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FILE TITLE: The Tuskegee Airmen Experiment Created Opportunities in the Air Force for African-Americans

AUTHOR: SMSgt Larry Robinson, SNCOA Student, Class 97B

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative G. R. Akin date 5 Dec 97

EPC Representative John C. Che date 12 Dec 97

Scanner Operator Sandy Gordon date 12 Dec 97

APPROVED BY: G. R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF
Director
Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

**The Tuskegee Airmen Experiment
Created Enlisted Opportunities
in the Air Force
for
African-Americans**

Imagine if your country was about to enter a war. What if you were told you could not join in the fight to protect your family, friends, and country. Besides being told you could not take part in the fight to defend your country, you are told you are mentally incapable of completing complex tasks. African-Americans were told this prior to World War II. As senior enlisted leaders, we should be aware that opportunities in the Air Force have not always been available to African-Americans. The Tuskegee Airmen Experiment provided the opportunity for African-Americans to prove they were capable of repairing and maintaining complex machinery, such as aircraft. If African-American enlisted members had not overcome the obstacles of racism and ignorance during World War II, they would not enjoy full participation in the Air Force, today. The focus of this work is on the enlisted opportunities created by the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment. First, I will examine African-American participation in the Armed Forces at the outbreak of World War II. The racial climate of the country and the *Army War College Report of 1925* set the tone for military policy toward African-Americans. Second, the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment was the catalyst for creating enlisted opportunities in the Air Force for African-Americans. The Tuskegee Airmen Experiment opened opportunities for African-Americans in aircraft maintenance and other ground support activities. In the third point, I will uncover some individual accomplishments made by enlisted African-Americans during World War II. Their roles and performance during the war will be discussed, and how their performance impacted future African-Americans. Today, it is difficult for Americans to understand why African-Americans were treated unfairly during this time. For you to better understand the treatment of African-Americans in the military prior to World War II, I will start by looking at the racial climate of the nation and the *Army War College Report of 1925*.

The racial climate in American society and the Armed Forces was not favorable to African-Americans. Even though African-Americans had fought in every previous American conflict including the Revolutionary War, African-Americans were underutilized in the Armed Forces at the outbreak of World War II. The views of the Armed Forces mirrored public opinion when it came to African-Americans. The USAF special study, *Blacks in the*

Army Air Forces (AAF) During World War II, states that the War Department policy before and during World War II was greatly affected by the racial beliefs of American society. Therefore, AAF racial policy reflected civilian practice and African-American soldiers received no more advantages than they received in civilian life. (1:9) As in society, African-Americans were thought to be mentally inferior and were given menial positions. Jim Crow (racial segregation) was the law of the land. Therefore, it carried over into the Armed Forces. The Army and Navy allowed African-Americans to enlist, but kept them separate from whites and assigned them mostly menial jobs. According to the Defense Study, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, the AAF assigned African-American enlisted members to mostly labor units such as quartermaster truck companies, engineer aviation and air base security battalions. (2:30) In other words, African-Americans were used as truck drivers, construction laborers, and security guards. Treatment in the Navy was not much better. Enlisted African-Americans in the Navy were assigned primarily to the Steward's Branch where they manned the mess and maintained the officers' billets on board ship. (2:58) Beliefs in American society were a prevailing reason for the treatment of African-Americans in the Armed Forces, but the *Army War College Report of 1925* was a major contributor of this policy, also.

The Armed Forces also based its policy toward African-Americans on the *Army War College Report of 1925*. The *Army War College Report of 1925* concluded that African-Americans would make fair laborers, but inferior technicians. (3:2) The report went on to make other conclusions such as African-Americans being mentally inferior and having inherent weaknesses of character. The report would later be most damning for African-Americans attempting to join the Army Air Force because of its conclusions of their technical abilities. The authors of the *Army War College Report of 1925* misinterpreted the results of intelligence tests administered and the performance of the 92nd combat unit during World War I. African-Americans did score less on intelligence tests given during World War I, but the authors of the *Army War College Report of 1925* did not take into account the lack of educational opportunities, and environmental and economic disadvantages that African-Americans faced. During World War I, the African-American 92nd combat unit did perform poorly, but inferior equipment, poor training and leadership was not considered by the authors of the war college report. The framers of the report also overlooked the fact that African-Americans had performed honorably in all of America's conflicts since the Revolutionary War. Public opinion and the *Army War College Report of 1925* laid the groundwork for treatment of

African-Americans in the Armed Forces immediately prior to World War II, however, the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment provided the chance to change the policy.

The AAF resisted efforts of African-Americans to enlist, nevertheless, constant pressure from the African-American press and African-Americans for the end of discrimination in the AAF, led to the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment. This experiment resulted in many enlisted opportunities for African-Americans. According to an interview with Mr. C. Alfred "Chief" Anderson, one of the first flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF), Yancey Williams sued the United States Government and the War Department for acceptance into the AAF. Yancey Williams won his case and shortly afterwards, the AAF began selecting students for what became known as the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment. (4:60) The AAF leadership was not overjoyed about the idea of accepting African-Americans into their service. Many of those in key positions did not believe African-Americans were capable of performing complex tasks. At first, "General [Henry] Arnold [Chief of the Air Corps] adopted a stalling tactic by noting that it would take several years to train black enlisted men to become competent aircraft mechanics." (1:23) Then after it became apparent the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment was going to happen in spite of opposition from the leadership of the AAF, many AAF leaders took an indifferent approach toward it. According to an *U. S Air Force Oral History Interview with General Noel F. Parrish*, commander of the Tuskegee Army Air Field, he said, "I knew that I could survive and contribute . . . only by refusing to be a crusader of sort. I was merely trying to make the best of a difficult situation . . ." (5:15) In spite of out and out opposition and indifference, the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment did open enlisted opportunities for African-Americans in the AAF.

The African-American press was filled with articles announcing enlisted opportunities created by the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment. On April 8, 1941, the *Newberry, S. C. Observer* carried the article "Colored Youths To Be Enlisted In Air Schools" which advertised for qualified colored youth of the United States who are interested in a career in aviation are now being given an opportunity to obtain one of the finest practical education available in the technical aspects of aviation at the Air Corps Training School Chaunute Field. (6:1) Other papers across the nation carried similar articles. The *Kansas City Call* dated September 11, 1942 carried the article, "Tuskegee Training Mechanics" stating, " Vital need to enlist approximately 100,000 skilled mechanics and technicians immediately the AAF, Signal Corps and Ordnance department was announced by the War Department recently."

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(7:1) So the dye was cast, African-Americans were to be given a chance to enlist in the AAF and work on aircraft. Once given this opportunity African-Americans were determined to prove their critics wrong.

The AAF did accept thousands of African-Americans for training as aircraft mechanics and for other ground support functions. Many were trained at Chaunute Field, Illinois and then sent to TAAF to support the training of African-American pilots. After leaving TAAF, most of these enlisted members were assigned to the newly formed all African-American 332nd Fighter Group. According to the *History of the 332nd Fighter Group (October 1942)*, “New pilots poured in from Tuskegee, more planes were brought in and the mechanics worked long strenuous hours in order to meet the demands of maintenance . . .” (8:1) The 332nd Fighter Group historical records document enlisted African-Americans performing jobs once closed to them. *Special Accounts from the 332nd Fighter Group (6 August 1944)* lists SSgt Gorman, line chief, for flying ace, Lt Clarence D. Lester. Also, these records list other enlisted members such as MSgt Romiane Goldsborough, line chief, and SSgt Washington Carter, TSgt Homer Foster, and SSgt George Ruff, mechanics, for the 302nd Fighter Squadron. (9:--) These and other unsung enlisted African-American heroes proved wrong the notion that they could not repair and maintain aircraft. The Tuskegee Airmen Experiment provided other opportunities in the AAF for African-Americans. *Special Accounts from the 332nd Fighter Group, (1 September 1944)* document MSgt Morris M. Johnson, New York City, 332nd Fighter Group Headquarters directing landing aircraft from the tower. (10:--) These and many other ground support activities were previously off limits to African-Americans. The Tuskegee Airmen Experiment provided opportunities for African-Americans to prove they could perform complex jobs, but the experiment also provided the ultimate opportunity: the right for African-Americans to fight for their country in World War II.

Finally, the contributions of enlisted African-Americans during World War II laid the foundation for future Air Force policy concerning race segregation. Most accounts of the Tuskegee Airmen center around the achievement of the officers. Like other enlisted members in the Air Force the efforts of the enlisted African-Americans were largely overshadowed by the pilots’ accomplishments. However, as an enlisted African-American in today’s Air Force, I owe a debt to those who came before me and knocked down the walls of racism and ignorance. I wish not to downplay the contributions of the African-American pilots, because I am equally proud of them and their accomplishment were superb. However, I do want to underscore some of the contributions of the enlisted African-Americans. “The Red-Tailed Angels from the 332nd Fighter Group had the unparalleled record of

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never losing a bomber to enemy fighter aircraft while flying cover for B-17 bombers over Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, and Poland [during World War II].” (11:18) There was thousands of unsung enlisted African-Americans heroes working countless hours to keep the aircraft of the 332nd Fighter Group flying. Their names and efforts have been largely silenced to the historical pages of the 332nd Fighter Group, I intend to shed a brief glimmer of light on their accomplishments.

The history of the 332nd Fighter Group recorded the following contributions of enlisted African-American: *Special Accounts from the 301st Fighter Squadron (6 August 1944)*, list commendations for TSgt James H. Lattimore and TSgt Raymond L. Washington. TSgt James H. Lattimore received a commendation for improvising a test set to expedite the repair of communications equipment in aircraft. TSgt Raymond L. Washington was also commended for repair of communication equipment. He was commended for devising a visual indicator to show the pilot when he was actually transmitting, His repair was noted as a definite aid to the pilot. (9:--). Men like TSgt Lattimore and TSgt Washington put to rest assertions by the General Henry Arnold that it would take five to six years to train African-Americans to be aircraft mechanics. MSgt Nathaniel A. Wade, TSgt Roland L. Poindexter, SSgt Elliot W. Lucas, and Cpl. John T. Fields received bronze stars for distinguished meritorious service in direct support of combat operations against the enemy. (12:4) These men and many other unnamed ones, destroyed two assertions in *The Army War College Report of 1925*. One is that African-Americans would make inferior technicians. And the other is that they would not fare well in combat situations.

African-Americans have not always enjoyed the same opportunities as others in the Armed Forces, especially in the Air Force's forerunner the AAF. The nations' racial climate and the *Army War College Report of 1925* had major impacts on the military policy toward African-Americans. African-Americans were used mostly as labors because of ideas in society and assertions in the *Army War College Report of 1925*. Leaders of the AAF resisted efforts to integrate because of African-Americans were believed to be mentally inferior. It was a common belief in both society and the military that African-Americans were incapable of performing complex tasks. Of course this was untrue, but African-Americans needed the right forum to disprove the myth of inferiority. That forum came in the forms of World War II and the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment. When Yancey Williams sued the United States Government and the War Department for acceptance into the AAF, his actions gave birth to the Tuskegee Airmen Experiment. The Tuskegee Airmen Experiment was the stage upon which African-Americans

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were given the chance to show that they could repair and maintain complex machinery, such as aircraft. Once given the chance, many answered the call. After demonstrating their abilities to repair and maintain aircraft at TAAF, many moved on to the challenge of repairing and maintaining aircraft under combat conditions while assigned to 332nd Fighter Group. Thousands of unknown enlisted African-Americans along with their pilot comrades shattered the assertions of society and the *Army War College Report of 1925* concerning African-Americans. All enlisted members, especially SNCOs, should be aware of the impact these men had on shaping our modern Air Force. If it was not for them, African-Americans would not have an equal chance for participation in the Air Force, today. And because of these gallant men, no African-American will have to fight for the right to defend their country, again.

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