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FREEDOM FIGHTERS OF TUSKEGEE

SUMMARY

As the first African-American military airmen, the Tuskegee Airmen featured in *Freedom Flyers of Tuskegee* fought in two fronts during the Second World War: against racism and segregation at home, and against fascism abroad. When the United States entered the Second World War in December, 1941, American military forces were still segregated and stereotypes surrounding African-Americans claimed that they lacked courage and patriotism. A study carried out in 1925 concluded that African-Americans were inferior to white Americans and led military officials to determine that African-American soldiers couldn't fly or hold positions of leadership in the military. This viewpoint remained intact until the Second World War. While African-American soldiers were allowed to serve in the military, the treatment they received varied drastically from that of their White counterparts. When not in battle, African-American soldiers were often assigned to menial occupations in peripheral units. During World War I, most African-Americans were assigned noncombat duties and menial jobs, such as working as mess orderlies.



At the beginning of World War II, as in the past, personnel needs dictated that Black recruits be accepted for military service, and many African-Americans viewed this as an opportunity to improve their lives. Although African-Americans were not permitted to fly in the air force, many were interested in piloting and had learned how to fly. The Public Law 18 passed in April 1939 and expanded the Army Air Corps. In calling for the creation of Air Corps training programs to be based at black colleges, this law offered hope for those African Americans who wanted to advance their military careers beyond the kitchen or the motor pool.



On January 16th, 1941, the War Department announced the creation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron. This was to be an all black flying unit trained at the Tuskegee Institute founded in Tuskegee, Alabama, by Booker T. Washington in 1881. Charles A. Anderson, a self-taught African American pilot, established a civilian pilot training program at the Institute in 1939. When the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Tuskegee Institute in 1941 to view their polio treatment center, she decided to take a flight with Charles Anderson and spent over an hour in the plane with him. Although the First Lady's exact impressions are unknown, reports indicate that she remarked to Mr. Anderson, "I always heard that colored people couldn't fly airplanes," but after her experience "saw no reason why blacks could not fly" and encouraged her husband,

President Franklin D Roosevelt, to expand the air force to incorporate the African-American flyers at Tuskegee. The "Tuskegee experiment" began in order to determine if African-Americans had the capacity and skills to fly, fight, and possibly die for their country. Located in the south, those who trained in Tuskegee experienced racist segregation policies before even arriving on base. As recounted in testimonies in *Freedom Flyers of Tuskegee*, after crossing the Mason-Dixon Line, African-Americans had to move to segregated cars on the train. In addition, they were denied access to certain beaches near their training groups that were designated for "Whites Only."

Members of the 99th Pursuit Squadron thus had to campaign for a double V: Victory at home and Victory abroad. Many African-Americans who served in the military thought that if they went overseas to fight for their country, their service would be recognized. As one Tuskegee Airman stated, "despite its shortcomings, in spite of its failures, it's still my country." The Airmen featured in *Freedom Flyers of Tuskegee* used their opportunity to join the air force as a chance to challenge and fight to overcome stereotypes and mistreatment of African-Americans. When they arrived at their station in North Africa, the air force built two separate runways, five miles apart, to ensure that there was no overlap or communication with White troops. As time went on, the segregated troops began to interact and got along with one another. The 99th Pursuit joined with

three other African-American fighter squadrons, and in July, 1944, they became a single combat group, the 332nd. The Allies called these airmen "Red Tails" or "Red-Tail Angels," because of the distinctive crimson paint predominately applied on the tail section of the unit's aircraft. Through their outstanding performances in battle, the Tuskegee Airmen began to see a change in the racial attitudes of soldiers. However, when the US Congress held a hearing during the war to determine if segregation should continue, they concluded that the military should remain segregated.

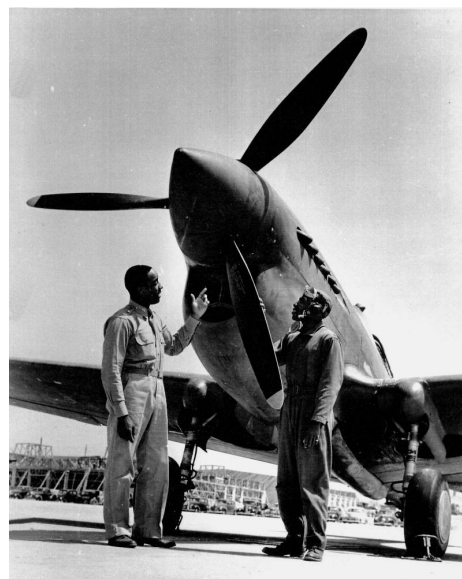
The Tuskegee Airmen's fame spread from the United States through the world. Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Jefferson and Captain Richard Macon, both pilots in the 332nd, were captured by the Nazis during the war and became Prisoners of War. When Jefferson was captured and brought to a German officer for interrogation, he noticed the officer looking through a large notebook with "332nd, Negroes" printed on the cover. Inside, the German officer had photographs and information on all the Tuskegee Airmen, including information on their families. While the pilots had heard rumors that Germans treated African-American POWs in a similar fashion to the treatment of Africans-Americans by the KKK, in particular that they would remove the prisoner's genitals and put them in their mouth before killing them, they were relieved to find that they survived their time as POWs unharmed.



Unfortunately, when the Tuskegee Airmen returned home after the war, they came back to segregated conditions in which many could not find work. As there seemed to be no place for them in fledgling aerospace industry, many tried to make a living through low-paying, menial tasks, and manual labor. Just as they had during the war, these men persevered and continued to break down racial discriminations and demonstrate that they were just as capable as anyone else.

Thanks to strides made by the Tuskegee Airmen, desegregation in the military became a reality after World War Two. They had proven that African-Americans were more than capable airmen and that they could, and would, fight to defend the United States. In 1948, months before the election, President Harry Truman issued the Executive Order 9981, which "declared to be the policy of the President 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." Following this order, the armed forces began to institute a policy of racial desegregation. Desegregation proceeded slowly, however, and met with resistance. Most civilians and military personnel opposed racial integration. One month before President Truman's Executive Order, a Gallup poll showed that 63% of American adults endorsed the separation of Blacks and Whites in the military; only 26% supported integration. A 1949 survey of white Army personnel revealed that 32% completely opposed racial integration in any form, and 61% opposed integration if it meant that Whites and Blacks would share sleeping quarters and mess halls. However, 68% of white soldiers were willing to have Blacks and Whites work together, provided they didn't share barracks or mess facilities.

Today, the Tuskegee Airmen are remembered not only for their contribution to the American War effort, but for their abilities in transgressing and breaking barriers of segregation and racism. The Tuskegee Airmen received the Congressional Gold Medal for their service in 2007, and were honored by President Bush at the White House at that time. In addition, they participated President Obama's inaugural parade in January 2009.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why weren't African-Americans allowed to fly in the air force?
2. Why was the Tuskegee Training Program created?
3. What was the "Double V" for which African-American pilots were fighting?
4. What justification did the military have for maintaining segregated units?
5. Why would these soldiers fight to defend a country that treated them like second-class citizens?
6. What additional barriers and challenges did the Tuskegee Airmen face that other Air Corps units did not?
7. How did the Tuskegee Airmen work to combat enemies abroad and at home?
8. How did the Tuskegee Experiment make the point for racial integration of the U.S. military?
9. How did the 99th and 332nd fighter groups contribute to the war effort?
10. Why do you think many Americans found the racism and intolerance of Nazi Germany so deplorable, yet failed to fight for change in the treatment of African Americans in their own country?
11. Why was desegregation more easily accomplished in the Military than it was in the population as a whole?
12. What impact did desegregation of the Military have on the advancement of Civil Rights in America as a whole?
13. Explain how African-Americans' service in World War II produced a stimulus for President Truman's decision to end segregation in the armed forces in 1948.
14. What aspects of African-American's positions within the armed forces and society as a whole changed after the war? What remained the same?
15. Today, the United States is in the midst of a debate over whether or not homosexuals can serve openly in the military. Given that unit cohesion was given as one rationale for discriminating against blacks prior to 1950, and against gays today, compare and contrast the "don't ask don't tell" rules with the history of discrimination against black Americans in the armed forces.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Online:

- <http://www.tuskegeeairmen.org/>
- <http://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/tuskegee/airoverview.htm>

Print:

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- Holway, John. *Red Tails, Black Wings: the Men of America's Black Air Force*. Las Cruces, New Mexico: Yucca Tree Press, 1997.
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- McGee Smith, Charlene. *Tuskegee Airman: The Biography of Charles E. McGee, Air Force Fighter Combat Record Holder*. Boston: Branden Books, 1999.
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- Wynn, Neil. *The African American experience during World War II*. Lanham, MD : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010

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