

# Trail Blazers

February is Black History month, a time which gives us an opportunity to highlight the significant role African Americans played in U.S. military history. One group the Tuskegee Airmen went on to have the enviable record of not losing a single bomber to enemy fighters despite the significant action they saw. They also went on to have one of the best safety records of the war.



Art by Willie Jones, Jr.



**D**enied military leadership roles and skilled training because many believed they lacked the abilities to be successful, they were excluded from many career fields and combat. This exclusion included flying and flying support functions.

In an effort to open doors to these fields, civil rights organizations and the black press exerted pressure that ultimately resulted in the formation of an

all African American pursuit squadron based in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1941. They became known as the Tuskegee Airmen. These Airmen went on to form one of the most successful combat units in World War II, and had the enviable record of not losing

a single bomber to enemy fighters despite the significant action they saw. No other combat unit in World War II accomplished this feat.

Prior to the "Tuskegee Experiment," very few African Americans learned to fly. In 1939, U.S.

government-sponsored flight training began with the passage of the Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) Act. Administered by the Civilian Aeronautics Association (CAA), the Act authorized selected schools to offer CPT primary flight training for pilots in

case of a national emergency and included African American colleges. The government paid for ground and flight school instruction, while the colleges provided instructors, physical examinations for potential students, and transportation to ap-

proved flying fields. Prior to this Act, African Americans were self taught or trained overseas.

The approved schools for African American candidates included Tuskegee Institute, Howard University, Hampton Institute, and the Coffey School of

Aeronautics. Tuskegee Institute originally offered elementary or primary CPT courses, but in July 1940, the CAA authorized Tuskegee Institute to provide advanced CPT courses; the military selected Tuskegee Institute to train its pilots because of the Institute's commitment to aeronautical training.

Tuskegee had the facilities, engineering and technical instruc-

The first class which included student officer Capt Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who became the commander for the 332nd Fighter Group, began training on July 19, 1941. Students received rigorous training in meteorology, navigation, and instruments in ground school. In addition, the cadets got their primary flight instruction at Moton Field, Tuskegee. Those who completed the course successfully transferred to TAAF to

302nd Fighter Squadrons formed the 332nd Fighter Group and began flying missions over Sicily, the Mediterranean, and North Africa. Under the able command of Col Davis (the same Capt Davis from 2 years earlier), the well-trained and highly motivated 332nd bomber crews overcame the obstacles posed by segregation and established an amazing combat record. Called the "Red-Tail Angels" after the red tail markings on their aircraft, or the "Schwarze Vogelmenschen (Black Bird Men)" as the German Luftwaffe called them, they flew 15,500 missions, destroyed over 260 enemy aircraft, sank 1 enemy destroyer, and demolished numerous enemy installations. Although they never lost a bomber to enemy fighters, several Airmen died in combat.

The Tuskegee Airmen were awarded numerous high honors,

*Airmen of the 618th & 619th Bomb Squadrons at training at Atterbury Army Airfield in Columbus, Indiana*



*Ammo NCOs during combat operations in World War II, Tuskegee Airmen included maintainers and other support personnel*

tors, as well as a climate for year round flying. The Institute received a military contract to conduct primary flight training, and the army built a separate, segregated base, Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF) for the advanced training. In fact, Tuskegee Institute was one of very few American institutions to own, develop, and control facilities for military flight instruction regardless of race. With these facilities, it became the focal point for training African American military pilots during World War II. (Support personnel were trained at Chanute Field in Illinois.)

complete Army Air Corps pilot training. In March 1942, the first class of five aviation cadets earned their silver wings to become the nation's first black military pilots.

Along with maintainers and support personnel from other African American colleges, the Tuskegee Airmen went to combat in segregated squadrons. In 1943, the 99th, 100th, 301st, and

including Distinguished Flying Crosses (approximately 150 of the 450 overseas-deployed pilots received this honor), Legions of



*1Lt Walter A. Palmer after he shot down an ME-109 on July 18, 1944*

Merit, Silver Stars, Purple Hearts, the Croix de Guerre, and the Red Star of Yugoslavia. A Distinguished Unit Citation was awarded to the 332nd Fighter Group for "outstanding performance and extraordinary heroism" in 1945. Their achievements proved conclusively that the Tuskegee Airmen were highly disciplined and capable fighters. Having proven themselves in combat, they earned the respect of fellow bomber crews and military leaders.

Today, "Tuskegee Airmen" refers to all who were involved in the "Tuskegee Experiment," the Army Air Corps' program to train African Americans to fly and maintain combat aircraft. More than 10,000 African American men and women in military and civilian groups supported the effort serving as flight instructors, officers, bombardiers, navigators, radio technicians, mechanics, air traffic controllers, parachute riggers, and electrical and communications specialists. The experiment proved conclusively that African Americans could fly and maintain sophisticated combat aircraft. The Tuskegee Airmen's achievements, together with the men and women who supported them, paved the way for full integration of the U.S. military. ▶

**Editor's Note:** *Courtesy of the National Park Service*



*A pilot prepares for a combat mission*