

General Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_O._Davis%2C_Jr.

(December 18, 1912 – July 4, 2002) was an American general, commander of the World War II Tuskegee Airmen.

Davis was the first African-American general in the United States Air Force. During World War II Davis was commander of the 332nd Fighter Group, which escorted bombers on air combat missions over Europe. Davis himself flew sixty missions in P-39, P-40, P-47 and P-51 fighters.

Biography

Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr. was born in Washington, DC on December 18, 1912, the second of three children born to Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. and Elnora Dickerson Davis. His father was a U.S. Army officer, and at the time was stationed in Wyoming serving as a lieutenant with an all-black cavalry unit. Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. served 42 years before he was promoted to brigadier general. Elnora Davis died from complications after giving birth to their third child (Elnora) in 1916.

At the age of 14 the younger Davis went for a flight with a barnstorming pilot at Bolling Field in Washington, D.C. The experience led to his determination to become a pilot himself. He was the first cadet to get his wings from the Tuskegee Army Air Field on March 7, 1942.

After attending the University of Chicago, he entered the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York in 1932. He was sponsored by Representative Oscar De Priest (R-IL) of Chicago, at the time, the only black member of Congress. During the entire four years of his Academy term Davis was shunned by his classmates, few of whom spoke to him outside the line of duty. He never had a roommate. He ate by himself. His classmates hoped that this would drive him out of the academy. The "silent treatment" had the opposite effect. It made Davis more determined to graduate. Nevertheless, he earned the respect of his classmates, as evidenced by the biographical note beneath his picture in the 1936 yearbook, the *Howitzer* :

"The courage, tenacity, and intelligence with which he conquered a problem incomparably more difficult than plebe year won for him the sincere admiration of his classmates, and his single-minded determination to continue in his chosen career cannot fail to inspire respect wherever fortune may lead him."^[1]

He graduated in 1936, 35th in a class of 276. He was the academy's fourth black graduate. When he was commissioned as a second lieutenant, the Army had a grand total of two black line officers — Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. and Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. After graduation he married Agatha Scott.

At the start of his senior year at West Point, Davis had applied for the Army Air Corps but was rejected because it did not accept blacks. He was instead assigned to the all-black 24th Infantry Regiment (one of the original Buffalo Soldier regiments) at Fort Benning, Georgia. He was not allowed inside the base officers club.

He later attended the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, but then was assigned to teach military tactics at Tuskegee Institute, a black college in Alabama. This was something his father had done years before. It was the Army's way to avoid having a black officer command white soldiers.

Early in 1941, the Roosevelt administration, in response to public pressure for greater black participation in the military as war approached, ordered the War Department to create a black flying unit. Captain Davis was assigned to the first training class at Tuskegee Army Air Field (hence the name Tuskegee Airmen), and in March 1942 won his wings as one of five black officers to complete the course. He was the first black officer to solo an Army Air Corps aircraft. In July that year, having been promoted to lieutenant colonel, he was named commander of the first all-black air unit, the 99th Pursuit Squadron.

The squadron, equipped with P-40 fighters, was sent to Tunisia in North Africa in the spring of 1943. On June 2, they saw combat for the first time in a dive-bombing mission against the German-held island of Pantelleria. The squadron later supported the Allied invasion of Sicily.

In September of 1943, Davis was called back to the United States to take command of the 332d Fighter Group, a larger all-black unit preparing to go overseas.

Soon after his arrival, however, there was an attempt to stop the use of black pilots in combat. Senior officers in the Army Air Forces recommended to the Army chief of staff, General George Marshall, that the 99th (Davis's old unit) be removed from combat operations as it had performed poorly. This infuriated Davis as he had never been told of any deficiencies with the unit. He held a news conference at The Pentagon to defend his men and then presented his case to a War Department committee studying the use of black servicemen.

Marshall ordered an inquiry but allowed the 99th to continue fighting in the meantime. The inquiry eventually reported that the 99th's performance was comparable to other air units, but any questions about the squadron's fitness were answered in January 1944 when its pilots shot down 12 German planes in 2 days while protecting the Anzio beachhead.

Colonel Davis and his 332d Fighter Group arrived in Italy soon after that. The four-squadron group, which was called the Red Tails for the distinctive markings of its planes, were based at Ramitelli and flew many missions deep into German territory. By summer 1944 the Group had transitioned to P-47s.

In the summer of 1945, Davis took over the all-black 477th Bombardment Group, which was stationed at Godman Field, Kentucky.

During the war, the airmen commanded by Davis had compiled an outstanding record in combat against the Luftwaffe. They flew more than 15,000 sorties, shot down 111 enemy planes, and destroyed or damaged 273 on the ground at a cost of 66 of their own planes. They never lost a friendly bomber to enemy fighters on their escort missions.

Davis himself led dozens of missions in P-47 Thunderbolts and P-51 Mustangs. He received the Silver Star for a strafing run into Austria and the Distinguished Flying Cross for a bomber-escort mission to Munich on June 9, 1944.

In July of 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed an executive order ordering the racial integration of the armed forces. Colonel Davis helped draft the Air Force plan for implementing this order. The Air Force was the first of the services to integrate fully.

Colonel Davis, commander of the 51st FIW, leads a formation of F-86F Sabres during the Korean War in 1954

Davis served at the Pentagon and in overseas posts over the next two decades. He again saw combat in 1953 when he assumed command of the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing and flew an F-86 in Korea. He gained the three stars of a lieutenant general in May 1965, when he was the chief of staff for American forces in South Korea. He was later commander of the Thirteenth Air Force, based in the Philippines, and assistant commander of the United States Strike Command, with headquarters in Florida.