



TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

FIGHTING TO FLY



Lexile Ranges

Level 1: Less than 810

Level 2: 810-1000L

Level 3: 1010-1200L

Level 4: 1210-1400L

Level
2

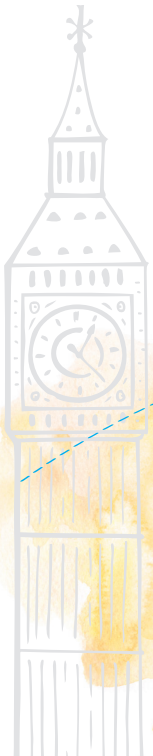
During World War II the U.S. military allowed Black men to fly as pilots. This had never happened before. Many people did not want them to fly because of their skin color. The pilots are known as the Tuskegee Airmen. They were very successful during the war.

Although Black men had served in the U.S. military before World War II, they were not allowed to fly airplanes. Many military leaders did not think Black men were smart enough to fly. This was not true. Black pilots proved they could, flying for France during World War I.

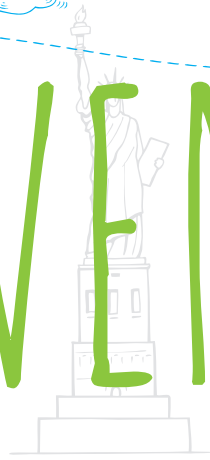
The first class of Black student pilots began training at Tuskegee University in Alabama on July 19, 1941. Nearly 1,000 Black men would learn to fly at Tuskegee between 1941 and 1946.

When America joined World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, everyone was in a hurry to train pilots. This was true at Tuskegee too. But there still were people who did not want Black men to fly in the war.

When the Tuskegee Airmen arrived in Europe, they joined the rest of their Fighter Squadron. A squadron is a group of pilots and airplanes. Their job is to fly missions to find and hurt the enemy. Their job is to drop bombs, shoot at enemy ships on the water, and shoot down enemy aircraft. Guarding bombers from enemy attack was the mission the Tuskegee Airman became most famous for.



ADVENT



In addition to pilots, squadrons included mechanics, cooks, doctors, nurses and many others. The squadrons the Tuskegee Airmen were part of also had Black men and women doing these other jobs. The military had rules that put Black and White people in separate squadrons.

Tuskegee pilots flew four types of airplanes. The most famous airplane they flew was the P-51 Mustang. It was the fastest fighter airplane at the time. To make their airplanes easy to see in the sky, the Tuskegee pilots painted the airplane's tail bright red.

They were known as "Red Tails" during the war.

The story of the Tuskegee Airmen is one of brave heroes who fought for their nation's freedom. Sadly, many in that same nation did not want Black people to be free like everyone else. White people tried to keep Black people separated from them in stores, schools and many other places.

Once, in 1945, many Tuskegee Airmen were arrested in the United States for not agreeing with an Army rule. The rule told them where they could go out to eat on a military base. Since there were officers in the Army who were not happy with using Black pilots, they decided to look at how well the Tuskegee Airmen were doing their jobs. The officers wrote a report in 1945. The report said both good things and bad things about the Tuskegee Airmen.



The report said that compared to White pilots, the Black pilots were shooting down fewer enemy airplanes. But the White pilots were allowing more of the bombers they were supposed to be protecting to be shot down. The report asked that more ways be added for Black men and women to serve the military.

But the report did not ask that everyone in the military be treated the same. The order for that to happen finally came from President Harry S. Truman in 1948. The success of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II helped make that happen.

The Tuskegee Airmen proved they were as good as any other group of pilots during World War II. They flew more than 1,800 missions. This included 351 missions to protect bombers in the sky. They shot down 112 enemy airplanes. Three of those airplanes were German jets.

Of the 996 Tuskegee pilots who finished training, 352 were sent across the Atlantic Ocean to fight in Europe. Of the 352, 84 lost their lives.

Some things written about the Tuskegee Airmen are not true. One example is the claim they never lost a bomber airplane they were trying to protect. The truth is the Tuskegee Airmen lost 27 bombers during seven missions. The good news is this was a very low number. Other fighter groups at the time lost nearly twice as many bombers.

The Tuskegee Airmen helped the U.S. win the war in Europe. Their experience led to the end of separating people of different skin color in the U.S. military.

Their example has inspired others to ignore skin color and treat everyone the same.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Headquarters

300 E. Street, SW
Washington, DC 20546

www.nasa.gov

Educators!
Guide/assessment files
for this reader are at
[https://www.nasa.gov/
stem-content/
tuskegee-airmen/](https://www.nasa.gov/stem-content/tuskegee-airmen/)