

The Tuskegee Airmen

Who were the Tuskegee Airmen? A question many may hesitate on or not be capable of answering. The Tuskegee Airmen were the first ever black airplane pilots in the United States military. Before the United States joined the war against Nazi Germany and its allies, pilot programs were put in place to teach young Americans how to fly planes to be prepared for when they were needed if they joined the war. Though, only white Americans were allowed to take these courses because it was deemed that African Americans weren't as intellectual or courageous as White men are. This ideal however, is wrong for an African American man, Eugene Bullard, and an African American woman, Bessie Coleman, were known for piloting planes. Chauncey Spencer and Dale White were two African American males who flew an old airplane from Chicago to Washington D.C. in May of 1939. Senator Harry S. Truman took notice of this and their courage and did all he could to establish a pilot program for black people. Six of these Civilian Pilot training programs for black people later that year. A year before this took place, a man and woman by the names of Cornelius Coffey and Willa Brown (with the help of a man named John Robinson previously before Brown came along) were capable of establishing a pilot training program, ensuring each class had at least a white person and a girl to prove that those of opposite skin color and gender can be taught together. Tuskegee Institute (established by Booker T. Washington) was a famous black college established in 1881 in

Tuskegee, Alabama. The school rented a field to build an airport and a hangar. Ground school was taught

by Chief Pilot Charles Alfred Anderson who was the first African American to have a pilot's license. His first group of students made it on to national tv due to the class accomplishing something no other pilot school, white or black, could achieve, a full graduating class. On December 8, 1941, with the bombing of Japan the day before, The United States joined World War II. The amount of soldiers that the United States had at the time was not enough to go to war calling for the first time ever in history for the service of women and minorities for help. Though this was allowed, the army still believed that black people did not have the capabilities to fly a plane, through convincing it was agreed by the army earlier in the year on January 16, 1941 that an all-black squadron would be formed. The men in this squadron would train in the newly built Tuskegee Army Airfield and Moton. The Tuskegee Civilian Pilot Training Program became a military training school on July 19, 1941. The first class of tuskegee airmen consisted of 13 cadets from all across the country. When the first class arrived, the base wasn't done being built meaning they had to sleep in tents until the new airfield was done being built. There was segregation present at the airfield, the white soldiers and instructor receiving luxurious service

while the Tuskegee cadets had to eat in poor conditions. The tuskegee airmen had to go through the three stages in learning how to fly the military way. These stages being: primary training, basic training, and advanced training where they learned many things such as how to fly at night, loops and spins, etc. Out of all the 2,053 cadets accepted to the program, 930 passed. Only five of the original thirteen in the Tuskegee experiment who made it. They became the first black men to become Army Airforce pilots. Another group of cadets went in after the program restarted, increasing that number of five Army Air Force pilots into thirty-three. Unfortunately, the airmen were able to go into combat immediately as they thought due to the army still believing the black pilots were incompetent. By August 1942, five classes had passed, making that enough tuskegee airmen to create two squadrons. On April 15, 1943, The 99th FS were given orders to join the war. Benjamin O. Davius Jr. who was promoted to lieutenant colonel was in charge of the squadron. When boarding the SS Mariposa, it carried both white and black soldiers, surprising the 99th FS who were amongst the highest-ranking officers on the ship. Davis Jr. was able to become the second black man in history to command white soldiers. The ship docked in casablanca, Morocco where they took an old cattle train that took them to a base that belonged to the German. The Tuskegee painted the tails of the planes they received at the base in red so they were easy to identify, later establishing them as the "Red Tails". The Tuskegee were moved to a new base in Tunisia June 1943. They were given their first combat sorties. One of the main jobs 99th FS was tasked with carrying out was to protect American planes. Due to the

content bomber planes carried, that affected the weight and speed of the plane, they needed to be surrounded by fighter planes. So the 99th FS and other planes escorted the bomber to make sure it got to its destination safely. On July 2, 1943, the 99th FS carried out a successful mission of escorting bombers that attacked a German Airfield in Sicily. The planes were ambushed leading to the immediate loss of two red tails, killing Pilot Sherman White and James McCullin, making them the first men of the 99th FS to die in action. The Red Tails continued fighting to protect the bomber planes where Charles Hall became the first black pilot to destroy an enemy airplane. The Germans retreated allowing the Red Tails to escort the bombers back to base. During the war, three hundred fifty-two Tuskegee pilots served overseas. Sixty-eight died in combat, thirty-one were held as war prisoners, and at least three Red Tails came close to ace status as a pilot. The 99th FS left Tunisia to go to new bases present in Italy. More squadrons were formed due to the graduation of more cadets. Combining the 100th, 301st, and 302nd fighter squadrons with the 99th to become the 332nd fighter group. The Red Tails began to earn a reputation as great fliers who were dependable, and did their job. Lt. Col Davis ensured that his men carried out their duty. They earned the nickname Red Tail Angels by protecting bigger planes. On the way back to a base on June 25, 1944, 332nd FG spotted a German Destroyer and took it down with major help from Captain Wendell Pruitt and Lieutenant Gwynne Pierson who were later awarded with the Distinguished Flying Cross for their accomplishment that is considered impossible. On March 24, 1945, the Red Tails faced their longest mission yet, tasked with escorting the three

leading bomber planes. The mission was a success in destroying the Nazi factory despite the amount of casualties that came as a result. On May 8, 1945 the Nazi surrendered. Even though these men were war heroes, they were still discriminated against, leading to protests led by Red Tails against the way they were being treated. After being promised better treatment, there was still segregation put in place when they got home to America. In 1948, President Truman passed a law that desegregated the US Army. It still took years for all branches of the military to become fully integrated. As a result of their service, they earned ninety-six Distinguished Flying Crosses and over a thousand medals for heroism, possibly receiving forty-seven purple hearts due to being injured in combat and twenty-five Bronze stars for heroism on the ground. The Tuskegee Airmen created a legacy that continues to this very day.

