



## “YOU CAN FLY ALRIGHT!”: REMEMBERING THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

World War II was a war unlike any other before or after it. Slowly warfare began to shift itself away from the trenches and into mobile combat operations on air, land, and sea. The technological advancement was stark. However, there was far more to it than simple mechanics of war machines and weapons when it came to advancement. The concept of African American service members was not a new one, but for those who sought to serve their nation in the skies it was a new world.

The first African American warfighters of regular enlisted showed up as early as 1863 during the Civil War. Numerous freemen were enlisted to provide limited assistance in combat and sentry duties. Notable examples included the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment which was charged with leading a frontal assault on Fort Wagner; the battle depicted during the climax of the movie *Glory*. Other units such as the 108th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment provided sentry duty at locations such as Rock Island where they guarded Confederate POWs.

In 1917, Eugene Bullard became the first African American combat pilot when he joined the French Air Service during World War I. Bullard, among many others, was not allowed to join the Army Air Service during the war. Following the war, an increased interest in civilian pilot programs led to many private citizens acquiring pilot's licenses. The gateway to the sky opened for many. In fact, it was through this revelation that organizations such as the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) trace their origins. However, other major services also trace their lineage to this phenomenon, specifically the Women's

Auxiliary Service Pilots and the Tuskegee Airmen. In 1939, Tuskegee University in Alabama joined the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP). As the Army Air Corps (USAAC) began to increase its Table of Distribution & Allowances (TDA) for Pilots, it also began to emphasize the importance of acquiring the best and brightest. This was enforced across all the USAAC. However, whereas many units were screened once, the airmen at Tuskegee were double and sometimes triple checked due to Jim Crow era laws. Because of this, these group of young men were in many cases some of the most elite airmen in the Corps.<sup>1</sup>

It was not until a 29 MAR 1941 flight that the group gained positive notoriety, specifically from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. In a flight with civilian instructor Charles Anderson Sr., she proclaimed “You can fly alright!” Subsequently, Roosevelt arranged a grant of \$175,000 for the construction of Moton Field.<sup>2</sup> Just a week before this, the 99th Pursuit Squadron had been formed in Rantoul, Illinois without any pilots. It was transferred to Tuskegee in June but did not gain its first pilots until August. Moton Field served as the training site for pilots that were then moved to Tuskegee Army Air Field. The unit was combat ready by April 1943.

Around the same time that the 99th was formed, the 332nd Fighter Group was also established. The 447th Bomber Group would follow in 1943. Both Groups were primarily staffed by African Americans. Likewise, the primary space of deployment was across North Africa and Southern Europe, with units gaining distinguished credits especially in the North African and Sicily Campaigns. The units

were outfitted with standard aircraft relative to World War II and were not shortened on supply or repair, including P-40's, -47's, and -51's. Despite the formation of the 447th Bomber Group in 1943, it was never used in combat actions despite heavy pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Tuskegee Airmen aircraft were painted with a signature red tail by their flight crews. Other locations of red included the nose and wingtips. The unique color scheme led them to acquire many names from “Red Tails” to “Red Angels.” Modern T-1 trainers of the 99th continue to use the red tail paint scheme on their aircraft today.

Just under 1,000 pilots were trained at Tuskegee with approximately 350 being deployed overseas for combat. The casualty ratio of pilots to loss was approximately 10 percent.<sup>3</sup> Three Distinguished Unit Citations were awarded along with 96 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 14 Bronze Stars (plus at least one known Silver), over 700 Air Medals, and at least 60 Purple Hearts.

The airmen at Tuskegee continued to provide influence in aviation for African Americans well after their time in their respective units. Individuals such as GEN David James Jr. went on to become the first four-star General Officer in the U.S. Air Force (USAF). Others went on to become chairmen of non-profit organizations to provide assistance to aspiring young African American aviators. Today the 99th Flying Training Squadron provides training to new USAF pilots, while the 332nd Expeditionary Fighter Group maintains multiple Air National Guard units in the Central U.S.



In World War II, the Army trained, equipped, and deployed almost 90 divisions worldwide, but was desperately short out of infantryman in early 1945. While ten percent of the American population consisted of African Americans, less than three percent of the Black units that deployed overseas were combat units and very few of them fought on the front lines. Close combat in Europe offered the opportunity for a few thousand Black soldiers to demonstrate their value as fighting men. When these soldiers, all volunteers from the Army Service Forces, fought side-by-side with White troops during the Battle of the Bulge and afterward, they began to change the minds of some of their harshest White critics and started a shift that would lead to full integration of the Army. The case of the missing World War II Black combat soldier offers lessons for today's military faced with similar issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

For more information on DoD's Black History Month Observation from the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, scan the code to the right.



## MONTHLY TRIVIA

- 1 When was the last Tuskegee Airmen trained at Moton Field?
- 2 What is the primary aircraft flown by the active fighter component of the 447th Fighter Group?
- 3 What historical project aims at the restoration and maintaining of warbirds dedicated to the Tuskegee Airmen?

## TRIVIA ANSWERS

Think you know the answer to the questions above? Find out in next month's edition of the IAWG History Newsletter.

Few things are quite as awesome as the SR-71 Blackbird. Originally, the A-12 (its predecessor) was designed to outfly Soviet anti-air defenses and fly over their radar. They were naturally helped a bit by stealth coatings of paint, but the bulk of the systems' defense was based on speed and altitude. Despite the Soviets managing to get a U-2 in 1960, they never did manage to get a Blackbird. She remains undefeated in many categories to this very day.

1958	05	An F-86 Sabre collides with a B-47 Stratojet causing the bomber to jettison a hydrogen bomb near Savannah, Georgia.
1961	01	The Minuteman I Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) is launched for the first time in an "all systems" test.
1961	03	The first EC-135 "Looking Glass" is flown with the mission of Command-and-Control (C2) of nuclear forces.
2001	21	An RQ-1 Predator destroys a tank with an AGM-114 missile, marking the first armored kill by an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV).
2003	01	Space Shuttle <i>Columbia</i> disintegrates upon reentering the Earth's atmosphere, killing all seven on board.



1. Terkel, Studs. *American Dreams: Lost and Found*. Pantheon Books, New York City, New York. 1980. pp359-360.  
 2. Maye, J. Todd. *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*. Oxford University Press, New York City, New York. 2010. pp52-54.  
 3. National Museum of the U.S. Air Force. *Fact Sheets: Escort Excellence*. Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Archived. 2012.

R1. Bucholtz, Chris; Laurier, Jim. *332nd Fighter Group - Tuskegee Airmen*. Osprey Publishing, Oxford, United Kingdom. 2007.  
 R2. Ross, Robert A. *Lonely Eagles: The Story of America's Black Air Force in World War II*. Tuskegee Airmen, Inc, Los Angeles Chapter. 1980.