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HISTORY OF THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

How would you feel if the country in which you love and would die for, denied you from defending her honor? Not because of some physical disability, but because of the color of your skin. During the 1900's segregation of the races played a key part in the history of the United States, from the slavery days, to the civil war, and during world wars I and II. African Americans not only had to fight for their civil rights in their country, but also had to fight to defend their country in time of war. As a result of this struggle, the African American was given their first taste of war by forming the first black training school. Out of this school came the Tuskegee Airman, also known as the Black Hawk men, due to training was conducted in Tuskegee, Alabama. The purpose of this paper is to inform you about the history of the Tuskegee Airman, and what they had to face during their beginning years. I will discuss the origin of how they were established, to include the background, location, training and members. In addition, I will discuss the all black 99th and 332nd Fighter Squadrons and how they relate to the history of this organization. Finally, I will summarize what we talked about. Let's begin with the origin of the Tuskegee Airman.

During the late 1900's, African American men wanted to join the military as aviators to fight in the war, as well as use their talents as mechanics. However, according to Charles Francis, author of *The Tuskegee Airman*, he stated these men were informed that "No colored aero squadrons were being formed at the present time and if so recruiting offices would be notified to that effect"(1:2) In addition, the War Department began to use excuses such as the Air Corps only selected men with technical and mechanical experiences and ability, and that colored men had not been attracted to flying in the same way as the white man. Also, to the fact that they had turned down applications from well educated , white men. To add to the injustice, the war department stated that since they didn't want to mix the races in an organization and no provisions were made for the colored Air Corps unit within the Army, colored persons were not eligible for enlistment in the Air Corps. Since the Air Corps refused to accept black youths for pilot training, the Civil Aeronautics Authority organized civil pilot training units at some black colleges and permitted some of the

black youths to enroll in pilot training courses at white colleges. What people failed to realize, was the fact that the majority of the training would be instructed by other blacks from the enlisted corps. The enlisted corps would keep the airplanes flying, train weathermen by using proper equipment, and also train the navigators. As a result, the enlisted member would be the backbone of the Tuskegee Airman. From all information, some blacks saw this as the beginning for blacks to become Air Corps Aviators and productive members of the Army Air Corps.

One of the black colleges selected for black pilots to train was Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In fact, the Institute and the Alabama Air Service would have to use the Municipal Airport in Montgomery, Alabama, jointly to conduct flying classes. Although black youths were permitted to participate in the civilian pilot training program, they were still denied the right to enter military flying. Public law 18 did not grant them permission to enter the Air Corps as military pilots, but allowed them to train as pilots and to prove that blacks could be taught to fly. Meanwhile, the National Association for the Advancement of Color People (NAACP) was fighting battles with the war department trying to get legislature to allow blacks to enter the military as pilots.

As a result, of the NAACP filing constant suits for black applicants after their applications were denied, the Army Air Force training centers felt pressure. In early March 1941, the Air Corps began accepting applications from black youths. A little later, the war department announced that it was planning to establish an Air training center to train a black squadron for pursuit flying. The squadron was to consist of 400 enlisted men, 33 pilots, and 27 planes. The Tuskegee Airman were finally on their way to place their mark in history. Next, a place to provide their training was needed.

The war department identified three potential sites, one at Tuskegee, a second at Milstead, a small community in Macon County some twelve miles west of town, and a third at Fort Davis, also in Macon County and twelve miles south of Tuskegee. Originally, Fort Davis was chosen as the base for the training site, but the district engineer discovered that the capacity of the soil at the site to support the proposed buildings and runways was marginal. As a result of this report a new site had to be chosen. The alternate

site chosen was Tuskegee, which brought on new discussions by the people of this area, due to having blacks that close to their town. After a long discussion and arguments, the war department chose Tuskegee as the new training location. In addition, the war department appropriated \$1,091,000 dollars for the establishment of an air field at Tuskegee. Since the civilian pilot training program was already established in Tuskegee, it was the logical location for the training to be held. According to Robert Jakeman, author of *The Divided Skies*, he states the blossoming of aviation at Tuskegee was due largely to the leadership and ideas of G. L. Washington (2:132). Once the construction of the air field was underway, high priority was given for it's completion. The Army Air Corps awarded the contract to a company, headed by a black architect and contractor. Immediately, after the field construction was started, the troops began to assembly for training.

To inaugurate the beginning of military pilot training for black youths, a ceremony was held at the Booker T. Washington monument, located on the campus of Tuskegee Institute. Not only would flying be taught but also training was conducted to include airplane mechanics, aircraft armorer, aircraft supply and technical clerk, instrument and weather forecasting. Black youths were being trained in every way, and eager to learn their new training. Black youths were trained on four types of aircraft to include, PT-17 for primary training, the BT-13 for basic training, the AT-6 for advanced training, and the P-40 for transition training. According to G. L. Washington, he believed that the performance of black students in both Civil Aeronautics Authority and military training programs showed that blacks Americans could fly at a level equivalent to white students(2:299). He also felt that the black student demonstrated under the Civil Pilot Training program that he could fly, do the ground work subjects, and that he is no different in this respect from any American youth. More than anything else, the Tuskegee Airman were only as good as the members, who made up this great organization.

Of the thirteen original members, who entered flight training only five remained to graduate. Four were aviation cadets, who received commissions as second lieutenants in the Air Corps Reserve- Lemuel R. Custis, Charles H. DeBow, Jr., George S. Roberts, and Mac Ross. The fifth was Capt. Benjamin O. Davis,

Jr., who was transferred on graduation from the infantry to the Air Corps, thus becoming the first black American to hold a regular commission in the air army. After, the graduation of these individuals in March 1942, it meant that black Americans had finally gained a foothold in the nation's air army, after more than three years of struggle. The Air Corps had been forced to accept black Americans into its ranks a year before the nation entered World War II, a step that might have been labeled as treasonous once the country mobilized for war. So by forcing the Air Corps to admit blacks during peacetime, the foundation had been laid for the participation of black Americans in aerial combat in the skies over North Africa and Europe. While members were in training, the 99th Fighter Squadron was formed to establish with black members making up the squadron.

The 99th Fighter Squadron, the first Black unit of the U. S. Army Air Corps, was organized in conformance with the doctrine of separate-but-equal rights. This doctrine, requiring segregation of blacks in separate units, had long determined the status of the black in the United States Army. Its application had excluded Blacks from the Air Corps during the 1920's and 1930's, when the Corps had been so small and its means so limited that the creation and maintenance of a black unit would not have been possible. To lead this group of men, took a special individual, none other than Col. Benjamin O. Davis Jr.

Colonel Davis played an important role in the future of black Americans in the Air Force as well as commander of the 99th Fighter Squadron. As a member of the first class he set the example and provided the leadership for the first black pilots in the Air Corps. Furthermore, as the first black officer to lead black units into combat, he helped to dispel the notion that blacks lacked a capacity for leadership and that black troops would not take orders from officers of their own race. Col. Davis' performance as an air commander provided postwar Air Force decision makers with clear evidence that race was not a barrier to effective leadership. Col. Davis led his troops to action in the European Theater and in the same year later in Africa. In fact, his first mission as commander, was an attack on the enemy air base at Fardjouna. Later, he led his fliers on strafing, dive bombing raids on Panteleria, and Italian Mediterranean stronghold. In July 1943, Col. Davis led the squadron as it flew cover for the invasion of Sicily, and moved its base to that

island shortly after the first troops landed. By February 1945, his group had completed 200 combat missions with the 15th Air Force and had served as escort to heavy bombers without losing a single bomber to enemy fighters. Up to that time members of the Red Tail Group, as they were affectionately known, had been awarded 63 Distinguished Flying Crosses, and had completed 8,000 sorties while destroying more than 200 enemy aircraft in aerial and group strafing assaults. The Group also received the Presidential Unit Citation. For gallantry in action while leading his fliers in bomber escort duty over Berlin, Col. Davis was awarded the Silver Star. Here are some operational facts, in which the 99th Fighter Squadron was involved in.

The 99th Fighter Squadron saw action throughout the European Theater, and never backed down from a battle. Sergeant Cleveland Watts member of the 99th, kept a war diary of their mission in Italy. The following is just a few of the entries in which he wrote: "4 July 1944, members of the 99th hardly knew that day is was; 8 July 1944, the squadron received it's first P-51 aircraft; 10 July 1944, Capt. Mac Ross recently transferred to the 99th crashed while on a routine transition flight and was killed; 15 July 1944, the 99th flew it's first combat mission since being under the XV Air Force. The flight was led by Capt. Lawrence, Commanding Officer of the 99th; 18 July 1944, on it's second mission, Capt. Toppins and Lt. Bailey destroyed one FW-190 apiece; and finally 31 July 1944, the 99th flew it's 14th mission under the XV Air Force for a total of 122 sorties."(3:1) The enlisted men were the backbone of the 99th Fighter Squadron and have been over looked throughout the years. Though they played the less glamorous role, they without a doubt, played a major role in the success of the Tuskegee experiment.

However, the enlisted men were also under pressure. General Arnold and Col. Parish argued against the black Army Air Corps stating that blacks could be trained as pilots in 18 months, but it would take years to train enlisted men as mechanics keeping within the separate- but- equal doctrine. People began to see the enlisted men in a different light especially Col. Parish. He was amazed to see the black mechanics servicing the planes, and even more amazed when he found out after questioning the men, they had been in the service only a year. Many of these men qualified for pilot training but chose to accept training in the less

glamorous technical jobs. Contrary to the belief of General Arnold, the enlisted trainees completed their training in eight months. The enlisted member proved that they were just as capable of maintaining their aircraft, as the white mechanics assigned to different units. Just as the white mechanics, “when a pilot failed to come back the enlisted men took it as hard as the officers did. A mechanic whose plane had been shot down was like a boy who lost his dad” (4:170) Keeping with tradition, the black mechanic placed an emblem on their aircraft that they were responsible for, showing pride in their work and accomplishments.

According to Patricia and Fredrick McKissack, authors of *Red Tail Angels*, the enlisted members wanted their aircraft to be easily recognized. At first, they painted a small portion of the tail of the aircraft red, but later told by one of the pilots to paint the whole tail section red to stand out in the air. Due to the consistent protection offered by the 99th, bomber pilots began to request for their protection, later to rename them the Red Tails. Bomber pilots in which the 99th Fighter Squadron had to protect on missions “knew who could be depended upon and whose appearance meant certain protection from enemy fighters” (5:44). But also, the pilots of the 99th knew the enlisted ground crew kept them flying to carry out their missions. As a result, of this protection the bomber crews would tell others about the 99th's accomplishments and their reputations had proceeded them into many parts of the world where they thought they were unknown. Due to the commanding officer reporting the squadron's accomplishments to the Air Force Commander, the 99th squadron felt that this made their operation a creditable one. To all that, the 99th soon was to take on a new mission.

Due to military strategy changes in Italy, transfers had to be made to counter the German army's advancement. Therefore, the decision was made to join the 99th with the 332nd Fighter Group, located in Rametelli, Italy. Thus, the transfer only brought on new problems. While the members of the 99th were satisfied with being assigned to the 86th, an all white outfit, they felt a sense of belonging. Now however, the members of the 99th felt that the war department was reverting to segregation policies practiced in the States, being reassigned with another all black unit. The enlisted members and pilots of the 99th who had

fought and repaired aircraft with tactical outfits ever since entering combat felt that color and race should not be used as a basis for transferring the unit to a strategic outfit. Members from the different units began to feel jealous of each other. Like, the members of the 99th who hated to lose their identity by being integrated into a larger unit. However, the men being professionals put their differences behind themselves, and got to the mission at hand, destroying the enemy. After, the war the 332nd was reassigned and later told that it's would be reduced in manning and aircraft.

Next, the 332nd had been reassigned on 1 December 1948, and ordered to reduce the mission and the activity of the unit. Also, to transfer one of their three squadrons elsewhere, and transfer twenty-five aircraft to depots. The plan was approved on 11 April 1949, and on the same day Colonel Davis was informed of the plans to inactivate his units and to integrate the blacks into other organizations.

The plans for inactivating the 99th and other black units of the Air Force were the results of President Harry S. Truman's action terminating the application of the doctrine of separate-but-equal rights in the armed forces. On 5 December 1946, the President had appointed a committee to suggest measures which would safeguard the civil rights of people. However, on 26 July 1948, he ordered that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. In addition, on 11 May 1949, the Air Force announced its racial policy, that qualified black personnel may be assigned to fill any position vacancy in any Air Force organization or overhead installation without regard to race. Afterward, a board was appointed to determine reassignments. This work was soon completed, and a chapter in the history of the Air Force was closed on 1 July 1949 when the 332nd Wing and the 99th Fighter Squadron, were inactivated.

In summary the role of the Tuskegee Airman, and the enlisted men that was apart of this fine organization played a vital role in the history of the Air Force. Furthermore, the enlisted members kept the aircraft flying, provided training in many areas to include mechanic, instrument panel, weather charts, and navigator training to the pilots assigned. As stated before, the enlisted members were the backbone of the

Tuskegee Airman. Even with all the confusion in the United States over segregation, the enlisted members stayed focus on their mission and gave it everything that they had for God and their Country.

In closing, such men like the Tuskegee Airman paved the way for other minority people by laying the foundation for others to follow. As a result, they encouraged the war department to end segregation within the military forces, and established policies that allowed black aviators to fly and fight in war for their country. If people like the Tuskegee Airman did not start the segregation movement within the military, nor willing to fight for their country, where would we be in terms of equal rights within the military today.

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