



477TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP



The extraordinary history of combat achievements of the 99th Fighter Squadron, and the 100th, 301st, and 302nd of the 332nd Fighter Group, were not duplicated by the 477th Bombardment Group (M) (Colored)—the last formed of the Tuskegee Airmen flying organizations. Yet the men of the 477th distinguished themselves in a different way. When confronted with bigotry and illegal segregation beyond their capability to endure, they protested and risked jail, or worse, by challenging the direct orders of their commander.

The 477th was activated on January 15, 1944 at Selfridge Army Air Field, Michigan, about 40 miles from Detroit. Because the Army Air Forces did not establish schools to train Blacks in the arts of navigation and bombardment until well into the war, the unit was starved for these crew specialties throughout its history. Pilots for the 477th were in greater supply, either from Tuskegee Army Air Field, or from the Mediterranean Theater. A small but significant number of the aviators in the 477th were veterans of the 99th and the 332nd who had completed their combat tours and were voluntarily returning to the United States to become proficient in the B-25 and to return to combat.

The 477th, moreover, was born under a cloud. Army Air Forces Commanding General Henry H. (Hap) Arnold tried to abort the unit before it was born. It also had the misfortune to be assigned to a numbered Air Force (First Air Force) that was **commanded by an ardent racial segregationist, Major General Frank O. Hunter.** He saw his role throughout the entire history of the 477th, not as one of preparing a unit for combat in a war with great stakes. Rather, he perceived his function as barring the Tuskegee Airmen from any respect from its leaders. Worse, and more importantly, he agreed to the illegal humiliation of the Tuskegee Airmen.

The 477th never entered combat because its commander, Colonel Robert E. Selway, was so bigoted that he drove more than 100 of the Black officers in his unit to mutiny. It was not that the Tuskegee Airmen were not capable of performing the medium bomber mission, it was that Selway, who ran the 477th as a promotion mill for White aviators, would not associate socially with the Blacks in his unit (and by setting this negative example discouraged any other White officer from doing the same), denied the 477th the ideal conditions for training by moving the unit to an undesirable location, and segregated the men illegally. This last act provoked mutinous reaction from the Black aviators.

Selway reserved command of all four squadrons in the 477th for Whites, despite the fact that many of the Black veterans of the combat in Europe had more flying time and combat experience than some of the White commanders. It was not until February that Selway had as many as 200 men in his Group, and this number included the first contingent of Black enlisted technicians. By **May 5, 1944**, 175 officers were assigned to the 477th out of an authorized strength of 290. The most acute shortages were in the navigator and navigator-bombardier specialties.

On that same day **Selway, without any advance notice to his men, ordered the people of the 477th to board trains to move to an unknown location.** Selway, concerned about race tensions in Detroit that had never affected his unit, and despite the pressures of preparing a unit that he would lead into combat, **moved the unit to Godman Army Air Field** near Fort Knox, Kentucky. This base was completely inadequate for the 477th. Selfridge had four times more hanger space than Godman, seven times the acreage, five times the aviation gasoline capacity, more runways, and better flying weather. More to the point, Godman could not house the entire group at one time because it had inadequate apron and hanger space. **It was a bad move and it was done for racial reasons. It seriously delayed the 477th training program and damaged morale.**

Although the 477th was authorized 128 navigators and navigator-bombardiers, by October 14, 1944, more than nine months into the program, only 23 had arrived and only half of the authorized 176 pilots had been assigned. The aircrews constantly repeated routine proficiency missions, but could undertake no combat crew training. This fact lowered morale. The 477th meanwhile had an exceptional safety record.

Their first aircraft accident, a landing mishap during a squall, came after the 14,000 flying hour mark. General Hunter twice commended the unit for its "exceptionally low accident rate." Between mid-October and mid-January 1945, 84 new bombardiers and 60 new pilots arrived, but the unit was not fully manned and the bombardiers were only partly trained. By mid-January, despite the fact that the 477th was not fully manned, combat crew training began. But then the winter weather closed in and flyable hours were reduced by 60 percent. Despite the poor flying weather, the unit in its first year accumulated 17,875 flying hours with two minor accidents, neither attributable to crew error.

Because Godman Field was so inadequate, the 477th fell far behind its training schedule and the Army Air Forces ordered the unit's move to Freeman Army Air Field near Seymour, Indiana in March, 1945. In addition to the disruption caused by a unit move, the town of Seymour was hostile to the Black airmen. Some grocery stores even refused to sell food to spouses of the aviators and many restaurant owners refused them service. At Godman, because there was a sizable Black population in the vicinity, the Tuskegee Airmen and their families had found some social acceptance.

Much more crippling to the progress of the 477th than the unit move or local hostility was the mutiny that occurred in April, 1945. The unit completely collapsed, suffering five fatal flying accidents beginning in mid-April, and was ordered back to inadequate **Godman Army Air Field on April 24, 1945.** The matter appears to be simple: Selway **illegally created dual officers clubs, one for Blacks and the other for Whites;** thus it seems to come down to this issue—who could enter an officers club. We say illegally because Army Regulation 210-10, published in 1940, required that any officers club on a post must be open to any officer on the post.

But the club question was only a symptom of the problem. The 477th was commanded by a bigot and his bigotry infected all of the Whites in his unit. Selway's prejudice so lowered morale that his illegal segregated officers club apparatus was only the match that lit the tinder. On April 5, 1945, and for several days after, many Black officers, despite written orders from Colonel Selway to stay out of his White club, entered it anyway, only to be arrested.

Selway, under orders from Hunter, had established his segregated clubs on the subterfuge that one was for supervisors (all of whom were White), and one for trainees (all of whom were Black). But there were Whites on the post who were indeed trainees, and about 20 Black officers who were truly supervisors, but for officers club purposes were designated trainees. The supervisor/trainee contrivance was blatant because, whenever Selway and Hunter telephoned each other or the Pentagon to talk about the clubs issue, both called the supervisor club the "White officers' club." **By April 7, more than 60 officers were under house arrest in an organization that was supposedly rushing toward combat. All of the first 60 plus officers were released on April 7 except for three officers who had been accused of jostling a superior officer when they entered the club on April 5.**

On April 9, Selway issued a new club regulation designating particular facilities for each group without citing race. All officers in the 477th were listed as trainees, except those who were specifically designated as "Command or Supervisory or Instructor" personnel—and all of these so-called "Instructor Personnel" were White. The club regulation also stated that all members of the two housekeeping squadrons—"E" and "C" specifically—were also trainees. There were few officers in these units and only two other Black officers on the post—a doctor and a chaplain. Had non-trainee Black officers been allowed membership in the club, such an action might have taken the wind out of the mutinous sail. The First Air Force Inspector General reported that "there is a group of approximately 20 Negro officers at Freeman Field who are not assigned to the 477th Bombardment Group or the "Combat Crews Training Squadron" and hence are not trainees per se. This is important because of the allocation of club facilities as between trainees and base personnel," so Selway knew when he wrote his regulation demarcating club facilities, he was creating a subterfuge.

Appended to the main body of Selway's April 9 club regulation was a statement that read: "I certify that I have read and fully understand the above order." On that and the following day, at Hunter's insistence, this club regulation was read and explained to all personnel at Freeman Field. **All Whites and most Black officers signed the statement, but 101 Black officers refused to do so.** A day later they were read the 64th Article of War, the willful disobedience article, and were given another opportunity to sign. The **101 still refused to sign and were arrested, and on April 13 were sent to Godman Field, Kentucky, under arrest.** Selway opened his "White" club only to learn from informants that "approximately 100 percent of the Negro officer personnel" were about to "present themselves en masse at the club." Selway immediately closed the club. Throughout the night roving patrols of Black officers passed by the club to see if it had been reopened. Selway came upon groups of up to 50 of these officers as he toured his base, and, while he found them "entirely orderly in their conduct," they were also surly and uncommunicative.

The Freeman Field 101, however, were not without friends. The Black press took up their story, sympathetic members of Congress called for an investigation, and the NAACP championed their cause. As was common in such matters involving Black troops in the Army, the (John J.) McCloy Committee on Special Troop Policies became deeply involved. On May 5, 1945, the committee received a summary sheet that outlined the Army Air Force position, which, essentially, called for abrogating the language of Army Regulation 210-10 and permitting commanders to segregate racially their officers clubs. The Committee members were critical of the Army Air Forces position and condemned it. On May 18, the Committee published its report acknowledging that Selway's actions were in conflict with the Army Regulation. Later that month McCloy sent a letter to the Secretary of War asking that Selway's non-compliance with "Army Regulations and War Department policies be brought to the attention of the Commanding General, Army Air Forces, for appropriate action."

Soon after that letter arrived in the Secretary's office, the Freeman Field 3—Roger C. Terry, Marsden A. Thompson, and Shirley R. Clinton—were brought to trial. They were ably defended by Theodore M. Berry, President of the Cincinnati Branch of the NAACP. All three were tried for violation of Article of War 64, the willful disobedience article, which carried a maximum penalty of death. The original intent of the Air Corps was to try all the officers who had attempted to enter the club and who had refused to sign the officers club regulation, but only the Freeman Field 3 were tried because Selway's order had been counter to Army Regulations, and the Air Corps Judge Advocate General forced Selway and Hunter to release all those who were held at Godman Army Air Field under arrest.

In court Selway's case quickly collapsed because his club officer, a Major White, testified that "colored officers were not allowed to use the club whether they were base personnel [i.e. supervisors] or not." Terry testified that he was not a trainee, but an officer in the 18th Air Base Unit, and Thompson and Clinton were found innocent because they were also not trainees; that is, they were officers for whom the club, ostensibly, had been provided. The court found that Selway's orders had violated Army Regulation 210-10, which had been introduced as evidence over the objections of the prosecution. Terry, however, was found guilty of shoving the provost marshal and was fined \$150. His was the only conviction.

In late May 1945, General Arnold replaced all White officers in the 477th with Blacks commanded by Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Plans were written to send the unit, now a composite Group of B-25s and fighters located at Godman Field, Kentucky, to the Pacific to fight in the war against Japan. Davis quickly improved the morale and fighting fitness of the Group. **A First Air Force inspection noted the improvement in the Group's effectiveness under Davis, and especially registered the vast increase in the unit's morale. But, before the 477th could deploy, however, the war in the Pacific ended.** The 477th went into the post war era as a bomber and fighter outfit (composite group). It is true that the 477th had never met the foreign enemy, but it had engaged the domestic enemy, foes of racism and bigotry, and had won.

<http://ecctal.org/tuskegee-477th-bombardment-group>



Lineage

Established as the 477th Bombardment Group (Medium) on 13 May 1943

Activated on 1 June 1943 - **Inactivated** on 25 August 1943

Activated on 15 January 1944 – Re-designated 477th Composite Group on 22 June 1945 - **Inactivated** on 1 July 1947

Assignments

Third Air Force, 1 June – 25 August 1943

First Air Force, 15 January 1944

Ninth Air Force, 1 January–1 July 1947

Components

616th Bombardment Squadron: 1 June–25 August 1943; 15 January 1944 – 22 June 1945

617th Bombardment Squadron: 1 June–25 August 1943; 15 April 1944 – 1 July 1947

618th Bombardment Squadron: 1 June–25 August 1943; 15 May 1944 – 8 October 1945

619th Bombardment Squadron: 1 June–25 August 1943; 27 May 1944 – 22 June 1945

99th Fighter Squadron: 22 June 1945 – 1 July 1947

Stations

MacDill Field, Florida, 1 Jun – 25 Aug 1943

Selfridge Field, Michigan, 15 Jan 1944

Godman Field, Kentucky, 6 May 1944

Freeman Field, Indiana, 5 Mar 1945

Godman Field, Kentucky, 26 Apr 1945

Lockbourne Army Air Base, Ohio, 13 Mar 1946 – 1 Jul 1947



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