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# Attacking Multiple Fronts: The Tuskegee Airmen as Pioneers of Military Integration

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# Attacking Multiple Fronts: The Tuskegee Airmen as Pioneers of Military Integration

## Abstract

Military service has long been associated with citizenship, and blacks have been part of every American war since the founding of this nation. Five thousand fought in the Revolutionary War, 180,000 fought in segregated units during the Civil War, and 380,000 enrolled in World War One. Although black participation increased with each major conflict, only 42,000 of the blacks in World War One belonged to combat units, a result of 20th century racial tensions that turned opinion against the use of black soldiers. Segregation persisted within the military establishment, including military aviation, through World War Two. Within a span of ten years, however, the Army Air Corps moved from having no African Americans among its ranks to become the United States Air Force, boasting tens of thousands of African Americans serving in many specialty areas. This dramatic change was inspired in part by the actions of the people who trained at Tuskegee Army Airfield or who served in the units of the Tuskegee experiment, collectively known as the Tuskegee Airmen. Their demonstrated skill in combat operations, their direct action protests against segregation outside of combat, and their remarkable commitment to preservation of military efficiency and discipline despite prejudices in semi-integrated settings combined to undermine the foundational justifications of military segregation, paving the way for Executive Order 9981 and integration of the Air Force.

## Keywords

Tuskegee Airmen, military history, civil rights

## Disciplines

African American Studies | Military History | United States History

## Comments

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Attacking Multiple Fronts: The Tuskegee Airmen as Pioneers of Military Integration

*“Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship.”* Frederick Douglass

Kaylyn Sawyer

The Modern Black Freedom Struggle in America

Dr. Titus

October 24, 2016

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.

Military service has long been associated with citizenship, and blacks have been part of every American war since the founding of this nation. Five thousand fought in the Revolutionary War, 180,000 fought in segregated units during the Civil War, and 380,000 enrolled in World War One.<sup>1</sup> Although black participation increased with each major conflict, only 42,000 of the blacks in World War One belonged to combat units, a result of 20<sup>th</sup> century racial tensions that turned opinion against the use of black soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Segregation persisted within the military establishment, including military aviation, through World War Two. Within a span of ten years, however, the Army Air Corps moved from having no African Americans among its ranks to become the United States Air Force, boasting tens of thousands of African Americans serving in many specialty areas.<sup>3</sup> This dramatic change was inspired in part by the actions of the people who trained at Tuskegee Army Airfield or who served in the units of the Tuskegee experiment, collectively known as the Tuskegee Airmen.<sup>4</sup> Their demonstrated skill in combat operations, their direct action protests against segregation outside of combat, and their remarkable commitment to preservation of military efficiency and discipline despite prejudices in semi-integrated settings combined to undermine the foundational justifications of military segregation, paving the way for Executive Order 9981 and integration of the Air Force.

Following World War One, the performance of black combat troops was questioned, prompting the Army to conduct various studies to determine how blacks could best be used during wartime. The most influential study was produced by the Army War College in 1925 titled “The Use of Negro Manpower in War.”<sup>5</sup> The conclusions of this study were openly racist. They indicated that blacks had not evolved with the same progress as whites, and that black officers “not only lacked the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Moskos Jr., “The American Dilemma In Uniform: Race in the Armed Forces,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (March 1973) 95.; Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 6.

<sup>2</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII* 6.

<sup>3</sup> Alan L. Gropman, “Tuskegee Airmen,” *Air Force Magazine* (March 1996) 52,53.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Gropman, “In Recognition of Their Unique Record: Tuskegee Airmen Awarded the Congressional Gold Medal,” *Air Power History* (Summer 2007) 49.

<sup>5</sup> Alan L. Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998) 2.

mental capacity to command but courage as well.”<sup>6</sup> As far as the Army was concerned, science supported their belief that the black man was mentally and morally inferior and thereby incapable of providing competent military leadership. Thus, the Army reasoned that continuing segregation was required based on the conclusions of such prejudiced studies. They considered the inferiority of the black soldier who had an “apparent lack of inherent natural mechanical adaptability” as evidence that technical positions, such as those in the Air Corps, would be a poor fit for black servicemen.<sup>7</sup> The War Department’s drafted plan for the utilization of black troops included provisions for blacks to be represented in the Army in proportion to their representation of military age citizens, to serve in segregated units, and to train and live in facilities that were separate from but equivalent to those for white troops.<sup>8</sup>

The Army’s policy of racial segregation was based upon other assumptions as well. Segregation was assumed necessary because it conformed to prevailing social patterns. The War Department insisted it could not “solve national questions relating to the social or economic position of the various racial groups composing our Nation... and that it cannot act... contrary to the will of the majority of the citizens of the nation.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, an Office of War Information survey in 1943 found that 90% of civilian whites and 18% of civilian blacks favored military racial segregation.<sup>10</sup> Commanding General of the U.S. Army Air Forces, Henry H. Arnold, feared an “impossible social problem” if black men were in command of white men.<sup>11</sup> The Army and its Air Corps were not willing to advance integration ahead of public opinion. Another assumption was that military tradition dictated continuing segregation, and that experiments in integration would be detrimental. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall summarized this thinking when he stated that “the

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Army War College, “The Use of Negro Manpower in War,” 1925.

<sup>7</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ulysses Lee, *The United States Army in World War II, Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Officer of the Chief of Military History, 1996) 49, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, *The United States Army in World War II, Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 7.

existing policy of military racial segregation had proven satisfactory over a long period of years,” and that “experiments within the Army in the solution of social problems are fraught with danger to efficiency, discipline, and morale.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the War Department thought changing a traditional system presented grave and unwarranted risks in an environment of war mobilization.<sup>13</sup> The Army’s final justifying assertion was that segregation itself did not constitute discrimination. This doctrine of “separate but equal,” established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), had been affirmed by more recent Supreme Court rulings and would not be struck down until the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954.<sup>14</sup> These assumptions that justified segregation would crumble in the post-war years, prejudices exposed by the experiences and achievements of the Tuskegee Airmen.

As the nation mobilized again for war, segregation would continue to be official Army policy; however, the conditions of WWII were critically different than WWI. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt needed the black vote to be reelected for an unprecedented third term, and Adolph Hitler’s belief in Aryan superiority created a moral dilemma that exposed the hypocrisy of segregation within a nation defending democracy.<sup>15</sup> These realities provided black leaders with a foundation from which to advocate for civil rights. The ineffective and disappointing “close ranks” strategy of WWI which reasoned, “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy” was replaced by the “Double V” campaign of WWII, which advocated for victory over fascism in Europe and Jim Crow at home.<sup>16</sup> Embracing this strategy, the press emphasized, “now is the time *not* to be silent about the breaches of democracy here in our own

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<sup>12</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 16, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Lee, *The United States Army in World War II, Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops*, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Dwight MacDonald, “The Novel Case of Winfred Lynn,” *The Nation* (February 20, 1943). Cites the cases *Gaines v. Canada* (1938), and *Mitchell v. United States* (1941)

<sup>15</sup> Michael F. Higginbotham, “Soldiers for Justice: The Role of the Tuskegee Airmen in the Desegregation of the American Armed Forces,” *William & Mary Bill of Rights Journal* (February 2000) 279.

<sup>16</sup> “Close Ranks,” *The Crisis* (July 1918).

land...we must say that the fight against Hitlerism begins in Washington D.C.”<sup>17</sup> Blacks knew their status would not change if they held a complacent silence, so they instead advocated for equality of opportunity, with one focus being on the Army Air Corps.<sup>18</sup>

The Air Corps was a prime target for blacks. If they could gain access to military aviation, “they would reap immediate and widespread publicity—publicity that would prove that blacks could master the most complex and dangerous machinery.”<sup>19</sup> The first significant opportunity for black aviators in the U.S. military came when the government opened the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) to blacks in the fall of 1939. Graduation from the CPTP program, however, did not provide black pilots the opportunity to enter the Air Corps. The Air Corps stated there was no provision made to create black Air Corps squadrons, so graduates could not be accepted into the ranks because there would be nowhere to place them.<sup>20</sup> Integrating an existing squadron was clearly not considered.

The demands of election politics in 1940 provided an environment ripe for activism. The black press stressed the political power blacks could wield by writing, “There will be a hard-fought Presidential election campaign within the twelve-month and our vote will be solicited.”<sup>21</sup> President Roosevelt, understanding the importance of minority votes, won re-election after taking concrete action. In October, he announced that black aviation units would be formed, and a week prior to the election, African American Colonel Benjamin O. Davis was promoted to the rank of general and Harvard Law School graduate William H. Hastie was appointed as Negro Assistant to the Secretary of War.<sup>22</sup> Civil Rights organizations, their legislative allies, and the black community continued to press the idea that segregation is unacceptable and hypocritical in a democratic nation claiming to fight in defense of freedom. Political advocacy was also accompanied by litigation that pushed for

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<sup>17</sup> “Now is the Time Not to Be Silent,” *The Crisis* (January 1942).

<sup>18</sup> Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts 1939-1953* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969) 28.

<sup>19</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 5-6.

<sup>21</sup> “Fruits of Agitation,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (October 7, 1939) 10.

<sup>22</sup> Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts 1939-1953*, 41,42.

equal opportunity. In January 1941, Howard University student and CPTP graduate, Yancey Williams, filed suit against the War Department and Air Corps, claiming that he was denied admission based on his race.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the Air Corps was hastened by this action, as the formation of the first black combat unit was announced that same month and the lawsuit was dropped.<sup>24</sup> Political expediency, legal action, and national press exposure successfully combined to create an initial and very real opportunity for blacks in the Air Corps.

The Tuskegee experiment, as it was dubbed by the Army Air Corps, was born of political necessity and activist pressure.<sup>25</sup> The formation of the first black squadron was announced at a press conference on January 16, 1941 and was reported in the *New York Times* on January 17. The unit would include 33 pilots and 400 ground crew.<sup>26</sup> The 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron was activated on March 22, 1941.<sup>27</sup> This African-American combat unit would be trained near the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and by the summer of 1941, two fields were under construction: Moton Field for primary training and Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF) for combat training.<sup>28</sup> The first class of students graduated the following March; they were Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., and Lieutenants Lemuel R. Custis, George S. Roberts, Charles De Bow Jr., and Mac Ross.

The establishment of this program in Tuskegee was criticized for its location in a southern town that was openly hostile to blacks.<sup>29</sup> Heavy criticism of the segregated program also came from within the African American community. *The Chicago Defender* referred to it as “the Jim Crow air squadron” while *The Pittsburgh Courier* charged that it “perpetuates ‘the American way’ of racial

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<sup>23</sup> Todd J. Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 37.; “Councils Back Suit of Yancey Williams to Enter Army Air Corps,” *The Crisis* (March 1941).

<sup>24</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> “Air Corps to Form a Negro Squadron: Plan Calls for 33 Officers and Ground Crew of 400,” *The New York Times* (January 17, 1941).

<sup>27</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Alan L. Gropman, “Tuskegee Airmen,” *Air Force Magazine* (March 1996) 53.



segregation.”<sup>30</sup> William Hastie strongly criticized the segregated training program for its uneconomical and nonsensical duplication of facilities.<sup>31</sup> These frustrations would eventually lead to Hastie’s resignation, and he declared “the racial impositions upon Negro personnel at Tuskegee have become so severe and demoralizing that, in my judgment, they jeopardize the entire future of the Negro in combat aviation.”<sup>32</sup> Assistant aide, Truman Gibson, would replace Hastie in the War Department.

Competent and progressive leadership would prove crucial to the Tuskegee experiment and ultimately to the post-war integration of the Air Force. One of the most effective commanders at TAAF was Noel Parrish.<sup>33</sup> Parrish took concrete steps to ease the burden of racial segregation introduced during the prior commander’s tenure.<sup>34</sup> Parrish fostered professional relations with Tuskegee officials and students and assembled a group of professional white officers who were willing to complete their tasks regardless of race. He uniquely understood that segregation was the prime cause of low morale among blacks.<sup>35</sup> After the war, Parrish would be a strong advocate for the integration of the armed forces based on his lived experience at TAAF. Within the squadron, Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., handpicked to be the leader of the first class of airmen at Tuskegee, was largely responsible for their success.<sup>36</sup> As commander of the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron and later the 332<sup>nd</sup>, he emphasized the importance of mission and performance. In his autobiography, Davis states, “My own opinion was that blacks could overcome racist attitudes through achievement, even though those achievements had to take place within the hateful environment of segregation...The coming

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<sup>30</sup> “Negro Flyers,” *The Chicago Defenders* (March 29, 1941).; “Aviation: Perpetuating Segregation,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, (March 29, 1941).

<sup>31</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*; *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 89, 90.; Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 29.; Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> William Alexander Percy, “Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee Flying Units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe During World War II,” *The Journal of Military History* (July 2003) 778.; Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 59.

war represented a golden opportunity for blacks, one that could not be missed, and our future in the Air Corps would be determined by the account we gave of ourselves.”<sup>37</sup>

Training continued, and more positions were open for blacks at TAAF between 1942 and 1943. The 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group was activated in October of 1942, comprised of the 100<sup>th</sup> and the 301<sup>st</sup> and 302<sup>nd</sup> squadrons.<sup>38</sup> The 99<sup>th</sup> squadron reached full strength in the summer of 1942 but had nowhere to go. They continued to fly training missions while waiting for an overseas assignment. Pilot Clarence Jamison recalled, “We were good...we were over-trained...but, hell, nobody seemed to want us.”<sup>39</sup> In the spring of 1943, the 99<sup>th</sup> finally deployed. The men of the 99<sup>th</sup> and later those in the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group were the only African American units in the Army Air Forces to see combat in WWII.<sup>40</sup>

The 99<sup>th</sup> moved from segregated training at Tuskegee to the semi-integrated reality of combat operations. They arrived in North Africa in April of 1943 and were assigned to the Twelfth Air Force. With true segregation in air combat practically impossible, they were attached to a series of white fighter groups for tactical missions.<sup>41</sup> Their first combat sorties occurred while attached to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group, commanded by Colonel William Momyer, on the Mediterranean island of Pantelleria.<sup>42</sup> Leadership, again, would prove crucial. Momyer’s attitude toward the 99<sup>th</sup> was one of professional indifference, and thus they were viewed “as a burden, an attachment the white pilots saw as a handicap rather than a responsibility.”<sup>43</sup> In August, Momyer wrote a combat report criticizing the unsatisfactory and undisciplined performance of the 99<sup>th</sup> in the Pantelleria Campaign and proposed

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<sup>37</sup> Percy, “Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee Flying Units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe During World War II,” *The Journal of Military History*, 779.

<sup>38</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel L. Haulman, “The Tuskegee Airmen in Combat,” *Air Power History* (Fall 2010) 16.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 99.

<sup>43</sup> Percy, “Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee Flying Units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe During World War II,” *The Journal of Military History*, 781.

the squadron be removed from combat.<sup>44</sup> *Time* magazine published an article titled “Experiment Proved?” that stated, “Unofficial reports from the Mediterranean theater have suggested that the top air command was not altogether satisfied with the 99<sup>th</sup>’s performance.”<sup>45</sup> Aware of the sensitive political nature of the experiment, Army Chief of Staff General Marshall requested a study of the issue prior to making a decision. The study contradicted Momyer’s claims and concluded there was “no significant general difference” between the performance of the 99<sup>th</sup> and other fighter units.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Colonel Davis defended the 99<sup>th</sup> before the McCloy Committee, which was established in 1942 to address issues regarding the employment of black troops.<sup>47</sup> Davis’ testimony and the study’s results gave reprieve to the 99<sup>th</sup>, allowing the experiment to continue. The 99<sup>th</sup>, and the future of black aviation, survived its most threatening challenge, one that came from high-ranking officers within Army Air Force itself.<sup>48</sup>

The early combat experience of the 99<sup>th</sup> was characterized by bigotry and segregation. This changed in October 1943 when the 99<sup>th</sup> joined the 79<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group commanded by Colonel Earl Bates. Bates and the 79<sup>th</sup>, unlike the 33<sup>rd</sup>, welcomed the 99<sup>th</sup> and fostered a positive professional relationship with them, engaging in integrated training and combat missions.<sup>49</sup> Even the Executive Director of the NAACP, Walter White, noted the unique attitude of this unit and stated, “The most remarkable development was the total obliteration of consciousness of difference in skin color among both white and black flyers of the 79<sup>th</sup> Group.”<sup>50</sup> Integration with professional leadership yielded effective combat results. The 99<sup>th</sup> performed admirably and earned praise from Chief of the Allied Air Forces General Henry H. Arnold, one of the high command who had earlier questioned the unit’s

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<sup>44</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> “Experiment Proved?,” *Time* (September 20, 1943).

<sup>46</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 103.

<sup>47</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> Percy, “Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee Flying Units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe During World War II,” *The Journal of Military History*, 789.

<sup>50</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 104.

ability to perform.<sup>51</sup> *Times* again reported on the 99<sup>th</sup>, but this time with affirmation: “These victories stamped the final seal of combat excellence on one of the most controversial outfits in the Army, the all-negro 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron...The Air Corps regards its experiment as proven.”<sup>52</sup> The *New York Times* wrote “The Negro pilots of the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron... more than proved their qualifications for aerial combat.”<sup>53</sup> Here, the performance of the 99<sup>th</sup> shattered the myth that blacks lacked the technical ability to operate and maintain aircraft or that their combat performance would be inferior to whites. The relationship between the 99<sup>th</sup> and the 79<sup>th</sup> proved that integration could be effective and beneficial when achieved under competent command leadership and that it neither threatened military efficiency or discipline nor created insurmountable social problems.

The 99<sup>th</sup> was attached to various other fighting groups before finally joining the all-black 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group at Rametelli Air Field.<sup>54</sup> The 332<sup>nd</sup>, now commanded by Colonel Benjamin Davis, Jr., arrived in Europe in January 1944 with a primary mission of escorting heavy bombers for the Fifteenth Air Force. Davis’ leadership was again integral to the success of his unit. He impressed upon the men of the 332<sup>nd</sup> the imperative of their mission to provide fighter escort in protection of bomber crews.<sup>55</sup> Davis understood the success of this mission was crucial not only for the war, but also for the future of black airmen.<sup>56</sup> The 332<sup>nd</sup> performed admirably. They received praise for their diligence, with one bomber pilot recalling, “Once established in their positions, the P-47s never left us” and a co-pilot stating, “Boy, we felt good when the Red Tails were with us.”<sup>57</sup> The black press reported praise from the wing commander of a bomber group as “Your formation flying and escort

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<sup>51</sup> Art Carter, “99<sup>th</sup> Flyers Set Record with 9 Missions in Day: Pilots Strafe Enemy’s Front Lines in Italy,” *Afro-American* (December 25, 1943) 1.

<sup>52</sup> “Sweet Victories,” *Time* (February 14, 1944).

<sup>53</sup> “Negroes Praised As Air Fighters: 2 Aces, Back, Tell How Their Outfit Brought Down 17 Enemy Planes at Front,” *New York Times* (June 25, 1944) 13.

<sup>54</sup> Percy, “Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee Flying Units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe During World War II,” *The Journal of Military History*, 797.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 799.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Percy, “Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee Flying Units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe During World War II,” *The Journal of Military History*, 800, 802.

work is the best we have ever seen.”<sup>58</sup> Again, segregation in actual combat flying was impossible as black fighter pilots provided protective escort to the white crews of bombers. With competent leaders modeling professionalism, the “experiment” again proved that military discipline and efficiency could survive integrated combat missions, and that black airmen were no less technically or mechanically capable than white ones.

The 332<sup>nd</sup> flew its last combat mission in April 1945, having amassed a good combat record that irreparably weakened the assertions underlying the Army’s policy of segregation. Of the 992 pilots that graduated from the Tuskegee program, 450 served in combat and collectively flew more than 15,000 sorties.<sup>59</sup> The War Department revealed that “when compared with other units in Italy,” the men of the 99<sup>th</sup> and 332<sup>nd</sup> “more than held its own in sorties, flying time, combat missions, and number of enemy aircraft destroyed.”<sup>60</sup> The black pilots of the 332<sup>nd</sup> were neither worse nor better than white pilots, ending in roughly the same place as one another. However, when considering that black pilots and ground crew had far less experience in these specialties prior to the war than their white counterparts, it is fair to conclude that the Tuskegee Airmen came farther in less time.<sup>61</sup> The unarguable record of satisfactory combat performance could not be ignored as the country would struggle with military integration after the war.

Air combat was not the only theater of operation in which the Tuskegee Airmen fought for equality. They acted outside of war to fight discrimination, and base recreational facilities were targets since community facilities, particularly in the South, were off limits to blacks. At Tuskegee in August 1944, black officers integrated the PX restaurant by eating lunch in the white section. The atmosphere was tense but not violent, and whites responded by abandoning the PX cafeteria in favor

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<sup>58</sup> Art Carter and Max Johnson, “5 Nazis Shot Down: Five Pilots Share Honors,” *Afro-American* (June 17, 1944) 1.

<sup>59</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 39.

<sup>60</sup> Percy, “Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee Flying Units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe During World War II,” *The Journal of Military History*, 808.

<sup>61</sup> Haulman, “The Tuskegee Airmen in Combat,” *Air Power History*, 19.

of other dining options.<sup>62</sup> Women at Tuskegee, such as Agatha Davis, Benjamin Davis Jr.'s wife, and Lieutenant Nora Green, a nurse at TAAF, also engaged in actions to protest discrimination. Agatha Davis organized “under-the-radar” boycotts of white merchants in town who mistreated blacks, while Lt. Nora Green was beaten and arrested for refusing to leave a whites only bus from Montgomery to Tuskegee.<sup>63</sup> Elsewhere, the men of the 332<sup>nd</sup> were inflamed when they encountered a base theater with segregated sections at Fort Patrick Henry, Virginia. Colonel Davis addressed the issue with the base commander, and the segregating ropes came down giving blacks unrestricted access to the theater.<sup>64</sup> Protests such as these demonstrated the commitment to integration by black military personnel, stressed that segregation was in no way acceptable or even tolerable, and made the armed forces a “critical battleground in the struggle for racial equality.”<sup>65</sup> No protest would demonstrate the resolve of both advocates for and against integration as would that which occurred at Freeman Field.

The frustration of segregation and its detrimental effect on morale and military efficiency was exemplified by the experience of the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group. Activated in January 1944, the black 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group was first located near Detroit at Selfridge Field, Michigan.<sup>66</sup> Training was slow and chaotic, and the group was moved many times, first to Godman Field, Kentucky supposedly to take advantage of “better atmospheric conditions for flying.”<sup>67</sup> The black press questioned this transfer to “inadequate Dixie airfields” implying the move may have been racially motivated to discourage unrest.<sup>68</sup> The 477<sup>th</sup> was again moved in March 1945 to Freeman

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<sup>62</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 82.; Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 85.

<sup>63</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 59, 89.

<sup>64</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 92.

<sup>65</sup> Higginbotham, “Soldiers for Justice: The Role of the Tuskegee Airmen in the Desegregation of the American Armed Forces.” *William & Mary Bill of Rights Journal*, 313, 315.

<sup>66</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 15.; Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 106.

<sup>67</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> “Hit Northern Jim Crow; Airmen Shipped South,” *The Chicago Defender* (July 22, 1944).

Field in Indiana.<sup>69</sup> The 477<sup>th</sup> was plagued by staffing problems, with no existing pool of trained black navigators or bombardiers. Colonel Selway, Commander of the 477<sup>th</sup> and staunch segregationist, staffed the group with white leadership, leaving no opportunity for blacks to earn promotion or to gain command experience.<sup>70</sup> Selway made this racially tense situation worse by creating separate officers' clubs at Freeman Field.<sup>71</sup> One club was reserved for instructors and the other for trainees; however, all whites were designated as instructors while all blacks were labeled trainees.<sup>72</sup>

These frustrations combined to create “an explosive situation” which led to the Freeman Field Mutiny.<sup>73</sup> Negro officers of the 477<sup>th</sup> claimed the right to enter any officers' club under the premise of Army Regulation 210-10, which outlawed segregated facilities.<sup>74</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* brought national attention to the disgust felt by servicemen resulting from the “Freeman Field bias.”<sup>75</sup> In April 5, 1945 black officers acted. Over the next few days, they attempted to enter the white officers club in groups and were arrested. Fifty-eight of the sixty-one arrestees were released, the last three held for using force to enter the club.<sup>76</sup> In response, Selway issued a new regulation and required officers to sign it confirming their understanding and acceptance.<sup>77</sup> 101 of the 422 black officers refused to sign and were arrested.<sup>78</sup> National attention to this mutiny brought pressure from Truman Gibson, the McCloy Committee, the NAACP, and the Chicago Urban League, resulting in General Marshall ordering release of the 101 officers and reassigning Benjamin Davis, Jr. to command the 477<sup>th</sup>.<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, only one of the three black officers tried for using force to enter the

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<sup>69</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 16.

<sup>70</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 126.

<sup>71</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 20.

<sup>72</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 133.

<sup>73</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 20.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 17,19.

<sup>75</sup> Charlie Davis, “Bombardiers Disgusted At Freeman Field Bias,” *The Pittsburgh Courier* (March 31, 1945) 18.

<sup>76</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 22.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*,22-23.

<sup>78</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 135.

<sup>79</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 24-26.

club was found guilty.<sup>80</sup> With leadership focused more on segregated facilities than training, the 477<sup>th</sup> did not achieve combat readiness before the war ended.<sup>81</sup> The War Department strengthened the ban on segregated facilities, including officers' clubs, as outlined in Army Regulation 210-10.<sup>82</sup> The actions of the black officers at Freeman Field in response to oppressive segregation "forced the War Department to define racial segregation as a discriminatory act by definition."<sup>83</sup> With the recognition that segregation was discrimination, another assertion justifying military segregation was shaken.

The Tuskegee Army Air Field closed in early 1946. The 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron and the 332<sup>nd</sup> Group were consolidated to become the 477<sup>th</sup> Composite Group, ultimately re-designated the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Wing.<sup>84</sup> With demobilization, the problems and inefficiencies of segregation within the Army Air Forces became glaring. The all-black Fighter Wing continued to have staffing issues resulting from Jim Crow policies, and they became ineffective.<sup>85</sup> Ongoing race-based restrictions were reported in the *Pittsburgh Courier* as "proof that the U.S. Army is the same biased arm of pre-World War II days."<sup>86</sup> However, the war for democracy abroad had forced debates on the morality of segregation within the armed services, and continuing the racial status quo was clearly unfeasible. General Benjamin Davis effectively captured this in a 1946 speech, "Many of the half-million colored men and women who have served abroad have...experienced a freedom abroad not experienced in their homes here in the U.S. These people will never forget this freedom, and it is not going to be an easy task to compel them to get back into the old pattern."<sup>87</sup> Change was inevitable,

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<sup>80</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 142.

<sup>81</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 17.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>83</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 144.

<sup>84</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 141,144.

<sup>85</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 145.

<sup>86</sup> Ric Roberts, "Same Old Story: Army Brass Limits Duties of Tan Gls," *The Pittsburgh Courier* (February 8, 1947) 5.

<sup>87</sup> Johnnie Johnson, "Gen. Davis Attacks Segregation in Army," *The Pittsburgh Courier* (August 24, 1946) 13.



due in part to the actions and accomplishments of the Tuskegee Airmen within and outside of combat which exposed the burden and inefficiencies of segregated Army Air Force service.

Post war, the Army again studied the use of blacks, including the performance of the Tuskegee Airmen.<sup>88</sup> The memorandum “Participation of Negro Troops in the Postwar Military Establishment” included findings that black airmen “performed creditably” and that “given proper selection of personnel and training, there is no evidence that the Negro cannot do a satisfactory specialized job whether administrative or technical.”<sup>89</sup> However, the recommendation was for segregation to continue. Noel Parrish, the Tuskegee Army Air Field commander, offered a different opinion.<sup>90</sup> Parrish recommended the “employment and treatment of Negroes as individuals which the war requires and which military efficiency demands” and went on to conclude that “segregation is itself inconsistent and contradictory.”<sup>91</sup> The Gillem Board, tasked with developing a new policy for blacks in the armed services, took this information and issued its own report in 1946.<sup>92</sup> Its recommendation for gradual integration of forces during duty hours was largely ignored.<sup>93</sup> Unchanged attitudes within the leadership of the Army Air Forces yielded little movement among military leaders toward integration in the early post-war years.

While the Army made no moves toward integration, civilian political leaders acted differently. Two events in the post-war years hastened the Army Air Forces along the path to integration. First, President Truman appointed the President’s Committee on Civil Rights in December 1946 to study the Federal Government’s authority in civil rights issues, and their findings

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<sup>88</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 145.; Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 150.

<sup>89</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 146.; Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 42.

<sup>90</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 45.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.; Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 147.

<sup>92</sup> Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts 1939-1953*, 150.; Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 59.

<sup>93</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 152.; Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 47.

would lay the groundwork for Executive Order 9981.<sup>94</sup> Second, the independent U.S. Air Force was created in 1947.<sup>95</sup> The President's Committee on Civil Rights issued its landmark report in October 1947, referencing the war as it contradicted earlier arguments against integration by noting, "The war experience brought to our attention a laboratory in which we may prove that the majority and minorities of our population can train and work and fight side by side in cooperation and harmony."<sup>96</sup> Although not mentioned specifically, the black airmen trained in the laboratory of the Tuskegee experiment at TAAF had proven this potential for cooperation and harmonious relations in combat. In presenting the report's recommendations to Congress in February 1948, Truman concluded by saying, "I have instructed the Secretary of Defense to take steps to have the remaining instances of discrimination in the armed services eliminated as rapidly as possible."<sup>97</sup> Integration of all the armed services would happen soon.

The upcoming election would expedite executive action. Activists exerted political pressure which, combined with Russian Cold War propaganda and political discord within the Democratic Party, forced issuance of the anticipated executive order. Executive Order 9981, issued July 26, 1948, called for "equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin."<sup>98</sup> The move was hailed on the front page of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, "President Truman Takes Steps to Abolish Jim Crow In Armed Services."<sup>99</sup> Implementation of this order would be overseen by the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Forces, known as the Fahy Committee.<sup>100</sup> The Federal Government had

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<sup>94</sup> Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts 1939-1953*, 134.

<sup>95</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 152.

<sup>96</sup> "To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights," *Truman Library* (October 1947) 47.

<sup>97</sup> "Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights," *The American Presidency Project: Public Papers of the Presidents* (February 2, 1948).

<sup>98</sup> "Executive Order 9981," *Truman Library* (July 26, 1948).

<sup>99</sup> Lem Graves and P. L. Prattis, "President Truman Takes Steps to Abolish Jim Crow in Armed Services: FEPC in Government Established," *The Pittsburgh Courier* (July 31, 1948).

<sup>100</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons in WWII*, 152.

clearly established its support for a policy of integration, and it would be up to the military to follow along in compliance.

The Army Air Corps, adamantly opposed to integration before the war, became the independent U.S. Air Force and thus one of the first institutions to end segregation after the war.<sup>101</sup> Desegregation happened primarily for practical and operational efficiencies, as Colonel Parrish had identified “segregation prevents standardized personnel procedures.”<sup>102</sup> Having realized the intolerable inefficiency of racial segregation through the experiences of the 99<sup>th</sup>, 332<sup>nd</sup>, and 477<sup>th</sup>, the newly established United States Air Force began planning a policy of integration soon after its inception.<sup>103</sup> Executive Order 9981 set the policy into action. As a new service, the Air Force did not have the intransigent barrier of military tradition to overcome in establishing policies.<sup>104</sup> New leadership also hastened change. The first Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington, was a strong advocate for desegregation based on military efficiency, Cold War ideology, and morality.<sup>105</sup> His service’s policy for integration reached the Secretary of Defense by December 1948 and was presented to the Fahy Committee in January 1949.<sup>106</sup> Speaking clearly in military terms, Secretary Symington explained integration by saying, “The Commander-in-Chief said that this should be done and so we did it.”<sup>107</sup> Unhindered by military tradition, the Air Force nearly completed integration before the Army began.<sup>108</sup> Within six months of the policy’s May 1949 implementation, the Air Force had created 1,301 integrated units with only 59 black units remaining.<sup>109</sup> The airmen of the

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<sup>101</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 148.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts 1939-1953*, 177.

<sup>104</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers: Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 152.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts 1939-1953*, 178.;

Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 11.

<sup>107</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 92.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>109</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 116.

332<sup>nd</sup> were integrated into other squadrons, and the Wing was officially deactivated in June 1949.<sup>110</sup> By June 1952 there were no more all-black units in the Air Force.<sup>111</sup> Since integration, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of blacks serving in the Air Force, from less than five percent in 1949 to twenty-two percent in 2014.<sup>112</sup>

Reform in the Army Air Forces began in 1942 with the first class of five men at Tuskegee Army Air Field. Their actions and those of the 987 pilots who followed them weakened the foundation on which the Army's policy of segregation was based. Their combat successes clearly showed no inherent inferiority for technical matters or complex assignments, and their performance in integrated situations did not reflect an "impossible social problem." They showed that the Army Air Corps was a viable laboratory in which to conduct an experiment. The moral courage displayed by airmen outside of combat through protests belied the contention that segregation was not discrimination. What these men achieved despite entrenched prejudice and bigotry is remarkable. The Congressional Gold Medal award, conferred in 2007, states, "The Tuskegee Airmen inspired revolutionary reform in the Armed Forces, paving the way for full racial integration in the Armed Forces. They overcame the enormous challenges of prejudice and discrimination, succeeding, despite obstacles that threatened failure."<sup>113</sup> They set an example that undermined the foundations of segregation, one that could not be ignored.

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<sup>110</sup> Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964*, 93.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>112</sup> Moskos Jr., "The American Dilemma In Uniform: Race in the Armed Forces," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 97.; *2014 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community* (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 2014) 26. However, only 5.9% are officers indicating there is still progress to be made toward achieving full integration.

<sup>113</sup> "Congressional Gold Medal to the Tuskegee Airmen," *U.S. Government* (April 11, 2006).

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