

FLYING INTO HISTORY
working title
Fourth Draft

by

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INTRODUCTION

Wars are terrible events in history. Countries fight against each other, and many people may be killed. Movies made about wars are often too violent for young children to watch.

World War II was one of the biggest wars the United States of America has fought. It lasted from 1939 until 1945. Most of the countries of the world were in this war. All of the biggest countries were fighting. The United States, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, Russia, and a lot of smaller countries were the Ally countries, or “Allies.” Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan were the Axis countries. Over 70 million people were killed. That number is more people than live in California and Texas, the two biggest states in our country, combined.

But while many people were killed, and horrible things happened, some good things came out of this war. Many countries are free that would not have been. The world was changed by World War II in some good ways. This book tells the story of one of the good changes that came out of this horrible war.

African-American soldiers in the U. S. military were not given the same respect and opportunity white soldiers got before World War II. Many people did

Groover 2

not believe they could fight as well as the white soldiers could. Though black soldiers had served in combat during every war in which the United States had fought, still many people did not know they had proved themselves under fire. But by World War II there were black newspapers in America. They gave black soldiers the opportunity to show everyone they were equal in ability by printing the news of their victories. Other media sources also told their stories.

All humans deserve some respect. But those who are brave and honorable deserve more than other people do. This book is about 450 pilots and the thousands of ground support soldiers whose courage and commitment to world freedom earned them the highest respect of their country. They are known in United States history as “The Tuskegee Airmen.”

CHAPTER ONE

African-Americans in Aviation Before WWII

The years from 1929 to 1939 were hard times in the United States. Almost all people were suffering hardships caused by “The Great Depression.” In this country, one adult out of four did not have a job. Most people had lost their savings when banks failed. Many lost investments when the Stock Market crashed. Too often parents could not feed their families. Very few people had any extra money to buy nice things.

Black people suffered most because it had not been too long since some of them had been slaves. Slavery was outlawed in 1864, only 75 years earlier. Very few blacks were able to inherit land from their parents and build wealth as some whites had. In many places in this country “segregation” was still practiced. Segregation was the separation of white people from black people, or colored people as blacks were then often called. Many places had laws saying white

children and black children could not go to school together, drink from the same public water fountains, or live in the same neighborhoods. These laws were called "Jim Crow laws." Even if a black family had money to be able to eat in a restaurant, they may not be allowed to do so. White people were usually given better jobs because they had been to better schools.

Today in this country blacks, whites, and all races can go to the same public schools and get good educations. Now we have laws against segregation. Everyone understands segregation is a bad thing and is unfair. But things were different in the 1920's and 1930's before the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's.

The 1920's and 30's were also a time when aviation was causing a lot of excitement in this country. Orville and Wilbur Wright had flown the first controlled airplane at Kitty Hawk, N.C., in 1903. Airplanes were improved very quickly. They were important weapons in the First World War between 1914 and 1918.

Newspapers, radios, and movie news reels told of the tremendous success airplanes had in the First World War (WWI). There were no televisions yet. Dramatic stories of combat aces like Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker captured the imagination of many who would like to fly. Eugene Bullard, a black American, joined the French Air Force and flew with the famous Lafayette Flying Corps. When the United States entered the war and enlisted other Americans who had been pilots for the French, Bullard was turned down because of his race. Still he

had flown twenty combat missions for the French and shot down two German fighters. He continued to fight for the French until the end of the war.

After the war most people still considered flying dangerous. Several famous pilots were killed in crashes. Wiley Post, the first to fly around the world, died in a crash in 1935. Amelia Earhart, one of the first women pilots and the first to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, disappeared when she tried to fly across the Pacific Ocean in 1937 on her attempt to fly around the world. People knew if the best pilots in the world could crash, flying was not a safe activity!

Flying was also expensive. There were very few flight schools. Airplanes, fuel, parts, and training cost lots of money. Thus there were tremendous barriers for anyone who wanted to fly. Money and opportunity were not easy things to get during the Great Depression. Minorities, who had even less money and less opportunity, really faced a challenge if they wanted to fly. And everyone had to find courage to attempt to control these unreliable machines.

Still a few determined black men, and even one determined black woman, sacrificed whatever they had to in order to fly. The first black woman pilot was Elizabeth Coleman, or "Bessie." She was born in Atlanta, Texas, in 1892. Her parents were poor share croppers who had thirteen children. In 1915, when she was 23, she moved to Chicago and became a manicurist in the Chicago White Sox barber shop. Here she heard stories from returning WWI pilots. In her heart she wanted to fly through the skies as they had. She also met some successful black business people. One was the publisher of a black Chicago newspaper, *The Defender*. He encouraged her in her dreams.

Miss Coleman knew it was hard enough for a black man or a white woman to learn to fly in this country. This goal would be near impossible for a black woman, especially a poor one. But she heard there was more opportunity in France. So she studied the French language, saved all her money for five years, and went to France. There she earned her pilot's license and became the first black woman pilot.

She returned to the United States and became a famous "barnstormer," flying in air shows at county fairs across the country. These pioneer pilots gave many Americans their first chance to see airplanes fly and do stunts close up. Many young black men who wanted to fly like her were given hope.

Unfortunately "Queen Bessie," as she was known, added her name to the list of well known pilots killed in crashes in 1926. Her life, courage, and determination inspired her friends, black and white, who started flying schools across the country. They were named "Bessie Coleman Aero Clubs." Lots of black people became pilots thanks to the sacrifice and example of Queen Bessie. The U. S. Post Office issued a stamp with her picture in 1995.

Still the excitement of flying called to many people, both white and black. The newspapers printed stories about war in Europe and the Pacific. Tremendous advances had been made in airplane design since WWI. Many military leaders expected the new airplanes to change the outcome of any future wars. Pilots would be some of the most important soldiers of the future.

White men, hopeful of being pilots, lined up to volunteer for openings in the U. S. Army Air Corps and as U. S. NAVY pilots. Many black men, just as

hopeful, volunteered as well. But there were no military units made up of black pilots, and the military units were still segregated. White soldiers served with white soldiers, and black soldier served with black soldiers, who usually did not get the best assignments. By the end of the war, the Army Air Corps was also training white women pilots. Women were not allowed to fly in combat, but they flew cargo planes in the States.

From 1939 and into 1942 most the leaders of the U. S. Army believed black pilots did not have the mental and physical skills to be successful in combat. There was no real evidence to support this idea. But those people who wanted to believe it was true did not need proof.

Nonetheless, some fair and open minded white people believed black pilots who received good training could serve as successfully as anyone. And these white people began working to give blacks the opportunity they wanted, and needed, to change history.

CHAPTER TWO

The First African-American Military Flight Training

In 1941 Tuskegee Institute was already an important black college in America. But when it was chosen to help train the first black combat pilots, the school wrote a new chapter in history.

Tuskegee Institute was started by Dr. Booker T. Washington in 1881 in southeast Alabama. He was a former slave and wanted to educate other former slaves. Dr. Washington borrowed space from a church to hold classes. The first buildings were built by students. It is now known as Tuskegee University.

Tuskegee Institute's first students were learning to be school teachers. But by World War II the school was training people in agriculture, engineering, and aviation technology. It was one of the few schools where students could receive civilian pilot training. On March 25, 1940, the first pilot trainees took their licensing test. Every one of the students passed. They proved a black school could teach black pilots.

By October 1941 it was becoming clear the United State would be drawn into the war in Europe. More and more combat pilots would be needed. Still the Army refused to train black pilots because they did not want to integrate the training programs for white pilots. Pressure was needed from the U. S. Congress, African-American newspapers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) and the President of the United States.

Tuskegee Institute also had a U. S. Army Reserve Officer Training Corp (R.O.T.C.) program. And the weather in the South made flight training possible all year. These things made it a good choice for becoming the first pilot training base for the Army. So on January 16, 1941 when the U.S. War Department announced they would start a program to train black pilots, Tuskegee Institute was chosen.

The President at that time was Franklin D. Roosevelt. In March, 1941, his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, visited Tuskegee Institute. She asked one of the flight instructors to take her up in his airplane. Newspapers across the country printed the photograph of Mrs. Roosevelt flying with "Chief" Anderson, a black pilot. The fact that the "First Lady" trusted her life to a black pilot impressed a lot of people. Three months after Mrs. Roosevelt's picture at Tuskegee was in the newspapers, on July 19, 1941, the first men to enter the new program arrived.

One of the first pilots to be trained was Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. He was one of the few black graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He had been an R.O.T.C. Instructor at Tuskegee Institute. His father was the first black Brigadier General in the U.S. Army.

Since the Army had not trained any black pilots yet, they had to use white instructors for the new program. Only volunteers were used for instructors because the Army did not want any racist officers to flunk cadets because of their skin color.

On the first day of training, the new white commander of the school told the cadets to look at the men on either side of them because soon they would be “washed out,” or failed from the program. This statement sounded harsh, but was the type of thing said in many elite military training programs. And it was true. Only five of the original thirteen graduated.

The first plane the cadets flew was the Stearman PT-13 “Kaydet.” It was a bright blue and yellow, two seated biplane the Army and Navy used for pilot training until after the war. Most pilots soloed after eight hours of training. But Capt. Davis soloed after only four hours with an instructor.

Conditions at the new Tuskegee Army Air Field were tough. Cadets lived in tents until dormitories could be built. The base was built along old Army rules of segregation. There was a white mess hall (dining facility), and a black one. Many blacks were upset by this continued racism, but others were just glad a black unit had finally been established.

One of the important memories for the cadets was getting to meet George Washington Carver. Professor Carver was a famous professor of agriculture at Tuskegee Institute. He had done a lot of research to find better crops to grow in the South than cotton. Today we still enjoy some of the peanut products this scientist developed.

Another wonderful experience was hearing the Tuskegee Institute Choir sing the old Negro Spirituals which had been popular among the slaves. Some of these songs had been used as secret codes by slaves. When some slaves were planning an escape, they would sing the song, "Steal Away, Steal Away to Jesus," and other blacks would know to help them. If the Underground Railroad was coming through, slaves on one plantation would pass the word to the next plantation by singing, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" when they were in the fields. The line, ". . . coming 'fo to carry me home," gave the message. The cadets from the North enjoyed learning about the history of blacks in the South.

Capt. Davis and the twelve other students knew the country was watching them. Some people did not think any of the black men could succeed. But they all worked hard. And finally, on March 7, 1942, the first five to complete the program graduated. Four were commissioned as Second Lieutenants, and the fifth, Capt. Davis, was made commander of the new squadron.

Col. Noel F. Parrish became the second white base commander in February of 1943. The first thing he did was remove the "White" and "Colored" signs that segregated the base. He closed the white only dining room at the Post Exchange. Col. Parrish told his other white officers he would help them go somewhere else if they did not like the changes. No one requested a transfer.

Over the next four years, 992 pilots would graduate. Of those, 450 served in combat, 66 were killed in action, and 32 became prisoners of war.

CHAPTER THREE

The Tuskegee Airmen Go to War

The U. S. Army Air Force, which became the U. S. Air Force in 1947, was organized in units called groups and squadrons. Usually 26 to 33 pilots plus ground support people made up one squadron. Three squadrons made up one group. The first 26 pilots to graduate from the Tuskegee Army Air Field program made up the 99th Pursuit Squadron (later called a Fighter Squadron). Those cadets who followed were mostly in the 332nd Fighter Group, which was made up of three squadrons: the 100th, 301st, and 302nd Fighter Squadrons.

But it takes more than just pilots to send a fighter aircraft on a mission. Ground support includes mechanics, armor specialists, aerial gunners, radio operators, weather forecasters, supply personnel, medical staff, cooks, and clerical specialists. Many of these people were initially trained in 22 weeks at Chanute Field in Illinois. There wasn't room at Tuskegee AAF for the pilots and the people to train them, much less everyone else. The first group of ground support personnel trained at Chanute, 460 people, arrived at Tuskegee in the early fall of 1941.

The Army was still holding firm to its policy of not integrating units. Since there had been not black combat aircraft units before, there were no experienced black pilots or mechanics. You may have heard the expression, “Experience is the best teacher.” The Tuskegee Airmen had to prepare for war without this benefit. Other squadrons were partly staffed with people who had been in combat before. Some brought years of experience they shared with the freshly trained people. One Army officer estimated that it “took ten years to train a line chief, three years to train a crew chief, and two years for a hangar chief.”¹ The Tuskegee Airmen were given one year. White volunteers were recruited to train and supervised them, but they were replaced as soon as they could train blacks to take over.

The first class of five pilots graduated March 7, 1942. When the fourth class graduated July 3, 1942, the squadron had its minimum 26 pilots. But still they did not go overseas to enter combat until April 15, 1943. During this year the pilots were frustrated. White pilots were finishing training and going straight overseas to replace other pilots who had been killed, captured, or who had completed their tour overseas. Some of the Tuskegee Airmen felt they were being discriminated against. The Army had trained them, but refused to send them to war.

While they waited, their commander was promoted. Capt. B. O. Davis, Jr., was scheduled to become a Major on March 1, 1942. But the Army decided they needed more well-trained officers, so they decided to make every Major who

¹McKissick, Patricia and Frederick. **Red Tail Angels: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II** (1995, Walker Publishing Co.) p. 43.

graduated from the U. S. Military Academy in 1936 a Lieutenant Colonel. Thus the 99th Fighter Squadron's Commanding Officer was now Lt. Col. Davis. To honor the occasion, Lt. Col. Davis' wife named their dog "Major."

To make up for the policy which prevented integrating the black units with combat experienced white personnel, the Army gave the 99th Fighter Squadron more training. When they were finally sent overseas, Lt. Col. Davis said, "No Army Air Force unit had gone into combat better trained or better equipped than the 99th Fighter Squadron."² His pilots typically had 250 hours of flying time. White pilots could be sent into combat after 65 hours of primary training and 75 hours of advanced training.

Finally the day came when the 99th left Tuskegee for the war. Adolph Hitler's Nazi army had been trying to capture the Suez Canal in Northeast Africa. He sent a famous officer, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, to achieve this goal. The Allied forces (United States, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand) had pushed Rommel's troops to the sea in North Africa. The 99th was going to provide air support for the conclusion of these battles.

The ship carrying the pilots and ground crews arrived in the Northwest African country of Morocco on May 1, 1943. For the first time in their lives, most of the black soldiers were in a country where white people were the minority. It was a very exciting experience for both black and white service people.

² McKissick, Patricia and Frederick. **Red Tail Angels: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II** (1995, Walker Publishing Co.) p. 75.

The 99th Squadron was attached to the all white 27th Fighter Group. Lt. Col. Davis said: “The town of Fez was found to be one of the most delightful spots any of us had ever visited. . . . Our relations with the other troop units in the area were excellent, and it was easy to enjoy the free and open customs of this region and forget the hateful attitudes that dominated our lives in the United States.”³

The first missions the 99th flew were easy cone compared to what was to come. The fighters were used to attack targets on the ground like ammunition trucks, warehouses, and farm houses used by the enemy as field headquarters. They flew with larger, slower bombers like B-17s and B-24s to protect them from enemy fighters. They were bombing the islands between North Africa and Sicily. The Army wanted a path cleared for an invasion of that larger island.

It was on one of these missions that Capt. Charles B. Hall became the first Tuskegee Airman to shoot down an enemy airplane on July 2, 1943. He was congratulated in person that same evening by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the commander of Allied forces in North Africa. Gen. Eisenhower said Hall did an outstanding job. Two other famous officers also congratulated Lt. Hall. They were General Carl Spaatz and Colonel James H. Doolittle⁴. Hall considered it a high honor to shake the General’s hand, but he also cherished the ice-cold cola the other pilots gave him to celebrate.

³ McKissick, Patricia and Frederick. **Red Tail Angels: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II** (1995, Walker Publishing Co.) pp. 73-74.

⁴ Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly, **Black Knights: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen** ((2002, Pelican Publishing Company), p. 93.

Unfortunately Capt. Hall's celebration was not all joy. That day was also the day the first Tuskegee Airmen lost their lives in combat. The planes of Lts. Sherman White and James McCullin crashed into the water one mile off the coast of Sicily.

Thanks to the 99th, the smaller islands were captured without having to use ground infantry to invade. These victories were the first time in history airpower alone had completely destroyed the enemy resistance.

After the invasion of Sicily began, Lt. Col Davis was called back to the States. He was being promoted from commander of one squadron, the 99th, to commander of the all black 332nd Fighter Group with three squadrons and a technical support group.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Outstanding Eagles

Lt. Col. Davis returned to the war in Europe on February 3, 1944, with the 332nd Fighter Group. The next month General Ira C. Eaker called Lt. Col. Davis to his office. Gen. Eaker was upset because enemy aircraft were shooting down so many of his bombers. The bombers were big and slow and made easy targets for enemy fighter airplanes. They needed US fighters to fly with them and protect them. But Gen. Eaker said too many white pilots wanted to chase enemy fighters instead of staying with the bombers. As a result, they could lose as many as 25 bombers, each with a crew of 11 men, on a single mission.⁵ In one month he had lost 111.⁶

Lt. Col. Davis promised Gen. Eaker his pilots would follow orders and stay with the bombers. Because they did, the Tuskegee Airmen earned a reputation for never losing a bomber to enemy fighters. Bombers they escorted were still lost to enemy ground fire (“ack-ack” guns and flak) but none to fighter

⁵ Frances, Charles E. **The Tuskegee Airmen**. Branden Publishing Company, Boston. P. 113.

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aircraft. The Tuskegee Airmen became some of the most trusted and respected pilots by the aircrews they protected.

A total of 992 pilots graduated from Tuskegee Army Airfield. Of those, 450 flew in combat. They flew 1,578 missions. An average of ten planes flew on each mission. Most white bomber crews flew 35 missions while fighter pilots flew 50. But the Tuskegee Airmen averaged 70 to 80 missions. One pilot, Walter Palmer, flew 158⁷ and another, Lee Archer, flew 169. This book cannot tell all of the stories of all of the pilots and all of their missions, but will pick two outstanding examples.

Lee A. “Buddy” Archer, Jr., was born September 6, 1919, in New York, N.Y. He graduated from flight training at Tuskegee Army Air Field in July, 1943. After four hours of flying, his instructor pilot told him to land the airplane. The Instructor got out of the plane and said, “I’m never flying with you again!” Cadet Archer thought he had washed out of the program. Then the Instructor said, “Now see if you can fly by yourself.” So, like Capt. Davis before him, he soloed with only four hours of practice instead of the usual eight hours.

Wendell O. Pruitt was from St. Louis, Mo., and graduated from Tuskegee A.A.F. in December of 1942. He sailed to Europe with the 302nd Squadron when they shipped out in 1943. He was tall and handsome and had features like a Native American.

Lt. Archer often flew as Capt. Pruitt’s wingman. Two fighters usually fly together in a formation. The front pilot’s job is to attack the enemy, and the wingman’s job is to fly behind the first plane and protect it. These two pilots

⁷ Ibid., **Black Knights**, p. 158.

were flying together on the day Capt. Pruitt scored his first victory against an enemy pilot.

The 332nd Group has just gotten new P-47 airplanes. The company that built the planes, Republic Aircraft Company, sent instructors to Italy to teach the black pilots the things that were special about these new planes. But when they arrived, they were surprised to find the black pilots had already been flying the planes and teaching themselves. The Instructor was telling the other pilots not to do “slow rolls” close to the ground because the planes were hard to handle. The P-47s were nicknamed “Thunderbolts,” but some pilots called them “flying bath tubs” or “the Jug.” While he was talking, Capt. Pruitt and Lt. Archer returned from the mission where Capt. Pruitt had scored his first victory. As they approached the base runway, Capt. Pruitt began slowly rolling his plane over on its back. Fighter pilots often did things like “victory rolls” to celebrate after winning a battle. It was a thrill to fly so low they could “cut grass with their props.” The Instructor was yelling, “No, you can’t do that!” as Capt. Pruitt was doing it in front of him.⁸

On Oct. 12, 1944, the two pilots were flying together again when they got into a big air battle. Capt. Pruitt had already shot down three enemy fighters that day and was chasing another when his guns jammed. His wingman noticed he wasn’t firing when he had a great opportunity and thought something must be wrong. Lt. Archer pulled his plane closer to Capt. Pruitt so they could exchange hand signals. Capt. Pruitt motioned for Lt. Archer to take the lead. He did and shot down the fighter they were chasing and one more enemy plane.

⁸ Ibid., **Red Tails**, pp. 86-87.

The whole battle lasted only fifteen minutes. Besides the five victories these two pilots scored, the rest of the 302nd Sqdn. scored seven more victories. Lt. Archer said later, “That was one good fight!”⁹

On June 9, 1944, Capt. Pruitt was flying without Lt. Archer. That day they spotted an enemy ship at sea. The warship was the kind known as a destroyer. No fighter airplanes had ever sunk a destroyer before, but Capt. Pruitt and the three other pilots with him attacked anyway. When they returned to base and claimed to have sunk the ship, no one believed them. But when the pictures from the camera on one of the planes were developed, they proved the pilots of the 302nd had sunk the ship. Capt. Pruitt was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross for that mission.

In addition to that medal, Capt. Pruitt was also awarded an Air Medal with six Oak Leaf Clusters (which means he was awarded that medal a total of seven times). He was credited with four combat victories.

After flying seventy combat missions, Capt. Pruitt was sent back to Tuskegee A.A.F. to be instructor. He wanted badly to return to combat and wrote Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the 332nd Fighter Group’s commander, and requested a return to combat. Col. Davis was trying to get Capt. Pruitt back when he heard Capt. Pruitt had been killed in a training accident.

No one knows exactly what happened in Tuskegee on April 20, 1945. It is believed that Capt. Pruitt was teaching a Cadet how to do a slow roll. The Cadet may have panicked and frozen the controls causing the plane to crash. Both men died in the crash.

⁹ Ibid., **Black Knights**, p. 156.

“Buddy” Archer survived World War II and remained in the Army Air Corps. He eventually retired as a Lieutenant Colonel from the U. S. Air Force in 1970. He returned to his old home of New York, N.Y., and became a respected businessman. In war, he broke the color barrier for pilots. In business, he broke the color barrier for executives and became a vice president at a major corporation, General Foods. He had flown 169 combat missions and been awarded the Air Medal with five Oak Leaf Clusters. During the war he had four confirmed combat victories and one unconfirmed victory. After the war the Army continued to research his unconfirmed victory and finally credited him with shooting down a fifth enemy aircraft. If a pilot had five confirmed combat victories he was considered an “Ace.” Thus Lt. Col. Lee Archer was the only ace among the Tuskegee Airmen.¹⁰

Lt. Col. Archer died in New York, N.Y., at the age of 90 years old on January 27, 2010, one year after being among the group of Tuskegee Airmen who had been invited to attend the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

¹⁰ Virginia Byrne, Associated Press. **Pilot considered the only Ace Tuskegee Airman Dies** (Associated Press, Jan. 28, 2010).

CHAPTER FIVE

The Dark Side of War

Wars tend to be glorified by movies and stories. Indeed those who serve honorably in combat deserve honor and glory. But the truth is war is horrible, and it does horrible things to soldier's minds and bodies. Warriors who defend their country in combat often come home with sever injuries from which they may never fully recover. Many come home having lost an arm, a leg, or their eyes overseas. And many come back with no visible wounds, but emotional wounds that are just as crippling. These wounds are sometimes called "Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome" or PTSD. Soldiers suffering from PTSD may not be able to return to the kind of civilian life they had before going to war. Many of the homeless men and women you may see living on the streets were highly qualified military specialists and leaders at one time. But after seeing so much death, and causing so much death, they can no longer act like they used to act. It is a sad thing that our government is unable to do everything they need to help them.

Being killed in combat is also a terrible thing. Families on the other side of the world wait anxiously every day for word that their loved one is safe for one more day. Soldiers die without ever having met their children sometimes.

And killing someone else can be very emotionally upsetting. Even when the other person is the “enemy” and you have been sent there to kill them, it can still be emotionally scarring. One Tuskegee Airman expressed his feelings following a mission: After returning from a mission on which he had shot down an enemy fighter, Louis Purnell thought about the experience:

My first thought was *better him than me*. But then I started thinking seriously about what had happened. Eighty minutes ago that man was alive and healthy, and whole. His parents had raised him just as mine had raised me. He had nothing against me and I had nothing against him, but since our countries were at war, killing was legal. When called to arms, one must defend his country . . . but it all seemed so futile.¹¹

In his book, **The Tuskegee Airmen: The Men who Changed a Nation**, Charles E. Frances, lists all the men who died either in combat, training, or routine missions. It is sad to read over the names of 159 flyers and how they died. Of these, 66 died in combat, and the others were in routine missions or training missions. All of these pilots were expected to be able to fly the next day. Some of the explanations are very simple. “Lieut. Andrew Maples, Jr., Box 403 Orange, Va., Missing over Italy June 26, 1944.” Others give more detail of combat, or of tragic accidents: “Lieut. Oscar D. Hutton, Jr., Chicago, Illinois. Died when his plane was hit by belly tank dropped from another plane while on mission, July 18, 1944.” Flying is always dangerous, even when the enemy is not shooting at you.

Pilots crashed after running out of fuel, having engine failures, and unknown causes in both training and combat missions. Pvt. Edward N. Thompson from Miami Florida, learned on April 15, 1945, that even if you go on

¹¹ Ibid., McKissick, p. 105. Note the full quotation is too graphic for this level reader.

Groover 25

a training mission with one of the best pilots in the Army Air Corps, Capt.

Wendell Pruitt, there is no guarantees that either of you will return alive. Neither did that fateful day.

Some of the pilots who got shot down or had engine problems and were forced to crash or bailout were captured by enemy soldiers. Of the 450 Tuskegee Airmen who flew combat missions, 33 became prisoners of war. On one memorable day,

1.
 - a. POWs Frances 133, BK 157 McCreary 89 msns POW, 159 assisted by Slavs, 161 Oct 44 15 lost or POW, 162 POWs beaten by Hungarians,

A F T E R W O R D

My Father was a Bombardier on B-25s with the 92nd Air Group in England during World War II. He flew many bombing missions over Germany and other targets. The big, slow planes full of explosives were easy targets for faster, more maneuverable enemy fighter planes. Thus there was nothing these bomb crews liked to see more than great numbers of American and British fighters escorting them.

One such fighter unit which flew escorts for bombers was the “Red Tailed Angels” of the 332nd Fighter Group. This unit never lost a fighter they were protecting!

I haven’t been able to find for certain that they ever actually protected my Father. I have matched dates both units were flying, but couldn’t match missions to a certainty. I also know General Ira Eaker flew missions with both units.

I cannot say absolutely that I owe my life to these pilots, but I know that I do to fighter pilots as a whole. Regardless, I think all Americans, and free

Groover 27

Europeans, owe a debt of gratitude to the Tuskegee Airmen. This debt is for me past due in payment.

Further, while I was in the United States Air Force at Scott AFB in 1974 to 1977, I served under a former Tuskegee Airman, General Chappie James. So I do have at least one direct link to this historic unit.

Finally, I gained much of my appreciation for Tuskegee University by teaching at another historically black school, Simmons University Bible College in Louisville, Ky. I still regard my time teaching there and my fellowship with students and other faculty very warmly.

Thus this book is the proud salute of one airman who understands barriers in the military, sacrifice, respect, honor, and patriotism, who wished to give one proud salute, a sign of respect and brotherhood with other people under arms, to the men and the families whose story I will attempt to use to inspire another generation, and of two educators to others.

The Tuskegee Airmen broke down some barriers, but others remain. They set some records, but not all of them. I am sure their spirits will not rest until we finish the work they humbly and honorably began.

Bill Groover

Tallahassee, FL

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