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THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

by

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BACKGROUND PAPER
ON
THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

1. In the spring of 1941, a black military flying school was established in Tuskegee, Alabama. The actual training was conducted by a group of black civilian pilots under the direction of Chief Anderson. A white officer functioned as overall commander from the beginning--white instructors arrived when the program expanded and a white command structure rapidly took shape.
2. Segregation prevailed throughout the training cycle. Cadets who completed primary training at the Alabama institution remain there for the subsequent stages of instruction. They entered basic training, an introduction to military flying, then advanced training, which combined aerobatics and gunnery, and finally joined the 99th Pursuit (later Fighter) Squadron based at the Tuskegee Army Air Field to undergo combat training. The air base, in short was a world all its own.
3. The black cadets had a unique status. They were in the Air Forces, subject to its rules and regulations, but they were not full-fledged members of the service. They could, for example, make practice landings at Maxwell Field, Alabama, or some other base, but they were not welcome to take their meals there or remain overnight. Scheduling and the efficient use of planes and facilities yielded under the pressure of racism.
4. The attrition rate among black aviation cadets--those men

Signature Line

undergoing flight training but not yet commissioned officers--proved unusually high, 50 percent or more in classes numbering from seven to thirteen students. The director of training, Captain Noel Parrish, attributed this percentage of failures, roughly twice that of a typical class of whites, to the fact that enthusiasm alone served to admit to the aviation cadet program some blacks of mediocre intellectual accomplishments or marginal physical condition. Classes were assembled quickly without the intensive screening to which the Army routinely subjected white applicants.

5. The black pilots were acutely aware of the fragile nature of the Tuskegee experiment. They knew that the air arm had been reluctant to admit them to training and that the whites of Alabama viewed them with a mixture of fear and curiosity.

(2:176) They realized that their failure would be interpreted as further proof that blacks could not compete in the white man's world. 6. Gradually the 99th Fighter Squadron took shape as black airmen completed training and joined the unit. In 1943 the allies invaded North Africa. (5:28) There was a subsequent need for tactical fighters, which forced the Army to use the black fliers against the Germans and Italians.

7. The 99th Flighter Squadron underwent no systematic indoctrination when it arrived in North Africa. Only one officer made a genuine effort to teach the newcomers to fly the Curtiss P-40 in actual combat. He was Colonel Philip G. Cochran, who

had become a training specialist for Major General John K. Cannon, the commander of the tactical air forces in the theater of operations. Fighter and light-bomber squadrons, hastened through the training cycle in the United States, reached North Africa poorly prepared for combat. Because of this situation Colonel Cochran paired the least experienced pilots in the outfit with those who had the most flying hours to form two-plane teams. If necessary, Colonel Cochran would assign officers from other units to increase the experience level. Assigned by General Cannon to guide the 99th Fighter Squadron through its indoctrination, the colonel discovered that the unit had no veterans and operated under a policy of racial segregation that prevented transfers from white squadrons. The best Colonel Cochran could do was assign a few blacks to fly with white units willing to accept them, and even this violated the rules enforcing segregation.

8. During the brief period that Colonel Cochran was able to work with the Tuskegee airmen, he discovered that they were precise fliers, able to maintain a tight formation but weak in aerial navigation, and like white pilots with similar experience, hard pressed to combine crisp aerobatics with accurate gunnery. (7:125) The North Africa navigation proved difficult for everyone, but the blacks may have faced a special handicap. The possibility of making cross-country training flights in the United States depended upon finding bases with

separate facilities where the blacks could eat and sleep.

9. Segregation was hard on the black aviators, and because of segregation they were hard on themselves. The men of the 99th Flight Squadron realized that they represented all black Americans. As a result, every member was under tremendous pressure.

10. The Tuskegee airmen did not hang back though. They put themselves in danger, flying their first combat mission over the island of Pantelleria in the Mediterranean Sea on 2 June 1943. One month later, First Lieutenant Charles B. Hall became the first black American to score a verified aerial victory during World War II. He downed a Focke-Wulf Fw 190 during a patrolling run between Sicily and Tunisia. (1:195)

11. By 27 and 28 January 1944, the 99th aided an embattled Allied landing force by downing a dozen German planes. Proof of the progress made by the black airmen was the decision made by General Spaatz to accept additional fighter squadrons made up of blacks. In addition, the 99th Fighter Squadron earned two Distinguished Unit Citations: one for the invasion of Sicily and the other for fighting Italy. (3:330)

12. By the time the war in Europe ended in May 1945, the black 332d Fighter Group--made up of the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302d squadrons--was escorting bombers deep into Germany. The fighter pilots could boast that no bomber entrusted to them had ever been lost to German interceptors, even though the enemy employed

the latest model Fw 190s and Messerschmitt Me 109s, along with the revolutionary jet-powered Me 262 when that aircraft became available. The discipline and aggressiveness shown by the black pilots assigned to protect the bombers bound for Germany resulted in the award of Distinguished Unit Citations to three of the group's squadrons: the 99th (its third), the 100th, and the 301st. (3:330,332,365) The 332d also received the Distinguished Unit Citation during this time. (4:213) The Tuskegee airmen downed 80 enemy planes. (6:588)

13. In all, 332d and its squadrons destroyed 409 enemy aircraft; flew 15,553 sorties on 1,578 missions; flew 200 missions as heavy bomber escorts into Germany, without losing a single bomber to enemy aircraft; flew more different types of fighter aircraft in combat than any other fighter unit; was the only fighter unit to sink a German destroyer; and won numerous battle honors, including the Distinguished Unit Citation. (5:26) The all-black units were inactivated on 1 July 1949, when blacks were integrated into the Air Force.

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