

## **The Tuskegee Airmen: First African-Americans Trained As Fighter Pilots**

The excellent work of the Tuskegee Airmen during the Second World War led to changes in the American military policy of racial separation. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*  
24 April 2007

VOICE ONE:

I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Barbara Klein with Explorations in VOA Special English. Today, we tell about the Tuskegee Airmen who served in World War Two. They were the first group of

African-Americans ever trained as fighter pilots.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

It was July second, nineteen forty-three. It was foggy near the ground. But the sky was clear. The airplanes flew upward, over the Mediterranean Sea. The water was calm and very blue. The planes were part of the United States Army Air Forces, the Ninety-Ninth Pursuit Squadron. They were responsible for guarding bomber airplanes flying to Italy.



**The first class of Tuskegee cadets**

The pilots tested their guns. When they were satisfied that their weapons were in firing condition, they flew the planes into position to guard the bombers. The bombers began to unload their cargo at the target area. Clouds of smoke rose from the explosions on the ground.

VOICE TWO:

A group of enemy fighter planes immediately appeared. The pilots of the Ninety-Ninth attacked them. In the battle that followed, Lieutenant Charles Hall shot down a German plane. It was the first time a pilot from the Ninety-Ninth defeated an enemy aircraft. He was the first African-American fighter pilot in the United States armed forces to shoot down an enemy plane. Charles Hall and the other pilots of the Ninety-Ninth Pursuit Squadron had come a long way from Tuskegee, Alabama to fight for their country during World War Two.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen forty, African-Americans made up about one and one-half percent of the United States army and navy. But they were not permitted to join the Army Air Forces and fly planes. They had begun campaigning for the right to be accepted into military pilot training during World War One. In nineteen seventeen, African-Americans who requested acceptance into military pilot training were told that black air groups were not being formed at the time.

Civil rights leaders denounced the belief expressed by many white people that black people could not fight. In nineteen thirty-one, Walter White and Robert Moton requested that the War Department accept blacks in the Army Air Corps for pilot training. Mister White was an official of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a civil rights organization. Mister Moton was president of a respected college for black students, the Tuskegee Institute.

The War Department refused. It said the Air Corps chose men with technical experience. The department also said that blacks were not interested in flying. And it said that so many educated white men wanted to enter the Air Corps that many of them had to be refused acceptance.

VOICE TWO:

The War Department's refusal led many to feel that blacks would only be guaranteed acceptance into the Air Corps through legislation by Congress. Black leaders used the United States' preparation for entry into World War Two to pressure Congress. They criticized the unfair treatment of African-Americans in the armed services.

In nineteen thirty-nine, Congress approved a bill guaranteeing blacks the right to be trained as military air pilots. It was proposed that a pilot training camp for blacks be established in Tuskegee, Alabama.

VOICE ONE:

Black leaders praised the signs of change within the military. Yet they continued to work against the military policy of racial separation. The War Department answered these critics by making plans to form several new black fighting groups.

It also promoted a black colonel, Benjamin O. Davis, Senior, to Brigadier General. And the War Department appointed a black judge, William Hastie, as civilian aide on African-American affairs. Judge Hastie was the head of Howard University Law School in Washington, D.C.

Judge Hastie first opposed the establishment of a flight training school in Tuskegee. He wanted blacks to be trained along with whites, not separated from them. The Air Corps said there was no space in other programs. And it said establishing a school at Tuskegee would be the fastest way to start the training. So Judge Hastie withdrew his formal opposition, although he was not satisfied with the plan.

Fred Patterson was the president of the Tuskegee Institute. He also objected to separate training of black pilots. He said it was necessary to denounce forced racial separation. But he finally accepted the program at Tuskegee. He recognized that blacks would be trained separately from whites any place in the United States. He saw Tuskegee as a beginning. At least blacks would now become military pilots.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

The Civilian Pilot Training Program at Tuskegee trained black pilots for difficult and dangerous flying. The first group of African-Americans completed the training as fighter pilots in March, nineteen forty-two.

General Davis's son, Benjamin O. Davis, Junior, was among the first graduates. Blacks finally had won the right to fly with the Army Air Corps, now known as the Army Air Forces. After the war, the Army Air Forces would become the United States Air Force.

Many of the men trained at Tuskegee served in Europe with the Ninety-Ninth Pursuit Squadron. It was organized in October, nineteen forty-two. Its commander was Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Junior.

VOICE ONE:

The Ninety-Ninth was sent to the Mediterranean area in April, nineteen forty-three. The pilots gained fighting experience flying over Sicily and Italy. In June of that year, the fighter pilots successfully attacked the Sicilian island of Pantelleria. It was the first time air power alone completely destroyed all enemy resistance.

The Tuskegee Airmen took part in the most famous battles in Italy. These included the battles over the Monte Cassino monastery between Rome and Naples and the invasions of Salerno and Anzio. At Anzio, in the first months of nineteen forty-four, the pilots of the Ninety-Ninth shot down eighteen enemy airplanes. Later, in July, they shot down thirty-six enemy planes. Their record led the Army Air Forces to decide to use more black pilots in the war.

VOICE TWO:



**Pilots with the 332nd Fighter Group in Ramitelli, Italy**

In September, nineteen forty-three, Colonel Davis became commander of the Three Hundred Thirty-Second Fighter Group. The Ninety-Ninth Squadron became a part of that group. Four hundred fifty black pilots were in the group. They flew more than fifteen thousand five hundred flights in Europe.

The Tuskegee Airmen guarded bomber airplanes. They destroyed more than one hundred enemy airplanes in the air, including German fighter planes. And two of the Tuskegee Airmen each shot down four enemy planes.

VOICE ONE:

Nine hundred ninety-six black pilots were trained at Tuskegee Airfield before World War Two ended. For black Americans during World War Two, the Tuskegee Airmen represented both honor and inequality. Members of the group received almost one thousand military awards during the war. Yet their separation from white troops was a powerful sign of the military's racial policy.

History experts say the Tuskegee airmen proved that black men could fly military airplanes in highly successful combat operations. And the group's success helped end the separate racial policy of the American military. In nineteen forty-eight, President Harry Truman ordered the armed forces to provide equal treatment for black servicemen. The next year, the Air Force announced that black and white airmen no longer would be separated.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

In civilian life, many of the Tuskegee airmen became lawyers, doctors, judges, congressmen and mayors. Their fighting spirit had helped them survive battles and unequal treatment. At home, their spirit helped lead the way to civil rights progress in the United States.

In March, two thousand seven, the United States Congress honored the Tuskegee Airmen at a ceremony in Washington, D.C. The group received the country's highest civilian honor, the Congressional Gold Medal.



**President Bush with Tuskegee airmen Roscoe Brown, center, and Alexander Jefferson during the Congressional Gold Medal ceremony**

President Bush spoke to the surviving airmen and their families. He praised their bravery to fight in the face of the unequal treatment they suffered at home. Retired Army general and former Secretary of State Colin Powell also spoke to the group. He thanked them for leading the way to equal racial treatment in the United States. He said the Tuskegee Airmen showed America that there was nothing a black person could not do.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

This program was written by Nancy Steinbach. It was produced by Mario Ritter. I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Barbara Klein. You can read and listen to this program on our Web site, [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com). Join us again next week for Explorations in VOA Special English.