeman Field, Indiana, 1 March-15 June 1945, AFHRA call number 283.28-6; LeRoy F. Gillead, "The Tuskegee Experiment and Tuskegee Airmen, 1939-1949," call number 289.28-18 at the Air Force Historical Research Agency)

By this time the problems at Freeman and Godman Fields had attracted national attention, as the news spread through the black press and also beyond. The situation became embarrassing to the War Department, which on April 20, directed the release of the 101 black officers who had been confined for insubordination, and although each was given a letter of reprimand, they were not court martialed. Three days later, the officers were released. They were transferred to the 126th Army Air Forces Base Unit at Walterboro Field in South Carolina. (LeRoy F. Gillead, "The Tuskegee Experiment and Tuskegee Airmen, 1939-1949," call number 289.28-18 at the Air Force Historical Research Agency).

The three black officers who had been charged with using violence were court martialed, and two of them were acquitted. Only one, Roger Terry, was convicted, of “jostling”. His sentence was far less than one might have expected, but far more than he deserved, in the eyes of most of his fellow black officers. He became a symbol of their struggle for racial equality and against segregation.

The ultimate solution to the racial problems of the 477th Bombardment Group was to replace its commander, Colonel Selway, with a new commander who had less of a racist reputation. That commander, logically was Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a fellow West Pointer who was black, and who returned from combat duty in Europe after the war ended there. In the summer of 1945, Davis replaced Selway as commander of the 477th Bombardment Group (later the 477th Composite Group, when the 99th Fighter Squadron was also assigned to it). Davis had succeeded Selway before, as commander of the 332nd Fighter Group. The solution was not really a great step toward racial justice. All the white officers who had been in the 477th were replaced with black officers, and the 477th Composite Group became an all-black organization. Instead of ending segregation, the reassignments of the summer of 1945 made the 477th more segregated than ever, and instead of being black and white, it became all black.

The peaceful integration of the post exchange restaurant at Tuskegee Army Air Field, Alabama, in August of 1944, under Colonel Noel Parrish, contrasts sharply with the failure to integrate the officers clubs at Freeman Field, Indiana, in April 1945, under Colonel Robert Selway. The primary reason for the contrast is the difference between Parrish and Selway. Although a Southerner, Parrish was willing to change the policy at Tuskegee Army Air Field, allowing racial integration to proceed, while Selway, who was not from the South, resisted integration, to his lasting shame. In the end, Noel Parrish has come down in history as a friend of the black Tuskegee Airmen, partly because of his willingness to treat them more as equals at his own base, and partly because of his advocacy of the integration of the Air Force soon after its birth in 1947. Selway, on the other hand, has been vilified as

an opponent of racial justice and progress because of his refusal to challenge the policies of his superior and his own prejudices. These historical incidents, compared and contrasted, illustrate how much influence a leader can have on the course of history, and how much influence the course of history can have on a leader.