

# The Tuskegee Airmen

(A short history of the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II)

Due to the rigid pattern of segregation that prevailed in the United States during World War II, the training of 996 Black military aviators was concentrated at an isolated, specially constructed Army Airfield near Tuskegee, Alabama and at Tuskegee Institute. The first contingent of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, (later designated as Fighter Squadron) was a group of enlisted technical and administrative specialists and five Aviation Cadets, all of whom were trained at Chanute Field, Rantoul, Illinois, the U.S. Army Air Corps Technical Training School. These individuals established a grade point average as a group, never equaled before or after during their training period April to November 1941.

Four hundred and fifty Black fighter pilots, under the command of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., (later to become the USAF's first Black Lieutenant General), fought the aerial war over North Africa, Sicily, Italy, southern France and Europe flying P-39 Aerocobras, P-40 Warhawks, P-47 Thunderbolts and P-51 Mustangs. These gallant men flew 15,553 sorties and completed 1,578 combat missions while assigned to the U.S. Army's XII (Tactical) and XV (Strategic) Air Forces. The 99th Fighter Squadron, already distinguished by its impressive combat record in North Africa, Sicily and over Anzio beachhead, was joined by the 100th, 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons, comprising the 332nd Fighter Group.

This Group was labeled and recognized as the "Schwarze Vogelmenchen" (Black Birdmen) by the Luftwaffe. The American bomber crews called the 332nd the "Red Tails" because of the identifying brightly painted red tail assemblies. The 332nd earned an unequalled record for never having lost a single bomber, under its escort cover, to enemy action during the en route, penetration and withdrawal phases of strategic bombardment operations all over the European continent. The Group flew four squadrons, each squadron providing 16 aircraft plus spares, totaling 72 fighters, *an awesome force*. Its combat achievement record comprises destruction of enemy aircraft in the air and on the ground, airfields, rail traffic and facilities, oil refineries, ammunition depots, barges and many assigned military targets. The 332nd distinguished itself in June 1944 when two of its pilots flying P-47 Thunderbolts discovered a German destroyer in the harbor of Trieste, Italy. One of the pilots, Lieutenant Gwynne Pierson of the 302nd Fighter Squadron, using only the aircraft's eight 50-caliber machine guns, strafed the destroyer, causing it to explode and sink. This was another unprecedented aerial gunnery feat of World War II. Another little known fact is 66 pilots were killed in action and 32 were prisoners of war in Europe. The Black aviators were awarded 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 744 Air Medals and Clusters, 992 Silver Wings, a Silver Star and a Legion of Merit, the Red Star of Yugoslavia, eight Purple Hearts and three Presidential Unit Citations. Not to be forgotten, are the contributions of skilled dedicated mechanics, armorers, ordinance, and seldom mentioned technical and administrative personnel who made this impressive combat record a reality.

Other Black pilots, navigators, bombardiers, gunners and maintenance personnel were trained and groomed as the 477th Medium (B-25) Bombardment Group, comprising the 616th, 617th, 618th and 619th Squadrons. The surrender of Germany and Japan precluded the 477th Bombardment Group's commitment to combat, so they were never deployed overseas.

However, they fought an equally important war back home. In the United States, Black airmen officers who did not go overseas in 1944 and 1945, and trained as B-25 Medium Bomber crew in the 477th Medium Bombardment Group, experienced racism that perhaps transcended all other World War II racial incidents. After the 332nd Fighter Group departed Selfridge Field, Michigan in Decem-

ber 1943 to go overseas, the remainder of the Black airmen personnel on the base comprised the 477th Medium Bombardment Group. They were treated as "trainees." All of the Black officers were denied access to the base officers club. This resulted in heated reactions from the Black officers. The memory of the recent race riot in nearby Detroit, Michigan in the spring of 1943 led to the transfer of the 477th Group from Selfridge Field to Godman Field, Kentucky. At Godman Field, the treatment and hostility continued and in early 1945, the group was transferred to Freeman Field, Indiana where hostilities reached a climax.

When the Black officers entered the Freeman Field Base Officers' Club against direct orders to stay out, 103 officers were arrested and charged with insubordination, and ordered to face court martial proceedings. The court dropped charges against 102 of the officers, but one officer was convicted. Fifty years later, at the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. National Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, in August 1995, the United States Air Force announced that it had purged the personnel records of 15 of the 103 officers referencing the Freeman Field incident, and reversed the court martial of the one officer that was convicted and cleared his record. The officer whose conviction was overturned is Roger "Bill" Terry of Inglewood, California. Terry is the immediate past president of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc.

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman enacted Executive Order No. 9981 — directing equality of treatment and opportunity in all of the United States Armed Forces. This led to the eventual end of racial segregation in the U.S. military forces. This was also the first step toward racial integration in the United

States. In August 1973, at a national meeting in Washington, D.C., the Tuskegee Airmen voted and installed its first slate of National Officers and divided the continental U.S. into three functioning regions - Eastern, Central and Western Regions respectively. The common goal of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. is to motivate, inspire and stimulate young people's minds to aspire, to seek and to achieve successful careers in the fields of aerospace and aviation. The Airmen devote time, effort and financial resources to capture young minds, to instill the underlying will to learn, sacrifice and to attain a self-sustaining status with marketable skills. The Tuskegee Airmen's Scholarship Fund awards over \$60,000.00 in scholarships annually to young people across the country irrespective of ethnicity or gender. The East Coast Chapter in the Washington, D.C. area provides educational assistance grants to youths who have shown an ability and desire to learn and progress in aviation and aerospace careers. Other Tuskegee Airmen achievements include a National Historical Museum at historic Fort Wayne, Detroit, Michigan, which serves as a repository for its archives and memorabilia, a bronze statue of a Black World War II pilot on the grounds of the USAF Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Memorial Plaque at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia. The U.S. Air Force has dedicated a Tuskegee Airmen Room in the Bolling Officers' Club, Washington, D.C.

There are thirty-nine active chapters located in major cities and military installations throughout the 50 States. The National Headquarters is located in Rosslyn, Virginia near Washington, D.C. The officers, directors and board members of this tax-exempt organization serve without salary or fee.

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