

# The Origin of the Tuskegee Airmen “RED TAIL” Designation



The Red Tail Origin as told by:  
S/Sgt. James Sheppard, DOTA,  
Crew chief 301st FS, 332nd FG  
Eye witness  
September 18, 2012

During the month of June or July 1944 while the 332nd FG was operating the Republic P-47 Fighters (for only one month), the Commander of the Fifteenth USAAF in Italy, General Nathan Twining, issued a written order to every Bomber Group, [21] and every Fighter Group [ 7 ] under his command to paint the nose cowl, and the appenage in accordance with the color-code color that his staff in Bari designed.

The four Squadron Maintenance Officers gathered all of the Crew Chiefs (of which I was one ) to carry out the General's order. Our Group was issued red, the 52nd FG was issued yellow, the 325th was issued a checkerboard black & yellow color, etc. This is the true accounting of the Red Tails. No one else other than the C.O. of the Fifteenth U.S. Army Air Force had that authority.



**SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR 332nd FIGHTER GROUP**  
332nd Fighter Group: Red spinners on all A/C. The entire tail section section is painted red. Trim tabs are painted (red, white, yellow or black) according to respective Squadrons.



As the 332nd Fighter Group was assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force (June 1944), they began flying missions in the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt. About a month later (July 1944), the 332nd Fighter Group began flying combat missions in the North American P-51 Mustang. This is the aircraft they became most commonly associated with.

When the pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group painted the tails of their P-47's red; thus the nickname emerged out of this circumstance and the reference to the "Red Tails" was born. USAAF Bomber crews referred them as the "Red Tail Angels."



**REFERENCES:**  
IRIS: Interrelated Retrieval Information System was started in order to give each document not only a cell number but a unique number for use with the computer finding aid, which we also call IRIS. The IRIS documents are all at the Air Force Historical Research Agency. The cell number is generally used to find the document, and the IRIS number helps distinguish a document from other documents with the same or a similar cell number.  
RSETA: the Ron Spriggs Exhibit of Tuskegee Airmen, founded Dec. 2, 2002.  
DOTA: Documented Original Tuskegee Airmen (1941-1949)  
EPENAGE: A stiffener to the leading edge of a plane's tail - the rudder or stabilizer.

## The Origin of the Tuskegee Airmen RED TAILS Designation ©2012



a Summation of Documented  
Facts Collected by

**R.L. (Ron) Spriggs**  
Exec. Dir. of R.S.E.T.A. and  
Pres. B/Gen. Noel Parrish  
Chapter of T.A.I.  
Nicholasville, Kentucky

Artwork by: Jerry Taliaferro  
www.blackartphotoart.com/BIOg.htm

When the HBO movie, "The Tuskegee Airmen" was released in 1995, I was caught up with (if not off-guard) the line by the character played by Laurence Fishburne as he told his Crew-chief to, "paint the whole tail red". It sounded real and even sensational. But through the years, I have heard other renditions of the origin of the red tail paint. One being the only available color in which to be used. All in all, I have heard four different interpretations from pilots and ground support personnel.

At different times through the years, I have had this discussion with Mr. Craig Huntly, SCPO, USN-ret., a recognized historian of Tuskegee Airmen history. He was the first to advise me that the 332nd FG was assigned the color red as their Group's identifying designation by higher headquarters. His comments were later corroborated by former 332nd FG Crew-chief James Sheppard and further supported by research conducted by Dr. Dan Haulman.

More recently, I was able to obtain a written statement from S/Sgt. James Sheppard, a Crew-chief (an eye witness) assigned to the 301st Fighter Squadron. As a result of his remarks, I passed his comments on to Dr. Dan Haulman, Chief, Organizational Histories Branch Air Force Historical Research Agency.

With the specific dates from S/Sgt. Sheppard, Dr. Haulman was able to research the referenced time frames. While he did not locate specific orders, Dr. Haulman did discover a document pertaining to the detailed directions of the paint schemes for the different units. Airplane identification (tail-painting) was too strategic of a war action, to just be left arbitrarily to the whimsical judgment by ground-support personnel or enthusiastic pilots.

Is this a small point of interest in the grand scheme of Tuskegee Airmen history? I think not, because as a speaker I have been asked why, how and when they became the "Red Tails". I owe it to my audiences (mostly students) a correct response and can't pretend that it did not have an origin.

It is the hope of this writer that one day an official order will surface. Until then, this summary will have to suffice due to the actual testimony of an eye witness - respondent to orders and the supportive instructions located in the U.S. Air Force archives.

R.L. Ron Spriggs  
Executive Director - R.S.E.T.A.  
Pres. B/Gen. Noel F. Parrish Chapter of TAI

NEWBARK, OHIO 31, 2012

The Red Tail Origin as told by:  
Dr. Daniel L. Haulman, PhD  
Chief, Organizational Histories Branch  
Air Force Historical Research Agency  
September 20, 2012

I searched the documents of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, the Fifteenth Air Force, and the 306th Fighter Wing for an order prescribing the aircraft markings of each of the fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force, but the only document I found relating to the subject was a Fifteenth Air Force folder under call number 670.328-1 (IRIS number 247524), under the name "Lead Check List."

The folder contains a smaller folder entitled "Friendly Aircraft Markings," which contains drawn illustrations of how the fighter aircraft of each of the groups will be painted. For the 332nd Fighter Group, there are two small outline illustrations of a P-47, bottom view and side view, showing the tail a solid red. Under the illustration someone has written "Now all P-51's - no more P-47's."

The same page shows illustrations of the markings of the aircraft of the other P-51 fighter groups, including the 31st, 52nd, and 325th. On the back of the page are descriptions of the markings for the four fighter groups.

For the 332nd Fighter Group, here are the words: "332nd Fighter Group: Red spinners on all A/C The entire tail section is painted red. Trim tabs are painted (red, white, yellow, or black) according to respective squadrons."

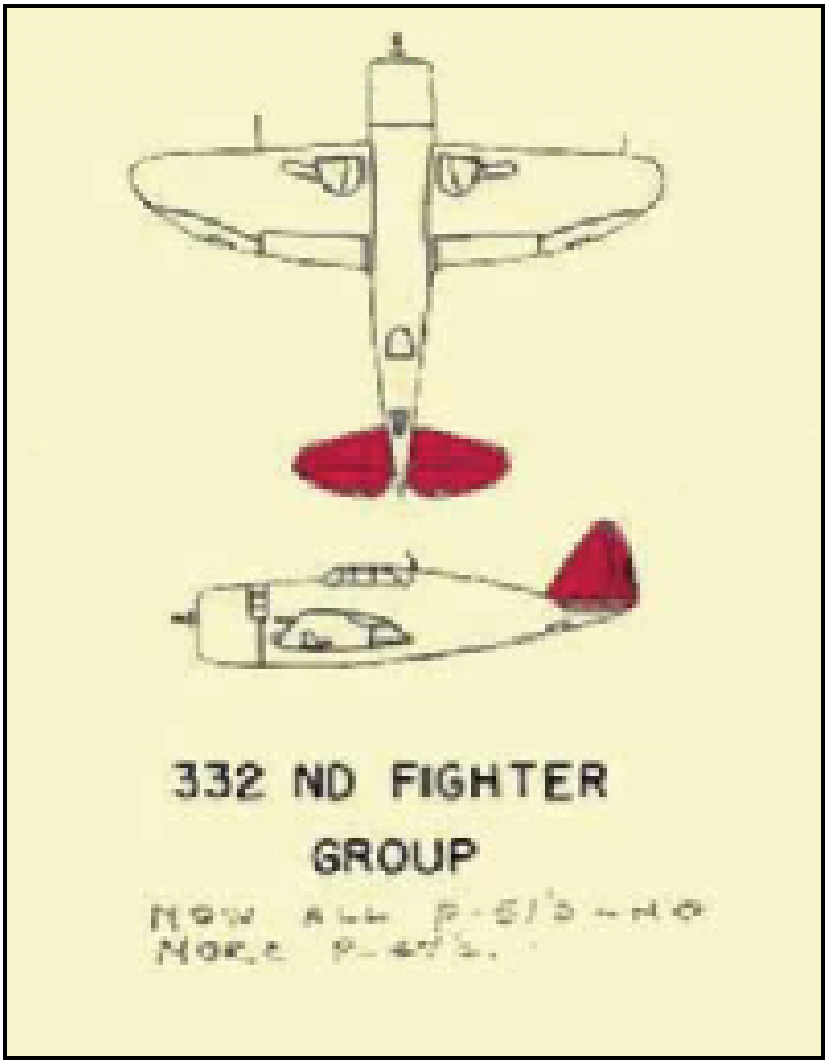
In the same document, there is also a page showing the markings of the tails of the bombers of four groups of the 47th Wing, including the 98th, 376th, 449th, and 450th Bombardment Groups.

"I think this is strong evidence that the colors of the aircraft of all seven fighter escort groups of the Fifteenth Air Force, and at least one wing of B-24 bombers, were prescribed by higher authority, such as the Fifteenth Air Force itself, and not improvised by the groups themselves".

Specific Details Extracted From:  
Friendly Aircraft Markings Document

The Fifteenth Air Force needed to know which color each group was using, not only to avoid duplication, but also to identify groups in formation. The emblems of the groups, however, were designed by the groups themselves, and the squadron emblems were designed by the squadrons.

Sketch Extracted From:  
Friendly Aircraft Markings Document



**Disclaimer:** This outline composes the documented facts (available to this author) about the Tuskegee Airmen designation as Red Tails. It is an attempt to make an impartial statement to approach the variety of past statements, some of which have been included in speeches, news articles, books, etc. Anyone with documented evidence contrary to this summation is welcomed to dispute these findings.  
ronspriggs@aol.com

**FACT: The painted Red Tail has been assumed to have only appeared on the P-51. But, in fact, the P-47s flew by the 332nd adorned the red tail designation also as shown on this P-47D flown by 1Lt Gwynne Peirson, 302 FS, 332 FG, 1944**



HawksCryII@gmail.com