

Tuskegee Airmen

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Tuskegee Airmen
National Historic Site

The Tuskegee Airmen: American Heroes



First class of flight trainees, Tuskegee Institute, 1941.

In spite of adversity and limited opportunities, African-Americans have played a significant role in U.S. military history over the past 300 years. For centuries, they were denied military leadership roles and skilled training because many believed they lacked the talent, expertise, and competence for combat duty. Before 1940, African-Americans were barred from flying for the U.S. military. However, civil rights organizations, the black press, and other social and political events across both oceans would exert pressure resulting in changes and producing the formation of a dazzling all African-American pursuit squadron based in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1941. They became known as the *Tuskegee Airmen*.

The Right to Fly

"Tuskegee Airmen" refers to all who were involved in the "Tuskegee Experiment," the Army Air Corps (Army Air Forces) program to train African-Americans to fly and maintain combat aircraft. The Tuskegee Airmen included 992 pilots and over 10,000 personnel that included navigators, bombardiers, maintenance and support staff, instructors, and all the personnel (both men and women) who kept the planes in the air.

On July 19, 1941, twelve aviation cadets and one student officer, Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., reported to Tuskegee Institute to begin flight training as the first class of African-American pilot candidates in the U.S. military. By November, four of these cadets and Captain Davis had demonstrated the necessary skills, passed the training course, and were transferred



The first graduates of the Advanced Flying School, Tuskegee, AL, 1942.

to Tuskegee Army Air Field to complete their pilot training with the Army Air Corps.

On March 7, 1942, the first class of African-American aviation cadets graduated from Tuskegee Army Air Field. Overcoming enormous social pressures and vast obstacles, these African-American pioneering aviators became the nation's first black military pilots. The successful training of these pilots at Tuskegee coupled with the United States' entry into World War II, led the military to expand its African-American aviation program. Consequently, the Army Air Forces established the 99th Fighter Squadron, the 332nd Fighter Group, and began plans for a segregated medium bomber group known as the 477th Bombardment Group.

Achieving Success

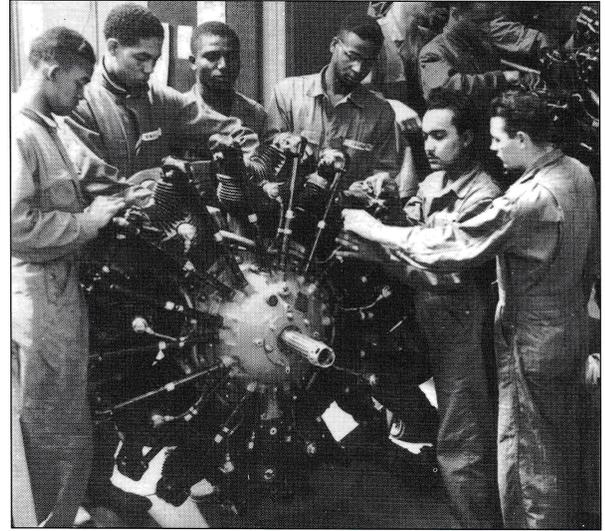
Finally in April 1943, the 99th Fighter Squadron was allowed to put their training to use and sent into combat duty. After combat duty in North Africa they distinguished themselves in Italy and the news of the Tuskegee Airmen's exemplary performance reached the ears of military leaders in the United States. Many who had formerly opposed the group now acknowledged their ability to fly in combat, and included them in more vital missions. More importantly, the Tuskegee Airmen earned the respect of several bomber crews, who began to depend on their skillful air coverage and

dubbed them the Red-tail Angels.

Unlike the 99th Fighter Squadron, the 477th Bombardment Group remained in the United States throughout the war. While the bomber group did not have the opportunity for combat success or receive international recognition like the fighter unit, they staged an important protest for equal rights at Freeman Field, Indiana. This early non-violent protest within the Army Air Forces system was a significant precedent for the later civil rights movement.

The CPT Act

In 1939, the U.S. government offered African-American flight training through the Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) Act. Administered by the Civilian Aeronautics Association (CAA), the Act authorized selected schools to provide CPT primary flight training for pilots in case of a national emergency. The military selected Tuskegee Institute to train pilots because of its commitment to aeronautical training. Tuskegee had the facilities, and engineering and technical instructors, as well as a climate for year round flying. The first students of the Civilian Pilot Training Program completed their instruction in May 1940.



Aviation cadets studying a radial aircraft engine, 1942.

Tuskegee's Moton Air Field

Named in honor of Robert Russa Moton, the second President of Tuskegee Institute, Moton Field was built between 1940 and 1942 with financing from the Julius Rosenwald Fund. Because the facility was an army contract flight school, Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama, provided technical assistance in selecting and mapping the site. Edward C. Miller, an architect, and G.L. Washington, an engineer who served as Director of Mechanical Industries at Tuskegee Institute, designed many of the structures at the airfield. The school also selected Archie A. Alexander, an engineer and contractor to build the airfield, and Alexander began construction on the flight school facilities in June 1941.

Inclement weather caused several building delays, and student laborers and skilled workers from Tuskegee Institute helped finish the field so flight training could begin on time.

Upon completion, Moton Field, also known as the Primary Flying Field, was the only primary flight training facility for African-American pilot candidates in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. Thus, the facility symbolizes the entrance of African-American pilots into the Army Air Corps and the singular role of Tuskegee Institute in providing economic and educational resources to make that entry possible, although on a segregated basis.

Living History: The Tuskegee Airmen Experience

On November 6, 1998, President Clinton approved Public Law 105-355, establishing the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site at Moton Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, to celebrate and interpret the lives and actions of the Tuskegee Airmen who served their country so heroically during World War II.

The National Park Service will restore the U.S. Army Corps flight training facilities which will include an aircraft hangar, control tower, and other buildings associated with the original historic complex. Equipment and fixtures including aircraft, vehicles, signs and fuel pumps will be replaced to bring life back to Moton Field.

Moton Field instilled hope, opportunity and courage into the airmen. It produced

giants who distinguished themselves in battling the enemy overseas and a segregated society at home. The Tuskegee Airmen went on to become some of America's most respected and decorated fighters.

As one of the National Park Service's newer initiatives, the Tuskegee Airmen Experience will provide a vehicle for telling the complete story of the Tuskegee Airmen, including African-American achievements in aviation, and the long struggle for more significant roles in defending their country.

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Proposed Historic Building Complex

