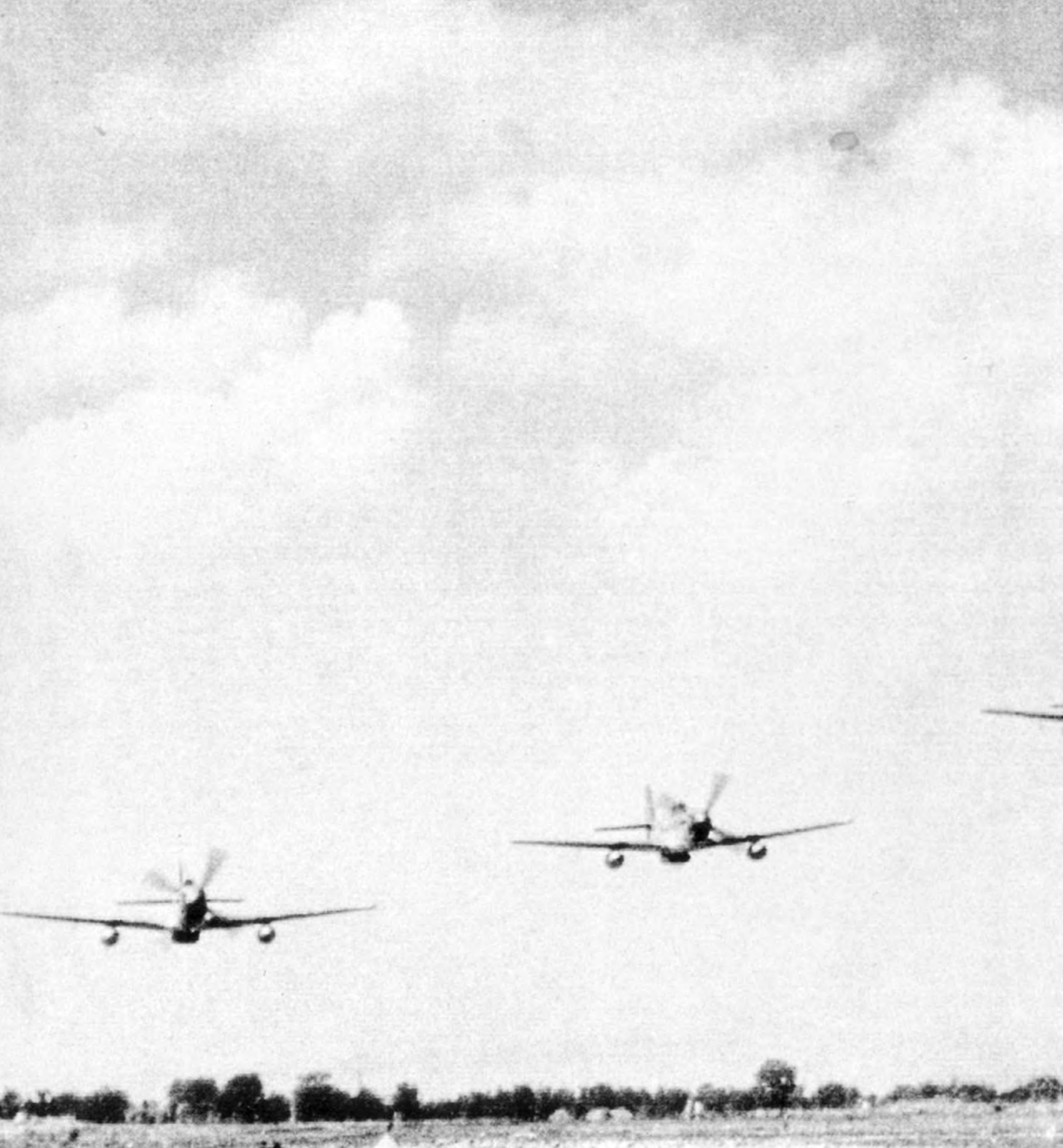
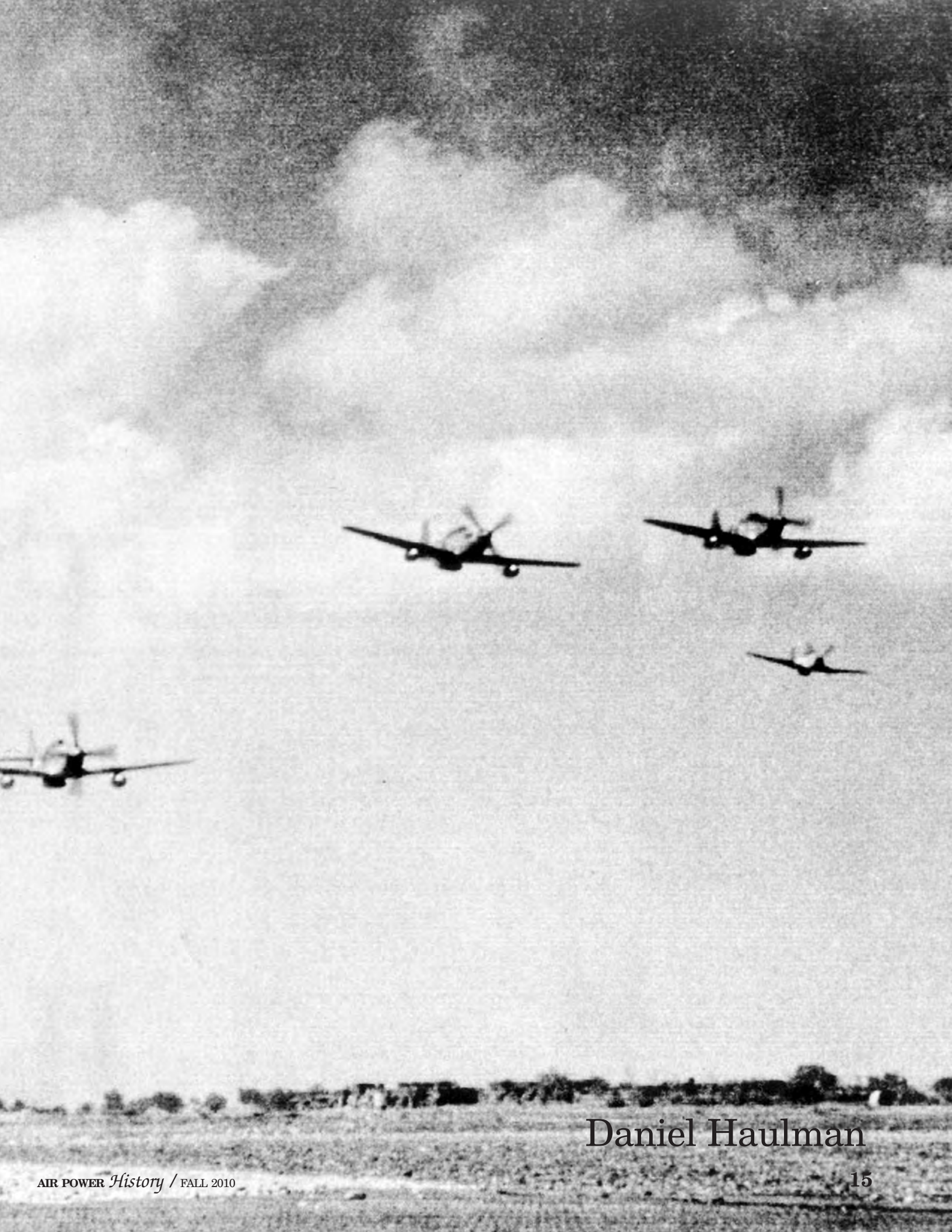


THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN IN COMBAT





Daniel Haulman

(Overleaf) Tuskegee
Airmen in their P-51s buzz
their home field.

The 332d Fighter Group and its four elements, the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302d Fighter Squadrons, were the only African-American organizations in the Army Air Forces to enter combat during World War II. They are more popularly called the “Tuskegee Airmen” because they trained at Tuskegee Institute’s Moton Field and then at nearby Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama.

The first African-American combat unit in the Army Air Forces was the 99th Fighter Squadron. First activated at Chanute Field, Illinois, on March 22, 1941, it moved to Maxwell Field on November 5, and finally, on November 10, the unit relocated to Tuskegee Army Airfield, where it served until April 1943. Later that month, it deployed to North Africa and began flying tactical missions with the Twelfth Air Force in the Mediterranean Theater. Flying Curtiss P-40 fighter aircraft on strafing, patrol, and other tactical missions, the 99th moved to Sicily in July 1943, and then to the mainland of Italy in October of that year. It served with a series of white fighter groups, attached at various times to the 33d, the 324th, the 79th, and the 86th. Before the 99th Fighter Squadron joined the 332d Fighter Group, it had earned two Distinguished Unit Citations. One was for its missions over Sicily in June and July 1943, and one was for its missions over Cassino, Italy, on May 12-14, 1944.¹

A second African-American flying unit, the 100th Fighter Squadron, was activated at Tuskegee on February 19, 1942, but it did not deploy to North Africa with the 99th; it stayed at Tuskegee. When the 332d Group, was activated at Tuskegee on October 13, the 100th Fighter Squadron was assigned to it, along with two new fighter squadrons, the 301st and 302d. After they completed training at Tuskegee, the group and its three squadrons moved to Selfridge Field, Michigan, on March 29, 1943, to Oscoda, Michigan, on April 12, and then back to Selfridge on July 9. On October 9, 1943, Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who had commanded the 99th Fighter Squadron in combat overseas, became commander of the 332d Fighter Group. In February 1944, the group and its three squadrons deployed to Italy, where the 99th was already serving. Like the 99th, the squadrons of the 332d Fighter Group first served directly under the Twelfth Air Force, primarily flying the

Bell P-39 Airacobra on strafing, patrol, and other tactical missions, and attacking targets on the ground. At the end of May 1944, the 332d Fighter Group moved to Ramitelli Airfield, was reassigned from the Twelfth Air Force to the Fifteenth Air Force, and given the primary mission of escorting heavy bombers such as Boeing B-17s and Consolidated B-24s to their targets in southern, central, and eastern Europe. After transition to the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt, members of the 332d began flying missions for the Fifteenth Air Force in early June 1944. On June 25, 1944, eight P-47s, of the 332d, spotted an enemy warship as they patrolled over the Gulf of Venezia and the Gulf of Trieste. The P-47s strafed the ship until it exploded, and reported it sunk off Pirano.²

That was the day before the group received its first North American P-51 Mustang. The P-51 was faster and had a longer range than the P-47. Although the 99th Fighter Squadron was assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group on May 1, it remained attached to other groups (324th and 86th) until mid July, when it began flying fighter escort missions in P-51s with the 332d. By then, all the African-American units were serving together, all with the primary mission of escorting Fifteenth Air Force heavy bombers. The 332d was the only one of the seven fighter escort groups of the Fifteenth Air Force to have four squadrons. The others had three each.³

West Point graduate Colonel “Ben” Davis, who had earlier served as the commander of the 99th Fighter Squadron, became the most important of the 332d Fighter Group commanders during World War II. He later became the first African-American general officer in the United States Air Force. The only other commander of the 332d during its combat operations in World War II was Major George S. Roberts, who led the group between November 3 and December 24, 1944.⁴

The Tuskegee Airmen’s 332d was one of seven fighter groups assigned to escort the heavy bombers of the Fifteenth Air Force. The groups served rotationally, so that they did not always escort the same bomber wings and their groups to the same targets. Sometimes more than one group would be assigned to escort the same wing or set of wings to a target. At times the fighter groups took

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Members of the first graduating class, 42C. (Left to right) Capt. B. O. Davis, Jr., 2d. Lt. Lemuel Curtis, 2d. Lt. George S. Roberts, 2d. Lt. Charles DeBow, and 2d. Lt. Mac Ross.

turns for a mission, some providing escort on the way to the target, some escorting over the target, and some escorting on the way back.⁵

Each of the seven fighter groups of the Fifteenth Air Force had its aircraft painted in distinctive colors so that the groups could be identified in flight. The other P-51 escort groups in the Fifteenth Air Force were the 31st, 52d, and 325th. The other three Fifteenth Air Force fighter escort groups, the 1st, 14th, and 82d, all flew Lockheed P-38 Lightening. The tails of the 332d Fighter Group were painted solid red, and the tails of the other groups were painted in other patterns or colors. For example, the tails of the 325th Fighter Group were painted a checkered black and yellow, and the tails of the 31st Fighter Group were painted a striped red. The tails of the 52d Fighter Group P-51s were painted solid yellow.⁶

Not all of the 311 missions the 332d Fighter Group flew for the Fifteenth Air Force, between June 1944 and the end of April 1945, were bomber escort missions. Some of them, for example, were strafing missions against enemy airfields. The 332d flew 179 bomber escort missions for the Fifteenth Air Force, including 172 missions to escort heavy bombers, such as, B-24s or B-17s, or a combination of the two. The Fifteenth Air Force had twenty-one bomber groups, and only seven fighter groups to escort them. Within the groups were squadrons. The Fifteenth Air Force had eighty-four bombardment squadrons, and only twenty-two fighter squadrons.⁷

The 332d Group reported that it encountered enemy aircraft on thirty-five of the 311 missions it flew for the Fifteenth Air Force, although it saw enemy aircraft in the distance on twenty-one additional missions. Coincidentally, the number of missions the 332d Group flew in which it shot down enemy aircraft was also twenty-one. Lt. Charles B. Hall of the 99th Fighter Squadron, on July 2, 1943, became the first Tuskegee Airman to shoot down an enemy aircraft. Before the 99th Fighter Squadron joined the 332d Fighter Group, its pilots had downed eighteen enemy aircraft. Between

June 1944 and the end of April 1945, the 332d Fighter Group and its four squadrons shot down a total of ninety-four enemy aircraft. The total number of enemy aircraft shot down by the Tuskegee Airmen was, therefore, 112.⁸

During World War II, seventy-two Tuskegee Airmen shot down 112 enemy airplanes. Obviously, some of the members of the 332d Fighter Group and its squadrons earned more than one aerial victory during World War II. However, none were aces, if ace is defined as a pilot with at least five aerial victories. The highest number of aerial victories scored by any of the Tuskegee Airmen was four. That feat was accomplished by Capt. Joseph D. Elsberry, Capt. Edward Toppins, and Lt. Lee Archer. Four Tuskegee Airmen, including Captain Elsberry, 2d Lt. Clarence D. Lester, Lt. Lee Archer, and 1st Lt. Harry T. Stewart, each earned three aerial victory credits in one day. Members of the 332d Fighter Group, or squadrons eventually assigned to it, downed at least ten enemy airplanes on four separate days in 1944 and 1945. There is no evidence in the histories of the 332nd Fighter Group, its daily mission reports, the daily mission reports of the Fifteenth Air Force, or in the general orders the Fifteenth Air Force issued to confirm aerial victories, that Lee Archer or any other Tuskegee Airmen ever claimed or earned credit for any more than four aerial victories. There is no evidence in these documents that any of the Tuskegee Airmen's aerial victory credits was ever reduced or taken away or that there was ever a conspiracy to prevent an African-American from becoming an ace.⁹

On sixty-one of the missions flown by Tuskegee Airmen for the Fifteenth Air Force, some of its own aircraft were reported lost or missing. Some of the lost or missing pilots and aircraft later returned to their respective squadrons. For example, some of them landed at other fields and returned to their own field later.¹⁰

Members of the 332d Fighter Group reported seeing bombers going down on twenty-five of the 311 missions it flew for the Fifteenth Air Force. Not all of these bombers were shot down by enemy aircraft, and not all of them were under the escort of the 332d Fighter Group. Most of the Fifteenth Air Force bomber losses were due to enemy anti-aircraft artillery fire, or flak. On seven of the 172 heavy bomber escort missions the 332d Fighter Group flew for the Fifteenth Air Force, bombers in groups the 332d was assigned to escort were shot down by enemy aircraft. Six of these missions were flown in 1944—on June 9, June 13, July 12, July 18, July 20, and August 24. The seventh occurred on March 24, 1945. Missing Air Crew Reports (MACRs) indicate which groups and squadrons the downed aircraft belonged to, when and where they went down, and how they were lost. As many as twenty-seven of the Tuskegee Airmen-escorted bombers were shot down by enemy aircraft. The claim that the 332d Fighter Group, in 200 escort missions, was the only fighter group never to have lost a bomber to enemy aircraft, is false. It was inaccurate at the time it



Tuskegee Airmen and a P-40, the first kind of aircraft the 99th Fighter Squadron flew in combat.

first appeared in a newspaper article in *The Chicago Defender* on March 24, 1945.¹¹ The story appeared on the first day in seven months that a 332d Fighter Group-escorted bomber was shot down by enemy aircraft. The last time that had happened was on August 24, 1944. It is possible that many of the Tuskegee Airmen who deployed to the combat theater since August did not remember seeing any bomber go down before March 24, 1945, when the claim was first published. Perhaps they were not aware of the bombers lost to enemy aircraft in June, July, and August 1944.

For example, on July 12, 1944, the 332d Fighter Group was the only fighter group assigned to escort the B-24s of the 49th Bombardment Wing to bomb the marshalling yards at Nimes, France. The 49th Bombardment Wing included the 461st Bombardment Group. The 332d successfully rendezvoused with the bombers before they reached their target and did not leave them until after the bombing mission and after the B-24s left the French mainland and reached the island of Corsica. During the mission, in the target area, a large group of enemy fighters emerged to intercept the bombers. Although the Tuskegee Airmen shot down four of the enemy fighters, they could not get them all. The 461st Bombardment Group history for July 1944, notes that enemy aircraft shot down four of their bombers in the target area that day, and missing air crew reports confirm that at least

three of these bombers were indeed shot down by enemy aircraft.¹²

The 99th Fighter Squadron had already earned two Distinguished Unit Citations before it joined the 332d Fighter Group. The 332d earned another Distinguished Unit Citation for the only Fifteenth Air Force mission to Berlin, the German capital. The raid took place on March 24, 1945. Three Tuskegee Airmen pilots each shot down a German Me-262 jet that day. This was a remarkable feat, because the German jet could fly some 100 miles per hour faster than a P-51. The 332d Group's victors were 2d. Lt. Charles V. Brantley, 1st Lt. Roscoe C. Brown, and 1st Lt. Earl R. Lane. However, they were not the first Fifteenth Air Force pilots to shoot down German Me-262 jets. On two previous dates, Fifteenth Air Force fighter pilots who did not belong to the 332d Fighter Group had shot down German jets. Five fighter pilots in the Fifteenth Air Force who did not belong to the 332d Fighter Group also shot down German jets on the Berlin mission of March 24, 1945.¹³

Although the 332d Fighter Group and the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302d Fighter Squadrons were the only Tuskegee Airmen organizations in combat during World War II, another group, the 477th Bombardment Group, included pilots who had trained at Tuskegee, and can also claim the name "Tuskegee Airmen." Components of the 477th Bombardment Group included the 616th, 617th, 618th, and 619th Bombardment Squadrons. These organizations never deployed overseas, but trained for combat in Michigan, Kentucky, and Indiana. They flew North American B-25 Mitchell medium bombers. When the 332d Fighter Group finished its overseas operations and the war in Europe ended, Colonel Ben Davis, became commander of the 477th group. The 99th Fighter Squadron, which had served with the 332d Fighter Group, was reassigned to the 477th, which was redesignated on the same day, June 22, 1945, as a composite group.¹⁴

For years after World War II, the record of the Tuskegee Airmen was largely ignored. Histories of World War II did not generally mention the only African-American pilots in combat, or the achievements of the 332nd Fighter Group, the 99th Fighter Squadron, the 100th Fighter Squadron, the 301st Fighter Squadron, or the 302d Fighter Squadron. As time passed, however, the accomplishments of the Tuskegee Airmen, and stories about them, became more widely known. During the 1990s, the media focused more attention on the Tuskegee Airmen, partly because of an HBO movie by that name. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the Tuskegee Airmen had become more famous than many of the other fighter groups of the Army Air Forces with whom they had served.

During World War II, there were people who claimed that African-American pilots of World War II were inferior. Decades after World War II, others claimed that the African-American pilots were superior to their fellow Fifteenth Air Force fighter escort pilots. Documents of the seven fighter groups



Graduating class 44H.

of the Fifteenth Air Force in 1944 and 1945 suggest that the truth lies in between. The fighter pilots of the 332d Fighter Group were not worse than the fighter pilots of the other six fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force, but whether the 332d Fighter Group was “better” than the other fighter groups is debatable. The aerial victory credit totals of the seven fighter groups of the Fifteenth Air Force between June 1944 and April 1945 are comparable. The 332d Fighter Group and its squadrons earned fewer credits than some of the other groups, and more than some of the others.¹⁵ In terms of aerial victory credits, the African-American fighter pilots were roughly equal to the white ones. But considering that the starting line for the Tuskegee Airmen was farther back than for their fellow white pilots, and that they finished at roughly the same line, it is fair to conclude that the Tuskegee Airmen came farther in less time. Unquestionably, they climbed a steeper hill, because of the racial bigotry of the time.

Between early June 1944 and late April 1945, when the 332d Fighter Group was flying missions for the Fifteenth Air Force, the Army Air Forces reported having lost 303 heavy bombers to enemy aircraft in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations.¹⁶ If the 332d Fighter Group lost twenty-seven of the heavy bombers to enemy aircraft, the other six fighter groups together would have lost a total of 276 heavy bombers to enemy aircraft in the same time period, or an average of about forty-six for each of the other fighter groups. Thus, it appears that the 332d Fighter Group lost significantly fewer than the average number lost by each of the other fighter

groups in the Fifteenth Air Force.

The 332d Fighter Group was the only one of the seven Fifteenth Air Force escort groups to have no aces during World War II. This is easy to explain. The 332d Fighter Group entered combat much later than any of the other fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force. Five of the other groups entered combat in 1942, and one entered combat in February 1943. The 332d did not enter combat until February 1944, although its 99th Fighter Squadron had been in combat since 1943. The other groups had more time to accumulate aerial victories, and had more pilots with combat experience. Moreover, as the war went on, the German fighter opposition diminished.¹⁷

Occasionally, one fighter group would get credit for the actions of another. For example, in an article by Ryan Orr in the *Victorville Daily Press* newspaper of California dated November 10, 2008, a World War II B-24 pilot of the Fifteenth Air Force claimed that his aircraft was saved by a red-tailed P-51 of the Tuskegee Airmen on a mission to Ploesti on May 5, 1944. Since the 332d Fighter Group did not begin flying bomber escort missions for the Fifteenth Air Force until June 1944, and did not begin flying P-51 aircraft on such missions until July 1944, it is likelier that the bomber pilot probably saw a red-tailed P-51 of the 31st Fighter Group. The 31st Fighter Group was the only P-51 fighter escort group of the Fifteenth Air Force escorting bombers to Ploesti that day, and the tails of its fighters were painted a striped red.¹⁸

The true significance of the Tuskegee Airmen was that they proved that African-American pilots



(Above) Graduating class 42F.

(Right) Herbert Carter, who was one of the early members of the 99th Fighter Squadron.



(Below left) Brig. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis, the first African-American general in the U.S. Army, and Lt. Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the future first African-American general in the U.S. Air Force, on either side of Lt. Col. Noel Parrish, commander of Tuskegee Army Air Field, where the first African-American military pilots were trained.



could fly missions as well as their counterparts. The Tuskegee Airmen's superb combat performance was an eye opener for many Americans. That fact contributed to the United States Air Force's decision to integrate in 1948, one year after

its establishment. It helped integrate the U.S. armed forces, a first step towards the integration of American society, and later launching the civil rights movement that resulted in equal opportunity, by law, for all Americans regardless of race. ■

NOTES

1. Maurer Maurer, *Combat Squadrons of the Air Force, World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1969), pp. 329-30; lineage and honors history folder on the 99th Fighter Squadron at the Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA); histories of the 99th Fighter Squadron at the AFHRA; War Department General Order 23 (1944) and War Department General Order 76 (1945).
2. Maurer, *Combat Squadrons*, pp. 332, 365-66; Maurer Maurer, *Air Force Combat Units of World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983), pp. 212-13; 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 11 dated June 25, 1944.
3. Maurer, *Combat Units*, pp. 212-13; Maurer, *Combat Squadrons*, pp. 329-30.
4. Maurer, *Combat Units*, pp. 212-13; Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., American* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).
5. Fifteenth Air Force daily mission folders, 1944-1945, AFHRA call number 670.332.
6. E. A. Munday, *Fifteenth Air Force Combat Markings, 1943-1945* (London: Beaumont), copy of publication provided by Mr. Bob Iversen.
7. 332d Fighter Group daily narrative mission reports, contained in the group monthly histories, from June 1944 through April 1944, AFHRA call number GP-332-HI (FTR).
8. 332d Fighter Group daily narrative mission reports, contained in the group monthly histories, from June 1944 through April 1944, AFHRA call number GP-332-HI (FTR); XII ASC General Order 32 (Sep. 7, 1943); Twelfth Air Force General Orders 64, 66, 81, and 122 for 1944; Fifteenth Air Force General Orders 1473, 2029, 2030, 2032, 2202, 2284, 2350, 2466, 2484, 2485, 2831, 3153, 3174, 3538, 4287, 4604, 4990, for 1944; Fifteenth Air Force General Orders 449, 1734, 2292, 2293, 2294, 2990, 3362, and 3484 for 1945.
9. XII ASC General Order 32 (Sep. 7, 1943); Twelfth Air Force General Orders 64, 66, 81, and 122 for 1944; Fifteenth Air Force General Orders 1473, 2029, 2030, 2032, 2202, 2284, 2350, 2466, 2484, 2485, 2831, 3153, 3174, 3538, 4287, 4604, 4990, for 1944; Fifteenth Air Force General Orders 449, 1734, 2292, 2293, 2294, 2990, 3362, and 3484 for 1945.
10. 332d Fighter Group daily narrative mission reports, (AFHRA call number GP-332-HI).
11. 332d Fighter Group daily narrative mission reports for each date (AFHRA call number GP-332-HI); Fifteenth Air Force daily mission folders for each date (AFHRA call number 670.332); Missing Air Crew Reports 6317, 6179 (for June 9, 1944), Missing Air Crew Reports 6894, 6895, and 7034 (for July 12, 1944), Missing Air Crew Reports 6856, 6953-6954, 6975-6981, 7097-7099, 7153, and 7310 (for July 18, 1944), Missing Air Crew Reports 6914 and 6919 (for July 20, 1944), and Missing Air Crew Reports 13278, 13274, and 13375 (for March 24, 1945); "332nd Flies Its 200th Mission Without Loss," *Chicago Defender*, March 24, 1945, p. 2 (information on this article courtesy of Mr. Bob Iversen).
12. 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 23 for July 12, 1944; 461st Bombardment Group history for July 1944; Missing Air Crew Reports 6894, 6895, and 7034; Fifteenth Air Force General Order numbers 2032 (July 23, 1944) and 2466 (Aug 1944), both issued in 1944.
13. Fifteenth Air Force General Orders 327, 2293, 2525, 2591, 2709 from 1945. On December 22, 1944, 1st Lt. Eugene P. McGlauffin and 2d Lt. Roy L. Scales, both of the 308th Fighter Squadron, 31st Fighter Group, Fifteenth Air Force, shot down an Me-262 German jet, sharing half a credit each. On March 22, 1945, Capt. William J. Dillard, also of the 308th Fighter Squadron, 31st Fighter Group, Fifteenth Air Force, shot down an Me-262. On March 24, 1945, five members of the 308th Fighter Squadron, 31st Fighter Group, Fifteenth Air Force, who were not Tuskegee Airmen, each shot down an Me-262. Those pilots were William M. Daniel, Forrest M. Keene, Raymond D. Leonard, Kenneth T. Smith, and William M. Wilder. See also USAF Historical Study 85, *USAF Credits for the Destruction of Enemy Aircraft, World War II* (Maxwell AFB, AL, and Washington, D.C.: Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center and Office of Air Force History, 1978), p. 506.
14. Maurer, *Combat Units*, pp. 349-50.
15. During the period June 1944 through April 1945, the 332d Fighter Group and its squadrons earned a total of 91 aerial victory credits. In the same period, the 1st Fighter Group earned 72, the 14th Fighter Group earned 85, the 31st Fighter Group earned 278, the 52d Fighter Group earned 225.5, the 82d Fighter Group earned 106, and the 325th Fighter Group earned 252. Of the seven fighter groups of the Fifteenth Air Force, the 332d Fighter Group earned fewer aerial victory credits than four of the other groups, but more aerial victory credits than two of the other groups. Source: USAF Historical Study No. 85, "USAF Credits for the Destruction of Enemy Aircraft, World War II," (Maxwell AFB: Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Agency, and Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1978), under each group and squadron.
16. Army Air Forces Statistical Digest, World War II (Second Printing, December 1945), p. 256, Table 160, "Airplane Losses on Combat Missions in Mediterranean Theater of Operations, By Type of Airplane and Cause of Loss."
17. USAF Historical Study no. 85, *USAF Credits for the Destruction of Enemy Aircraft, World War II* (Maxwell AFB, AL, and Washington, D.C.: Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center and Office of Air Force History, 1978), pp. 29, 31, 48, 75, and 191-93; Maurer, *Combat Units*, pp. 21-24, 57-58, 83-85, 113-15, 147-49, 206-208, 212-13; There were at least seven of the Fifteenth Air Force pilots who shot down at least five enemy airplanes between early June 1944 and late April 1945, while the 332d Fighter Group was flying combat missions with the Fifteenth Air Force. The pilots included Captain John J. Voll (21 of his total of 21), Major Herschel H. Green (5 of his total 18), Captain James S. Varnell, Jr. (13 of his total of 17), Major Samuel J. Brown (7 of his total 15.5), Major Robert C. Curtis (12 of his total 14), Captain Harry A. Parker (13 of his total of 13), and Captain James L. Brooks (10 of his total of 13). None of these seven pilots belonged to the 332d Fighter Group.
18. Fifteenth Air Force daily mission folder for May 5, 1944 (AFHRA call number 670.332); 31st Fighter Group history for May 1944; E. A. Munday, "Fifteenth Air Force Combat Markings, 1943-1945" (Plymouth, UK: Beaumont Publications).