

Tuskegee Airmen



Under a title of both honor and ostracism, the **Tuskegee Airmen** were African-American Air Corps officers who trained at the Tuskegee Army Airfield in Alabama, the only training facility for basic and advanced flight training open to black pilots during World War II. The Airmen successfully fought as a segregated unit with the U.S. Army Air Force during the war and completed more than 1,500 missions. Today, they are remembered as heroes who helped to integrate the American armed forces during and after World War II.

Before 1954, African-American officers and enlisted men fought in segregated units. Only the army allowed black men to serve in a combat role; the U.S. Navy allowed African Americans to serve as stewards and cooks; neither the U. S. Marines Corps nor the U.S. Air Force allowed African Americans to enlist. It was not until 1939 that congressional legislation mandated the admittance of African Americans to the training facilities of the Civil Aeronautics Authority, which used flying equipment provided by the Air Corps. Yet the Corps refused the entrance of African Americans in any capacity until 1940. Citing a common rationale for keeping them out, Gen. Henry Arnold argued that "Negro pilots cannot be used in our present Air Force, since this would result in having Negro officers over white enlisted men." Arnold caved in to pressure in December 1940, when he unveiled an experimental program to recruit 500 African-American men, 10% of whom would be given commissions (but not all as pilots). To maintain Southern support of the war effort and to appease the leading figures in the armed forces, Arnold ordered that African-American air cadets be segregated from white officers and enlisted men.

Segregation and discrimination plagued the program. Originally located at an air base outside of Chicago, the program's African-American flyers and ground crew were eventually moved to an airfield operated by the Civil Aeronautics Authority at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, the all-black school founded by Booker T. Washington in the late 19th century. This move angered many leading African-American men and women who felt the stated reason for the move, the high price of land near Chicago, masked an ulterior motive: legitimizing the segregated nature of the unit by placing it in the South, where segregation was reinforced by law. But like the majority of African-American civil rights leaders at the time, vocal critics accepted that a segregated unit was better than none.

The Tuskegee Airmen dealt daily with the indignities associated with segregated military life. They were not allowed to associate with whites, even other officers. African Americans from Tuskegee could not stay overnight at the nearby Maxwell Field, the location of the visiting officers' quarters. They also could not use the officers' club. This treatment alienated most of the African-American airmen, who dubbed themselves the Lonely Eagles. Also, black pilots could only fight with black units, so the combat role open to the Tuskegee airmen was limited. The absence of useful work was acute, since black fighting units could only absorb a finite number of black pilots. Segregation created the ridiculous situation of over-qualified black airmen serving as "assistant to the assistant supply officer" and "assistant area beautification officer." Many good African-American pilots failed to see combat as a result.

Despite segregation, the Tuskegee Airmen convinced their white military superiors that they could play an effective combat role. By the end of the war, 926 African-American pilots had been trained. Out of nearly 1,000 black airmen, 450 black fighter pilots fought over the skies of North Africa, Sicily, and Europe. They flew P-40, P-39, P-47, and P-51 aircraft in 15,500 sorties and finished 1,578 missions with the U.S. Army Air Force. Sixty-six pilots were killed in combat, and 32 were shot down and captured. The first African-American aviation unit to fly in battle was the 99th Pursuit Squadron, led by Lt. Col. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. The 99th developed into a superior-fighting unit despite its hurried training.

As African-American pilots became more common to both Allied and Axis powers, nicknames formed. Germans called the Tuskegee Airmen the Schwartze Vogelmenschen (Black Birdmen), while American bomber crews referred to them as the "Black Redtail Angels" due to the red paint on the aircraft tails designating Tuskegee. The Tuskegee Airmen's reputation for not losing many bombers was known throughout the American armed forces during World War II.

Stemming from his command of a larger African-American unit, the 33rd Fighter Group, Davis became the leading figure associated with the Tuskegee Airmen following the war. He eventually climbed to the rank of lieutenant general, the first African American to achieve three stars. Another leading figure was Lt. Col. Noel Parrish, a white officer who took over leadership at Tuskegee in 1942. Profoundly influenced by the efforts and troubles of the Tuskegee Airmen, Parrish spearheaded the desegregation of the air force in the wake of World War II.

Today, four memorials are scattered across the nation that call attention to the relatively unknown history of the

Tuskegee Airmen and their military accomplishments. A traveling exhibit also records the living history of these courageous men. Furthermore, there are several active chapters of the Tuskegee Airmen, a non-profit organization that sponsors scholarships for youth interested in studying math and science.

References:

Emery, Gary, "Tuskegee Airman tells Trials, Triumphs," *Air Force News*, March, 1997.; Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. (<http://members.aol.com/hqtai/tai/nofram.html>).

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