

**Tuskegee Airmen Condensed History
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The Wright Brothers invented the airplane in 1903. By the end of 1909, the Army had its first airplanes and its first pilots. For more than thirty years afterwards, however, there were no African American pilots in the American military. Racism was the primary reason. The War Department did not allow African Americans to serve as military pilots for decades. This is the story of the first black military pilots in American history: the Tuskegee Airmen. The Tuskegee Airmen were not only the pilots, but also the ground personnel who served in their units or at their bases. They outnumbered the pilots more than ten to one.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt fulfilled a 1940 campaign promise to allow African Americans to serve as military pilots in the armed forces of the United States. The Tuskegee Airmen story begins in March 1941, when the War Department activated the 99th Pursuit Squadron, later the 99th Fighter Squadron, at Chanute Field, Illinois. The unit had no pilots until a year later, after it moved to Tuskegee, where the pilots were trained.

Primary flight training, with mostly biplanes on grass runways, took place at Moton Field, a Tuskegee Institute facility under contract with the War Department. The flight instructors there were African Americans, many of whom had taught civilian pilot training at Tuskegee before 1941. Cadets who graduated from the primary training went on to basic and advanced flight training, which took place at a much larger Air Corps base called Tuskegee Army Air Field, a few miles northwest of Moton Field. The great majority of the flight instructors there were white. Colonel Noel F. Parrish commanded Tuskegee Army Air Field during most of World War II and immediately after the war.

Less than half the African American cadets who entered flying training at Tuskegee graduated from the advanced phase, and received their wings. At the same time, they became officers in the Army Air Forces. Almost 1,000 African American pilots completed the flight training, some to be future fighter pilots, some to be future bomber pilots, some to be liaison pilots, and some to be flight instructors. The Navy and Marine Corps had no black pilots during World War II.

Most of the Tuskegee Airmen pilots served in two groups, the 332nd Fighter Group and the 477th Bombardment Group. Each of those groups eventually had four squadrons assigned.

The 99th Fighter Squadron was the first to deploy to combat overseas, in 1943, and at first it was attached to various white fighter groups, in North Africa, in Sicily, and in Italy. They flew P-40s like those the Flying Tigers flew in eastern Asia. In early 1944, the 332nd Fighter Group also deployed to Italy, with its 100th, 301st, and 302^d Fighter Squadrons. At first they flew P-39s. Like the 99th Fighter Squadron, they flew mostly tactical air support missions to protect ground forces, or help them take out enemy targets.

All of the American fighter groups of World War II had three fighter squadrons, except one. In the summer of 1944, the 99th Fighter Squadron was reassigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, making it the only fighter group in World War II with four squadrons. After June 1944, it had more squadrons, pilots and planes than the other fighter groups. Around the same time, the 332nd Fighter Group was reassigned from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Air Force, which flew heavy four-engine bombers such as B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators. For the escort missions, the Tuskegee Airmen flew P-47s and then P-51 Mustangs, with red tails, to distinguish them from the colors of the other six fighter escort groups of the Fifteenth Air Force. The Tuskegee Airmen are remembered most for their missions to escort bombers into central Europe,

over Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, and other Nazi-occupied countries.

Sometimes the Tuskegee Airmen fighters were outnumbered not only by the number of bombers they had to protect, but also by the number of enemy fighters that emerged to attempt to shoot them down. Twenty-seven of the Tuskegee Airmen-escorted bombers were shot down by enemy aircraft, but that was better than the other fighter escort groups in the Fifteenth Air Force, which lost an average of 46 bombers. The Tuskegee Airmen lost significantly fewer bombers than the average of the other groups. They lost bombers on only seven of the 179 bomber escort missions they flew for the Fifteenth Air Force. They proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that they could fly the most advanced combat fighters as skillfully and effectively as the white pilots.

The most memorable mission the Tuskegee Airmen flew was to Berlin on March 24, 1945, the longest mission ever flown by the Fifteenth Air Force. Three Tuskegee Airmen each shot down a German Me-262 jet that day. Another fighter escort group flying on the same mission also shot down five of the jets. It was not the first time American pilots shot down German jets, but it was the first time that the Tuskegee Airmen did so. One of those pilots was Roscoe Brown.

The 332nd Fighter Group did not only fly bomber escort missions. They flew strafing missions as well, sometimes destroying enemy targets on the ground or on the sea. On one mission eight of their P-47s struck a German ship, and while it did not sink, it was effectively taken out of the war.

By the end of the war in Europe, Tuskegee Airmen pilots had shot down 112 enemy airplanes. None of the Tuskegee Airmen was an ace, since none of them shot down at least five enemy aircraft, but three Tuskegee Airmen each shot down four enemy airplanes, and four Tuskegee Airmen each shot down three in one day. The 332nd Fighter Group and its squadrons also destroyed many other enemy aircraft on the ground, and damaged many others in the air. Ninety-five Tuskegee Airmen earned Distinguished Flying Crosses.

The bomber pilots who trained at Tuskegee served in the 477th Bombardment Group and its four squadrons, the 616th, 617th, 618th, and 619th. Since the group was activated late in the war, and it took longer to train bomber crews than fighter pilots, the 477th never deployed overseas, although it was training to go to the Pacific. It flew twin engine B-25s, the same kind of airplane the Doolittle Raiders had flown in the first attack on Japan. The B-25 had a five-man crew. Among the 477th Bombardment Group crew members were pilots, copilots, navigators, bombardiers, and gunners.

Although the 477th Bombardment Group did not enter combat overseas, it should be remembered for a famous episode: the Freeman Field Mutiny. More than 100 black officers at Freeman Field, Indiana, refused to go along with a segregated officers' clubs policy of its white commander, and were arrested and reprimanded. All the arrested African American officers were eventually exonerated, and the white commander was replaced with the most famous Tuskegee Airmen of all: Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who had earlier commanded the 99th Fighter Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group. He had attended West Point, and his father, Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., was the first black general in the U.S. Army. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. eventually became the first black general in the Air Force. The first four-star black general in the Air Force, or in any of the armed forces of the United States, was also a Tuskegee Airman. He was Daniel "Chappie" James, who had been a member of the 477th Bombardment Group.

Although much of the Tuskegee Airmen story is about the pilots, most of the Tuskegee Airmen were not pilots, but served on the ground, as crew chiefs, other maintenance personnel, armorers, intelligence officers, clerks, transportation personnel, and in other functions. On the training bases, there were also instructors, nurses, parachute riggers, and weathermen. There were

almost 1,000 Tuskegee Airmen pilots, but more than 13,000 other Tuskegee Airmen who were not pilots, but on whom the pilots depended to accomplish their missions.

By demonstrating they were the equal of the whites in the Army Air Forces, and could fly the same kinds of airplanes on the same kinds of missions, and do that as well as anyone else, the Tuskegee Airmen helped convince the leaders of the Army Air Forces and the Air Force, which emerged in 1947, that there was no good reason for segregation in the service. When President Harry S. Truman issued his Executive Order 9981 in 1948, mandating the desegregation of the Armed Forces, the Air Force was already in the process of integrating. In fact, it was already training black pilots with white pilots at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona. In March 2007, President George W. Bush presided at a ceremony in the Capitol at which a Congressional Gold Medal was presented collectively to the Tuskegee Airmen, recognizing their achievements. They fought two wars, one against the Nazis overseas and one against racism at home. It was indeed a double victory.

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