

# 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  
3

During World War II the United States Army Air Corps created the first fighter squadron in its history made up of Black military pilots. They became known as the Tuskegee Airmen. Their success in war overseas, and challenges faced at home, helped light the path toward equal rights for all.

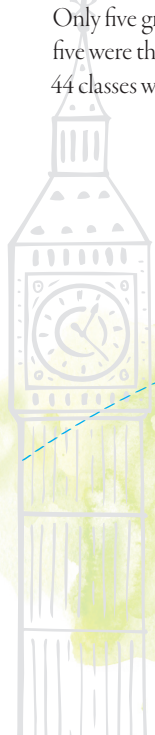
The story of the Tuskegee Airmen began in January 1941, when the U.S. War Department announced plans to send qualified Black men to Alabama for pilot training at Tuskegee University. Many within the Army Air Corps did not agree with the program. Although Black men had served in the U.S. military long before World War II, they were not allowed to fly airplanes. Many military leaders did not think Black men were smart enough to fly, even though Black pilots flew for France during World War I.

The first class of Black student pilots began training at Tuskegee on July 19, 1941. Twelve men were trained to become military pilots. Only five graduated on March 7, 1942. Those five were the first of nearly 1,000 Black men in 44 classes who would receive fighter or bomber

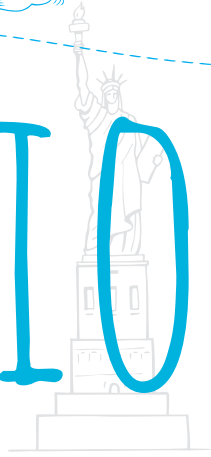
pilot training and graduate between 1941 and 1946 at Tuskegee.

When America entered World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, there was an urgent need to train new pilots to fly fighters and bombers in Europe. The Tuskegee pilots could help fill this need, but many military leaders still did not want to use them. The training at Tuskegee was considered an experiment, and many military leaders were sure the experiment would fail. However, the number of Black military pilots trained at Tuskegee continued to grow. By August 1942, enough had graduated to form a full fighter squadron of 33 pilots.

Fighter and bomber squadrons often had their names changed as they were moved around to different bases. The squadrons and groups in which the Tuskegee Airmen flew were no different. Eventually, all the units in which Tuskegee Airmen flew were gathered together as part of the 332nd Fighter Group. This Group included the 99th, 101st, 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons. Fighter squadrons were responsible for many jobs during the war,



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including dive bombing bridges, shooting at enemy targets on the ground, patrolling coastal areas and escorting bombers to protect them from enemy fighter attack. Squadrons included more than pilots. They included mechanics, cooks, doctors, nurses and others. Most of these duties also were done by Black men and women because the military kept Black and White people segregated from each other.

Tuskegee fighter pilots primarily flew four different types of aircraft. These included the P-39 Airacobra, P-40 Warhawk, P-47 Thunderbolt, and P-51 Mustang. Each of these aircraft had a single propeller. The P-51 Mustang was a favorite among the Tuskegee pilots. When they began flying the P-51 Mustang, they painted the entire tail red. Because of this the Black pilots were known as "Red Tails." The name "Tuskegee Airmen" did not become popular until 1955, when a history of the famous group was published in a book called "The Tuskegee Airmen – The Story of the Negro in the U.S. Air Force."

That story is one of brave heroes who fought for their nation's freedom at a time when many

citizens of that nation fought to keep Black men and women from enjoying the same freedoms they did. Retired Tuskegee Airmen remind people that skin color didn't matter to an enemy who was shooting at you or your buddies. Sadly, skin color was still an issue in America, even as the "Red Tails" were proving they could do the job in Europe. In April 1945, at Freeman Field in Kentucky, 61 Black officers from the 477th Bombardment Group were arrested for trying to enter the base's White's only Officer's Club. More Black officers were arrested a few days later for not agreeing with a rule that said there had to be separate Officer's Clubs for Blacks and Whites.

In November 1945, a War Department committee presented a report to the U.S. Army Chief of Staff in which the record of the 332nd Fighter Group's "Red Tails" was compared with three other P-51 squadrons flying in Europe. The report both praised and criticized the Black pilots. Parts of the report were confusing. For example, while White squadrons shot down more enemy fighters during bomber escort missions, the Black squadrons lost fewer bombers to enemy attack because they did not leave their bombers alone to chase the enemy



fighters. The report also suggested the military find more ways for Black men and women to serve. The report did not ask for complete desegregation of the Army. It wasn't until July 1948 that President Harry S. Truman signed an executive order to desegregate the military, a big moment in civil rights history made possible by the Tuskegee Airmen.

Today, the program to use Black pilots is known as the "Tuskegee Experience." All the men and women who served at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama, or in any of the programs that were part of the "Tuskegee Experience," no matter their sex or skin color, are thought of by the history books as Tuskegee Airmen. Some estimates say that number ranges from 16,000 to 19,000 persons.

The Tuskegee Airmen proved they were as good as any other group of fighter pilots during World War II. Together they flew more than 1,800 missions, including 351 bomber escort missions. They recorded 112 aerial victories in

which enemy aircraft, including three German jets, were shot down. Of the 996 pilots who graduated from the Tuskegee program, 352 were deployed overseas and 84 of those lost their lives.

Many historical accounts, including those by Tuskegee Airmen themselves, claim they never lost a bomber to enemy fire. This is a myth that began during the war when the public wanted good news, and others wanted to highlight the success of the Black pilots. War documents studied by Air Force historians show the Tuskegee Airmen lost 27 bombers during seven missions. Yet that number remains impressive considering the average number of bombers lost by the other six fighter groups of the Fifteenth Air Force was 46.

The Tuskegee Airmen was a successful experiment that helped the U.S. win the war in Europe, and led to the end of racial segregation in the U.S. military. Their example has inspired others to see beyond skin color and seek equality for all.

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