

# The Tuskegee experience

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**O**ur country's heritage includes the contributions of more than 13,000 African-Americans who have come to be known as the Tuskegee Airmen. During World War II, 450 combat single-engine fighter pilots, 223 non-combat single-engine fighter pilots, 263 non-combat B-25 bomber pilots, and more than 12,500 other Tuskegee Airmen served America stateside and in the Mediterranean and European Theaters of Operations. Here is a brief synopsis of how this period of history came to be and who was involved, along with some safety insights from some of the original Tuskegee Airmen.

In 1939, mobilization pressures on the Roosevelt administration and Congress led to the passage of Public Law 18, then the Civilian Pilot Training Act. This Act, sponsored by the Civil Aeronautics Authority, established the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP), which created a reserve of civilian pilots to be called in the event of a war emergency. It was out of this program that six segregated CPTP centers were established at African-American colleges in the south. The focal point of this part of the program became Tuskegee, Alabama, where pilot training centers

were created at Moton Field and Tuskegee Army Airfield (TAAF). Because of this, the term "The Tuskegee Experiment" was adopted and characterized the period of 1939 to 1949.

Forty-four classes were conducted in Tuskegee from 1942 to 1946. Each one averaged about 21 students per class. It took 36 weeks of training to make the transition from aviation cadet to certified military pilot. In basic flying training, aviation cadets flew the BT-13. In advanced flying training, fighter cadets flew the AT-6, and bomber cadets flew the AT-10. Historically, the graduates of this program have been referred to as Tuskegee Airmen.

During the early years, the TAAF commander, the director of the Tuskegee Army Flying School, all flight instructor billets and key TAAF positions were voluntarily staffed by white officers. This began to change under the command of Col Noel F. Parrish who served as the third and last commander of TAAF from 1942 to 1946. Under Col Parrish, the Tuskegee Airmen who returned from combat were placed in basic, advanced, and combat instructor positions. All the non-flying personnel who needed the ground, technical and administrative skills required to operate an Army Air Corps Field were trained at Army posts, Army Air Corps bases, civilian facilities or educational institutions throughout the United States.

After the CPTP had been established, but before the first class had started, these Airmen made history when Eleanor Roosevelt took a flight with Charles A. "Chief" Anderson who was the chief pilot at Tuskegee. Lt Gen Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., USAF, (Retired), (Deceased), who was the first African-American promoted to the rank of brigadier general, graduated from the very first class, 42-C, on March 1, 1942. Lt Gen Davis went on to command the all-African-American 99th Fighter Squadron (FS) and the 332nd Fighter Group (FG) overseas. In June and July 1945, then-Col Davis and his selected staff from the

332 FG accepted command of the 477th Composite Group (CG), the Army Air Corps' only composite fighter-bomber group. It included the 99 FS, which flew P-47Ds, and two consolidated bomber squadrons, the 617th at Godman Field, Fort Knox, Kentucky, and the 618th at Atterbury Field, Columbus, Indiana. Both of these bomber squadrons flew B-25Js. Lt Gen. Davis returned to the Tuskegee Institute after retirement to teach military science.

Gen Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr., USAF (Retired), who was America's first African-American four-star general, graduated from class 43-G. In 1945, he served stateside under then-Col Davis as a twin-engine B-25 bomber pilot in the 447 CG. In 1947, he served under then-Col Davis as a single engine P-47 fighter pilot in the 332 FG. Four hundred fifty combat pilots from Tuskegee flew P-40s, P-39s, P-47s, and P-51s in the aerial war over North Africa, Sicily; and Europe under the command of then-Col Davis. When the first Tuskegee Air-

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men were sent overseas, they were not replaced at the end of the usual tour of duty; so many of them ended up flying more than the normal 50-mission tour before returning stateside. These gallant men flew 15,553 sorties and completed 1,578 missions with the 12th Tactical U.S. Army Air Force and the 15th Strategic U.S. Army Air Force.

The Army Chief of Staff, Gen Marshall, had the Army Division of Operations (G-3) conduct an eight-month study starting in July 1943, after receiving some complaints about the 99th Fighter Squadron's performance in the Mediterranean and subsequent recommendations that they be removed from the theater. The G-3 report stated, "An examination of the record of the 99th reveals no significant general difference between this squadron and the balance of the P-40 squadrons in the Mediterranean



Theater of Operations.” Official records show that the 99th Fighter Squadron and 332nd Fighter Group continued to perform admirably until their deactivation in July 1949 and October 1945, respectively. The number of unit citations they received for both the pilots and their service and support units reinforced this record. Of the 450 overseas pilots, approximately 150 received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Their success contributed to the reputation they earned among their opponents and fellow servicemen. The Germans, who both feared and respected them, called them the “Schwarze Vogelmenschen” (Black Birdmen). White American bomber crews reverently referred to them as “The Redtail Angels” because of the identifying red paint on their tail assemblies and their reputation for miraculously not losing a single bomber to enemy fighters during escort missions over strategic targets in Europe. A few of the Tuskegee Airmen who helped contribute to this phenomenal record recently shared their thoughts on the role that safety played in achieving this record.

Lt Col Gene Carter, USAF (Retired), was a fighter pilot and squadron maintenance officer with the 99th Fighter Squadron. According to Lt Col Carter, each pilot was assigned to a particular aircraft, which was owned by a crew chief so both the pilots and maintenance personnel took personal pride in their aircraft and its performance in combat. A mission abort was a serious issue and considered unacceptable. As a maintenance officer and pilot, Lt Col Carter tried to minimize these by flight-testing all aircraft problems before returning the aircraft to service. He also related that there were no formal safety meetings like the Air Force has today. Flight safety was stressed as a part of the formation briefing. Great emphasis was placed on avoiding midair collisions and pre-planned reactions if enemy aircraft like the ME-109 jumped the formation.

Air discipline was essential in combat operations. Formation integrity was more important than the number of kills achieved and this was the responsibility of the formation leaders.



They had to decide how to rejoin the formation, which was the most critical portion of the flight, and get the formation through the cloud decks and safely on the ground.

Col Charles McGee, USAF (Retired), was also a pilot and is currently the Past National President of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. He was assigned to the 302nd Fighter Squadron, which was under the 332nd Fighter Group. He echoed Lt Col Carter's comments on how safety was simply a part of the normal combat briefing. He felt that the safety program in those days was just in the beginning stages so regular safety meetings did not happen as they do today. According to Col McGee, he just followed the flight lead and did what had to be done to accomplish the mission. The pilots made sure their life support gear checked out correctly before takeoff. Just like today, an emergency at high altitude was not the time to find out their oxygen masks were malfunctioning.

While there was pilot fatigue at the end of the missions, this was normal and did not prevent safety from being adhered to in all ground and flight operations.

Col Harry Sheppard, USAF (Retired), (Deceased), was a fighter pilot and maintenance officer in the 302nd Fighter Squadron. He had high praises for the maintenance personnel and contributed the success of the

flying operations to them. When the squadron started flying the P-51, the maintenance personnel transitioned to the new aircraft in minimum time and sustained combat operations before the supply system was able to provide spare parts for the aircraft. Col Sheppard felt that these Tuskegee Airmen had a drive to perform well and show how much they could contribute to the Air Corps. He viewed his fellow servicemen as Americans with a high dedication to duty and country that garnered the respect of the bomber crews they escorted to the target and home again safely.

Col Fitzroy Newsum, USAF (Retired), was assigned to the 617th Bomber Squadron. Col Newsum stated that then-Col Davis was big on safety and let everyone know that it was his personal priority. The directive to maintain good air discipline came right from the top. Col Newsum related that if a pilot was caught flying too low during a dive-bombing run, that pilot would probably have a face-to-face with the colonel. That is how serious a breach of air discipline was considered. Then-Col Davis was concerned that too many of these breaches would jeopardize the Tuskegee program.

The Tuskegee Airmen were pioneers that had the dedication and love of country to overcome obstacles and make a difference. Their contributions to our military history have become a part of the fabric that holds this nation together. The Air Force today reflects their contributions well. 