

**Classic American Aircraft - P-51D Mustang
Flown by the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II
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In January 1941 in response to pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Chicago Defender and other African American Newspapers and only one day after an African American named Yancey Williams threatened to sue the Secretary of War because the Army Air Corps would not consider African Americans for Air Corps training, the War Department formed the all-Black 99th Pursuit Squadron of the U.S. Army Air Corps. They were to be trained using single-engine planes at the segregated Army Airfield at Tuskegee, Alabama.

Tuskegee Army Airfield officially opened on July 19, 1941 and the first class graduated in March 1942. [Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.](#) became the squadron's commander.

Initial training was conducted at the Tuskegee Institute's Moton field using civilian aircraft. After the cadets completed their primary training they were sent to Tuskegee Army Air Field for further training on combat aircraft. Later graduates were assigned to the 100th, 301st and 302nd squadrons, which along with the 99th Pursuit Squadron became the 322nd Fighter Group.

Training on twin engine planes began in 1943 to train African Americans as bomber pilots. They became the 477th Bombardment Group, however the war ended before any of these cadets saw action.

Tuskegee graduated 992 pilots of which 450 saw combat action. Over 150 of these African American pilots lost their lives either in combat or in training. The Tuskegee Airmen flew 1,578 combat missions, (more than any other unit in Europe) and over 15,500 sorties. They destroyed 261 enemy aircraft and were the recipients of over 850 medals.

Additionally, African American soldiers were trained for ground crew and aircrew duties; engineers, navigators, bombardiers, gunners, mechanics, and armorers.

The **Tuskegee Airmen** received further training in French Morocco, before their first mission, on June 2, 1943, a strafing attack on Pantelleria Island, an Italian island in the Mediterranean Sea. Later that year the Army activated three more squadrons that, joined in 1944 by the 99th, constituted the 332nd Fighter Group. The 332 Fighter Group was the Army Air Corps' only escort group that did not lose a single bomber to enemy planes.

The Tuskegee Airmen had to overcome not only the German Luftwaffe, but the racism that was endemic to and rampant within the United States military. In fact many of their fellow white soldiers referred to them as the "Spookwaffe" or "Eleanor Roosevelt's niggers."

The 332nd Fighter Group were also known as the "Red Tails" for the red tailpieces on their P-51 Mustangs. There was one group of white pilots and flyers who not only respected the "Red Tails" but were more than happy to see them alongside. These were the bomber crews who knew that the "Red Tails" would get them home safely.

During the spring of 1945 the 332nd Fighter Group took part in an all-out offensive against German occupied countries in eastern Europe including the heavily defended oil fields at Ploesti in Romania. On March 24, 1945 the 332nd took part in the longest flight mission in the history of the Fifteenth Air force; a flight of over 800 miles each way from Italy to Berlin.

They shot down 25 enemy planes in two days alone on March 31st to April 1st.

In March 1945, The 477th Bombardment Group was moved to Freeman Field in Indiana. The white base commander, Colonel Robert Selway had issued a document called Regulation 85-2 which endorsed a strict segregationist policy. On April 5, 1945, African American Pilots led by 2nd Lt. Roger C. Terry and Lt. Marsden Thompson of the 477th Bombardment Group attempted to enter the segregated Officer's Club and on April 9th, Selway ordered them all of the Black officers to sign a statement that they had read and accepted Regulation 85-2. The Black officers refused in an incident which became known as the Freeman Field Mutiny. It was not until August 12, 1995 that the Air Force finally cleared the service records of the Tuskegee Airmen involved in the incident.

I would enthusiastically recommend the book "[*American Patriots*](#)" by Gail Buckley for further reading concerning the Tuskegee Airmen and all of the African American

patriots who served our country so well from the Revolution to the present.

Sources:

[*Encyclopedia Britannica*](#)

[*American Patriots by Gail Buckley*](#)

[*Encyclopedia Africana*](#)

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