

The Tuskegee Airmen (WWII)

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuskegee_Airmen

The **Tuskegee Airmen** (pronounced /təˈskiːɡiː^[1]) was the popular name of a group of African American pilots who flew with distinction during World War II as the 332nd Fighter Group of the US Army Air Corps.

Origins

Prior to the Tuskegee Airmen, no U.S. military pilots had been black. However, a series of legislative moves by the United States Congress in 1941 forced the Army Air Corps to form an all-black combat unit, much to the War Department's chagrin. In an effort to eliminate the unit before it could begin, the War Department set up a system to accept only those with a level of flight experience or higher education that they expected would be hard to fill. This policy backfired when the Air Corps received numerous applications from men who qualified even under these restrictions.

The U.S. Army Air Corps had established the Psychological Research Unit 1 at Maxwell Army Air Field, Alabama, and other units around the country for aviation cadet training, which included the identification, selection, education, and training of pilots, navigators and bombardiers. Psychologists employed in these research studies and training programs used some of the first standardized tests to quantify IQ, dexterity, and leadership qualities in order to select and train the right personnel for the right role (bombardier, pilot, navigator). The Air Corps determined that the same existing programs would be used for all units, including all-black units. At Tuskegee, this effort would continue with the selection and training of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Training

Major James A. Ellison returns the salute of Mac Ross of Dayton, Ohio, as he passes down the line during review of the first class of Tuskegee cadets; flight line at U.S. Army Air Corps basic and advanced flying school, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1941 with Vultee BT-13 trainers in the background.

On 19 March 1941, the 99th Pursuit Squadron (Pursuit being the pre-World War II descriptive for "Fighter") was activated at Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois.^[2] Over 250 enlisted men were trained at Chanute in aircraft ground support trades. This small number of enlisted men was to become the core of other black squadrons forming at Tuskegee and Maxwell fields in Alabama.

In June 1941, the Tuskegee program officially began with formation of the 99th Fighter Squadron at the Tuskegee Institute, a highly regarded university founded by Booker T. Washington in Tuskegee, Alabama.^[3] The unit consisted of an entire service arm, including ground crew. After basic training at Moton Field, they were moved to the nearby Tuskegee Army Air Field about 16 km (10 miles) to the west for conversion training onto operational types.

The Airmen were placed under the command of Capt. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., one of the few African American West Point graduates. His father Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. was the first black general in the U.S. Army.

During its training, the 99th Fighter Squadron was commanded by white and Puerto Rican officers, beginning with Capt. George "Spanky" Roberts. By 1942, however, it was Col. Frederick Kimble who oversaw operations at the Tuskegee airfield. Kimble maintained segregation on the field in deference to local customs; a policy the airmen resented.^[4] Later that year, the Air Corps replaced Kimble with Maj. Noel Parrish. Parrish, counter to the prevalent racism of the day, was fair and open-minded, and petitioned Washington to allow the Tuskegee Airmen to serve in combat.^[citation needed]

In response, a hearing was convened before the House Armed Services Committee to determine whether the Tuskegee Airmen "experiment" should be allowed to continue. The committee accused the Airmen of being incompetent — based on the fact that they had not seen any combat in the entire time the "experiment" had been underway. To bolster the recommendation to scrap the project, a member of the committee commissioned and then submitted into evidence a "scientific" report by the University of Texas which purported to prove that Negroes were of low intelligence and incapable of handling complex situations (such as air combat). The majority of the Committee, however, decided in the Airmen's favor, and the 99th Pursuit Squadron soon joined two new squadrons out of Tuskegee to form the all-black 332nd Fighter Group.

Combat

The 99th was ready for combat duty during some of the Allies' earliest actions in the North African campaign, and was transported to Casablanca, Morocco, on the *USS Mariposa*. From there, they travelled by train to Oujda near Fes, and made their way to Tunis to operate against the Luftwaffe. The flyers and ground crew were largely isolated by racial segregation practices, and left with little guidance from battle-experienced pilots. Operating directly under the Twelfth Air Force and the XII Air Support Command, the 99th FS and the Tuskegee Airmen were bounced around between three groups, the 33rd FG, 324th FG, and 79th FG. The 99th's first combat mission was to attack the small but strategic volcanic island of Pantelleria in the Mediterranean Sea between Sicily and Tunisia, in preparation for the Allied invasion of Sicily in July 1943. The 99th moved to Sicily while attached to the 33rd Fighter Group,^[5] whose commander, Col. William W. Momyer, fully involved the squadron, and the 99th received a Distinguished Unit Citation for its performance in Sicily.

The Tuskegee Airmen were initially equipped with P-40 Warhawks, briefly with P-39 Airacobras (March 1944), later with P-47 Thunderbolts (June-July 1944), and finally with the airplane that they would become most identified with, the P-51 Mustang (July 1944).

On 27 January and 28 January 1944, German Fw 190 fighter-bombers raided Anzio, where the Allies had conducted amphibious landings on January 22. Attached to the 79th Fighter Group, eleven of the 99th Fighter Squadron's pilots shot down enemy fighters, including Capt. Charles B. Hall, who shot down two, bringing his aerial victory total to three. The eight fighter squadrons

defending Anzio together shot down a total of 32 German aircraft, and the 99th had the highest score among them with 13.^[6]

The squadron won its second Distinguished Unit Citation on 12 May-14 May 1944, while attached to the 324th Fighter Group, attacking German positions on Monastery Hill (Monte Cassino), attacking infantry massing on the hill for a counterattack, and bombing a nearby strong point to force the surrender of the German garrison to Moroccan Goumiers.

By this point, more graduates were ready for combat, and the all-black 332nd Fighter Group had been sent overseas with three fighter squadrons: the 100th, 301st and 302nd. Under the command of Col. Benjamin O. Davis, the squadrons were moved to mainland Italy, where the 99th FS, assigned to the group on 1 May, joining them on 6 June. The Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group escorted bombing raids into Austria, Hungary, Poland and Germany.

Flying escort for heavy bombers, the 332nd racked up an impressive combat record. Reportedly, the Luftwaffe awarded the Airmen the nickname, "Schwarze Vogelmenschen," or "Black Birdmen." The Allies called the Airmen "Redtails" or "Redtail Angels," because of the distinctive crimson paint on the vertical stabilizers of the unit's aircraft. Although bomber groups would request Redtail escort when possible, few bomber crew members knew at the time that the Redtails were black.^[citation needed]

A B-25 bomb group, the 477th Bombardment Group (Medium), was forming in the U.S. but completed its training too late to see action. The 99th Fighter Squadron after its return to the United States became part of the 477th, redesignated the 477th Composite Group.

By the end of the war, the Tuskegee Airmen were credited with 109 Luftwaffe aircraft shot down,^[6] a patrol boat run aground by machine-gun fire, and destruction of numerous fuel dumps, trucks and trains. The squadrons of the 332nd FG flew more than 15,000 sorties on 1,500 missions. The unit received recognition through official channels and was awarded a Distinguished Unit Citation for a mission flown 24 March 1945, escorting B-17s to bomb the Daimler-Benz tank factory at Berlin, Germany, an action in which its pilots destroyed three Me-262 jets, all belonging to the Luftwaffe's all-jet Jagdgeschwader 7, in aerial combat that day. The 99th Fighter Squadron in addition received two DUCs, the second after its assignment to the 332nd FG.^[5] The Tuskegee Airmen were awarded several Silver Stars, 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 8 Purple Hearts, 14 Bronze Stars and 744 Air Medals.

In all, 992 pilots were trained in Tuskegee from 1940 to 1946; about 445 deployed overseas, and 150 Airmen lost their lives in training or combat.