

# 24 MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN



The members of the 332d Fighter Group and the 99<sup>th</sup>, 100<sup>th</sup>, 301<sup>st</sup>, and 302d Fighter Squadrons during World War II are remembered in part because they were the only African-American pilots who served in combat with the United States armed forces during World War II. In the more than sixty years since World War II, several stories have grown up about the Tuskegee Airmen, some of them true and some of them false. Listed are twenty-four misconceptions about the Tuskegee Airmen that, in light of the historical documentation available at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, and sources at the Air University Library, are not accurate.

## I. THE MISCONCEPTION OF INFERIORITY

A March 30, 1944 War Department report concluded that the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron (flying P-40s) had performed as well as the white P-40 squadrons with which it flew in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. Records do show that, during the period from June 1944 to the end of April 1945, the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group (flying P-51s and with the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron attached) shot down more enemy airplanes than two all-white groups that flew P-38s, but shot down the fewest compared to the three other P-51 units. But, it is reasonable to deduce that the Tuskegee Airmen (332<sup>nd</sup>) shot down fewer enemy aircraft because they were staying closer to the bombers they were escorting. Because, the total number of Fifteenth Air Force bombers shot down by enemy aircraft between June 1944 and May 1945, when the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group was assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force, was 303. The total number of 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group-escorted bombers shot down by enemy aircraft was only 27. Subtracting 27 bombers from the 303 total shot down by enemy aircraft leaves 276 bombers shot down by enemy aircraft while under the escort of one or more of the other six fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force. Dividing 276 by six, one finds that 46 is the average number of bombers shot down by enemy aircraft when those bombers were under the escort of one of the other fighter groups. The Tuskegee Airmen lost only 27, significantly fewer bombers than the average number lost by the other fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force.

## 2. THE MISCONCEPTION OF "NEVER LOST A BOMBER"

Another misconception that developed during the last months of the war is the story that no bomber under escort by the Tuskegee Airmen was ever shot down by enemy aircraft. This misconception originated even before the end of World War II, in the press. A version of the statement first appeared in a March 10, 1945 issue of *Liberty Magazine*, in an article by Roi Ottley, who claimed that the black pilots had not lost a bomber they escorted to enemy aircraft in more than 100 missions. The 332d Fighter Group had actually flown more than 200 missions by then. Two weeks after the Ottley article, on March 24, 1945, another article appeared in the *Chicago Defender*, claiming that in more than 200 missions, the group had not lost a bomber they escorted to enemy aircraft. In reality, bombers under Tuskegee Airmen escort were shot down on seven different days: June 9, 1944; June 13, 1944; July 12, 1944; July 18, 1944; July 20, 1944; August 24, 1944; and March 24, 1945.

## 3. THE MISCONCEPTION OF THE DEPRIVED ACE

Another popular misconception that circulated after World War II is that white officers were determined to prevent any black man in the Army Air Forces from becoming an ace, and therefore reduced the aerial victory credit total of Lee Archer from five to less than five to accomplish their aim. A version of this misconception appears in the Oliver North compilation, *War Stories III* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2005), p. 152, in which Lee Archer is quoted as saying "I figure somebody up the line just wasn't ready for a black guy to be an ace." In the same source, Archer claimed that one of his five victories was reduced to a half, and no one knew who got the other half. Another version of the story is contained in an interview of Lee Archer by Dr. Lisa Bratton conducted on 13 Mar 2001 in New York, NY. Archer claimed that he shot down five enemy airplanes, without specifying the dates, and that one of his victories was cut in half and given to another pilot named Freddie Hutchins, leaving him with 4.5. He also claimed, in the same interview, that the American Fighter Aces Association honored him, implying that the association had named him an ace at last.

In reality, according to the World War II records of the 332d Fighter Group and its squadrons, which were very carefully kept by members of the group, Lee Archer claimed a total of four aerial victories during World War II, and received credit for every claim. Moreover, there is no evidence that Lt. Freddie Hutchins earned any half credit, with the other half credit going to Archer. In fact, Hutchins earned a full credit for shooting down an enemy aircraft on July 26, 1944. The mission report for that day, which lists all the claims from the mission, does not list Archer. The order that awarded the credit to Hutchins on July 26 was issued on August 6, 1944, and it was the same order that awarded a credit to Archer for 18 July 1944.

## 4. THE MISCONCEPTION OF BEING FIRST TO SHOOT DOWN GERMAN JETS

The Tuskegee Airmen were not the first Fifteenth Air Force pilots to shoot down German jets, as is sometimes alleged. Two such pilots, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Eugene P. McGlauffin and 2d Lt. Roy L. Seales, both of the Fifteenth Air Force's 31<sup>st</sup> Fighter Group and 308<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, shared a victory over a Me-262 German jet on 22 December 1944; and Capt. William J. Dillard, also of the Fifteenth Air Force's 31<sup>st</sup> Fighter Group and 308<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, shot down an Me-262 German jet on 22 March 1945. Moreover, on the day three Tuskegee Airmen shot down three German jets over Berlin on March 24, 1945, five other American pilots of the Fifteenth Air Force, on the same mission, with the 31<sup>st</sup> Fighter Group, also shot down German Me-262 jets.

## 5. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN SANK A GERMAN DESTROYER.

In the movie *Red Tails* by George Lucas, a P-51 fighter pilot is depicted as strafing a German destroyer until it explodes, and group members are later shown watching gun camera film of the attack and the explosion, suggesting that a Tuskegee Airman in a red-tailed Mustang sank a destroyer by himself. The 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group narrative mission report for June 25, 1944 notes that eight of the group's pilots flying P47 aircraft strafed a German destroyer, on June 25, 1944, and two of them went around for another pass to do more strafing. The group did not begin flying P-51s in combat until the next month.

It is not likely that gun camera film, activated when the machine guns were fired, also showed the actual sinking of the ship, which would not have been immediate. Moreover, other records show that the only German ship that was attacked at the same place and time was the TA-22, the former World War I Italian destroyer *Giuseppe Missori*, which the Germans had converted into a very large torpedo vessel. The same records show that the ship did not sink on June 25, 1944, but was heavily damaged.

## 6. THE MISCONCEPTION OF THE "GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY"

The 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group was not the only P-51 fighter escort group to fly the Berlin mission. There were three other P-51 groups that also flew the same mission, and they also used the larger fuel tanks to reach the target and get back. Two of the P-51 groups, the 31<sup>st</sup> and the 325<sup>th</sup> Fighter Groups, had an ample supply of the 110-gallon fuel tanks in the latter half of March 1945. Two of the others, the 52<sup>nd</sup> and the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Groups, ran out of the larger tanks in mid-March, 1945, just before the mission. Apparently they had to go to extraordinary lengths to get the fuel tanks they needed. On March 23, 1945, the 55<sup>th</sup> Air Service Squadron of the 380<sup>th</sup> Air Service Group dispatched trucks from the depot at Foggia to the railroad at Chieuti for the larger fuel tanks. The squadron's diary entry for 24 March notes that it received "one trailer load of 110 gal auxiliary tanks for 366<sup>th</sup> Air Service Squadron." The 366<sup>th</sup> Air Service Squadron was based at Ramitelli, Italy, with the 332d Fighter Group, to service its P-51 aircraft. Another 55<sup>th</sup> Air Service Squadron diary entry in March 1945 notes that the squadron also used trucks to deliver 110-gallon fuel tanks from Chieuti to the 52d Fighter Group, which, like the 332d Fighter Group, flew P-51s for the Fifteenth Air Force and which was based near Ramitelli. The larger 110-gallon auxiliary fuel tanks were delivered to Ramitelli by truck, not from the depot at Foggia, where the smaller fuel tanks had been obtained, but from a railroad at Chieuti instead. At least some of the fuel tanks the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group used for the mission came from Chieuti, and from the 55<sup>th</sup> Air Service Squadron, which shared them with the 366<sup>th</sup> Air Service Squadron at Ramitelli. Those tanks were not stolen from a train, but were obtained from a railroad.

## 7. THE MISCONCEPTION OF SUPERIORITY

In the final analysis, whether the Tuskegee Airmen were superior or inferior to the other fighter escort groups with which they served depends on the criteria. The Tuskegee Airmen seemed to be superior because they lost significantly fewer escorted bombers to enemy aircraft than the average fighter group in the Fifteenth Air Force. On the other hand, the Tuskegee Airmen seemed to be inferior because they shot down fewer enemy fighters than any other P-51 fighter group in the Fifteenth Air Force. I prefer to conclude that the Tuskegee Airmen proved, by their exemplary combat performance, not that they were superior or inferior to the white fighter pilots, but that they were equal to them. The issue is not really superiority or inferiority, but equality. Furthermore, each pilot should really be measured as an individual, not part of some artificial class. There were unquestionably some individual black fighter pilots who had superior records than some individual white fighter pilots, and vice versa.

## 8. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN UNITS WERE ALL BLACK

All of the Tuskegee Airmen organizations in combat, including the 99<sup>th</sup>, 100<sup>th</sup>, 301<sup>st</sup>, and 302<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Squadrons and the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group, were virtually all black by the time they deployed overseas, and remained all black until the Air Force was integrated in 1949. However, the Tuskegee Airmen flying organizations were not originally all black, and it would be a mistake to imagine that white officers never belonged to them, or that white officers were invariably opposed to their success. The most famous of the Tuskegee Airmen military organizations were the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, the first black flying unit in the American military; the 332d Fighter Group, the first black fighter group; and the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, the first black bomber group. All of these Tuskegee Airmen military organizations began with both black and white members. The first three commanders of the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron (originally called the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron) were white. They included Captain Harold R. Maddux, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Clyde H. Bynum, and Captain Alonzo S. Ward. The first two commanders of the 332d Fighter Group were white. They included Lt. Col. Sam W. Westbrook and Col. Robert R. Selway. The first commander of the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, after it was activated as a predominantly black group, was white. He was Col. Robert R. Selway (who had earlier commanded the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group). All of these military organizations eventually became virtually all-black, but they did not begin that way.

## 9. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT ALL TUSKEGEE AIRMEN WERE FIGHTER PILOTS WHO FLEW RED-TAILED P-51S TO ESCORT BOMBERS

Before July 1944, the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron flew P-40 fighters on patrol and air-to-ground attack missions against enemy targets on tactical missions for the Twelfth Air Force. During June 1944, the 332d Fighter Group flew P-47 aircraft on bomber escort missions. Before then, the group and its three fighter squadrons flew P-39 aircraft on tactical missions for the Twelfth Air Force, supporting Allied ground forces in Italy. Neither the P-39s nor the P-40s had red tails. Only in July 1944 was the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron assigned to the 332d Fighter Group, and only in that month did the group begin to fly red-tailed P-51s. The group painted the tails of the aircraft red because the Fifteenth Air Force had seven fighter escort groups, including three P-38 and four P-51 groups. All four of the P-51 groups had distinctively-painted tails. The 31<sup>st</sup> Fighter Group had red-striped tails; the 52<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group had yellow tails; the 325<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group had black and yellow checkerboard-patterned tails. The tails of the 332d Fighter Group were painted solid red. The assigned colors for each group helped distinguish it from other groups in large formations flying to, from, and over enemy targets. The various colored tails also helped bomber crews tell which groups were escorting them, and whether distant fighters were friend or foe.

Some of the African-American pilots who trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field during World War II never became fighter pilots at all. They became bomber pilots, and were assigned after their Tuskegee training to the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, which flew twin-engine B-25s. That group never deployed overseas to take part in combat during the war.

## 10. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT AFTER A FIGHT WITH A BLACK PILOT AT TUSKEGEE, ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PERSUADED THE PRESIDENT TO ESTABLISH A BLACK FLYING UNIT IN THE ARMY AIR CORPS

Contrary to a persistent misconception, Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to Tuskegee Institute at the end of March 1941 did not result in her convincing her husband, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to establish a black flying unit in the Army Air Corps. In fact, the decision to establish a black flying unit in the Army Air Corps had been announced by the War Department on January 16, 1941, more than two months before Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to Tuskegee. The announcement included mention of plans to train support personnel for the unit at Chanute Field, Illinois, followed by pilot training at Tuskegee. On March 19, 1941, the War Department constituted the first black flying unit, the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron, and on March 22, the unit was activated at Chanute Field. A week after the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron was activated, Eleanor Roosevelt visited Tuskegee, and was given an airplane ride over Tuskegee. The date was March 29, 1941. The pilot was Charles Anderson, chief instructor who taught civilian pilot training at Tuskegee Institute. The President's wife visited Tuskegee, not to get a black flying squadron started, but because the black flying squadron had been started, and was scheduled to move from Chanute to Tuskegee after its support personnel had been trained.

## 11. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN EARNED 150 DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSSES DURING WORLD WAR II

For many years the Tuskegee Airmen were said to have earned 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses during World War II. Craig Hundt of the Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated's Harry A. Sheppard historical research committee checked all the Fifteenth Air Force general orders that awarded DFCs to Tuskegee Airmen, and found 95 had been awarded. He knew that the Tuskegee Airmen units in combat had also served with the Twelfth Air Force, before joining the Fifteenth Air Force, and that Twelfth Air Force general orders would also probably note additional DFCs awarded to Tuskegee Airmen. However, Hundt found only one Twelfth Air Force general order that awarded a DFC to a Tuskegee Airman. It recognized the aerial victory credit of Charles B. Hall, the first black pilot in military service to shoot down an enemy airplane. He found no other Twelfth Air Force orders that awarded DFCs to Tuskegee Airmen. Tuskegee Airmen who earned other aerial victory credits, while flying with the Twelfth Air Force, earned Air Medals instead of DFCs. The total number of DFCs awarded to Tuskegee Airmen was therefore 96: 95 of which were awarded by Fifteenth Air Force orders, and I awarded by a Twelfth Air Force order. Moreover, one Tuskegee Airman, Captain William A. Campbell, earned two DFCs. Therefore, 95 Tuskegee Airmen earned DFCs, but 96 DFCs were awarded to Tuskegee Airmen.

## 12. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN WERE THE FIRST TO IMPLEMENT A "STICK WITH THE BOMBERS" POLICY

That is not true. The "stick with the bombers" policy had been instituted by Major General Ira Eaker when he was commander of the Eighth Air Force in England, long before the Tuskegee Airmen ever began heavy bomber escort. In January 1944, Eaker moved to the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, where the Tuskegee Airmen were to fly, and took his "stick with the bombers" ideas with him for the Fifteenth Air Force, over which he served as commander of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces.

## 13. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE 332<sup>ND</sup> FIGHTER GROUP WAS THE ONLY ONE TO ESCORT FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE BOMBERS OVER BERLIN

The RED TAILS movie by George Lucas depicts the Berlin mission as if only two fighter groups were assigned to protect the Fifteenth Air Force bombers: the 52<sup>nd</sup> and the 332<sup>nd</sup>. In the movie, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group fails to show up, so the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group stays with the bombers all the way to the target, being the only fighter group to protect the bombers on that mission. Tuskegee Airman Lee Archer, in a 2001 interview, claimed that "the other group was supposed to relieve us got lost and didn't show up and our group decided that they would stay with the bombers." In reality, the Fifteenth Air Force bombers

that raided Berlin that day were protected by no less than five fighter groups, including not only the 52<sup>nd</sup> and 332<sup>nd</sup>, but also three other groups. Four of the fighter groups flew P-51s, and one flew P-38s. All of the five fighter groups flew all the way to Berlin to protect the bombers that day. In fact, whereas the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group shot down 3 enemy jets that attacked the bombers near Berlin that day, the 31<sup>st</sup> Fighter Group shot down 5 in the same air battle.

## 14. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE 99<sup>TH</sup> FIGHTER SQUADRON, UNLIKE THE WHITE FIGHTER SQUADRONS WITH WHICH IT SERVED, AT FIRST FLEW OBSOLETE P-40 AIRPLANES

The Lucas film movie about the Tuskegee Airmen called RED TAILS suggests that the Tuskegee Airmen, when flying their P-40s, were flying obsolete hand-me-down airplanes that the white units no longer flew. The 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron was the Tuskegee Airman unit that flew P-40s in combat. When the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron entered combat from bases first in north Africa, and later Sicily and still later on the mainland of Italy in 1943, it was flying the same kinds of aircraft as the P-40 groups to which it was attached in turn, and the same kinds of aircraft as the P-40 squadrons that were assigned to those same groups. If the P-40 was an obsolete aircraft, then groups to which it was attached, and the fighter squadrons assigned to those groups with which the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron flew, were also flying obsolete aircraft.

## 15. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE TRAINING OF BLACK PILOTS FOR COMBAT WAS AN EXPERIMENT DESIGNED TO FAIL

Many publications about the Tuskegee Airmen claim that the program of training black pilots in the Army Air Forces was an experiment designed to fail, as if the Army Air Forces planned from the start to "wash out" all the pilot trainees before they had a chance to graduate, or that it planned from the start never to allow them to enter combat. The documentation from World War II does not support the claim, although there were many within the service, including some of the leading officers, who resisted the policy of granting black pilots the same opportunities as white ones. President Roosevelt, and the Army Air Forces officers at Moton and Tuskegee Army Air Fields, did not intend the program to fail.

## 16. THE MISCONCEPTION OF THE HIDDEN TROPHY

A popular story claims that when the Air Force held its first gunnery "Top Gun" meet in Las Vegas in 1949, the all-black 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group defeated all the other groups, but because a black group won, the competition was discontinued and the trophy was hidden. Some sixty years later, the trophy was finally discovered, and the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group was recognized for this unique achievement.

In reality, the Air Force's 1949 gunnery meet in Las Vegas was not called "Top Gun," and the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group was not the only fighter group to win. The 332<sup>nd</sup> won the conventional (propeller-driven) aircraft category, while the 4<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group won the jet aircraft category. In 1950, the Air Force held another gunnery meet in Las Vegas, but by then, the all-black 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group had been inactivated. Two other organizations, the 3525<sup>th</sup> Aircraft Gunnery Squadron and the 27<sup>th</sup> Fighter Escort Group, won the 1950 gunnery meet, the first for the jet aircraft category, and the second for the conventional (propeller-driven) aircraft category. The trophy for the 1949 and 1950 gunnery meets included an engraved plate that named the four organizations that won the two meets in the two categories.

The gunnery meets at Las Vegas were discontinued not because a black group had won, but because the Korean War broke out in 1950, and the Air Force needed to deploy its best fighter groups to the Far East to take part in the conflict, which did not end until 1953.

## 17. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE OUTSTANDING WORLD WAR II RECORD OF THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN ALONE CONVINCED PRESIDENT TRUMAN TO DESEGREGATE THE ARMED FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES.

The Tuskegee Airmen's 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group completed its combat missions in Europe, and members of the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group took part in the "Freeman Field Mutiny," in the spring of 1945, but President Truman did not announce his famous Executive Order 9981 (EO 9981) until July 26, 1948, more than three years later. Although the executive order did not mention segregation or desegregation or integration, President Truman noted that his intent was to end segregation in American military forces, which would help fulfill the equal opportunity the executive order overtly promised. According to a chronology on the website of the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, there were several factors that led up to EO 9981. On October 29, 1947, the President's Committee on Civil Rights issued a report, "To Secure These Rights," which called for an end to racial segregation in the armed forces of the United States. On March 27, 1948, twenty African-American organizations meeting in New York issued a "Declaration of Negro Voters," which called for an end to racial segregation in the armed forces. On April 26, 1948, sixteen African-American leaders told Secretary of Defense James V. Forrestal that the armed forces of the United States must be desegregated. On June 26, 1948, A. Philip Randolph announced formation of a "League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation," and three days later he told President Truman that unless he issued an executive order ending racial segregation in the armed forces, African-American youth would resist the draft. Most importantly, 1948 was a presidential election year, and President Truman hoped to appeal to black voters in his reelection campaign.

All of these factors must have influenced Truman's decision, but I believe the record of the Tuskegee Airmen and the many other black military organizations in World War II, such as the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division in Italy, black troops who volunteered for front line duty after the Battle of the Bulge, and the black drivers of the "Red Ball Express," must have also been a factor, not only in Truman's mind, but also in the minds of those who urged him to desegregate the military.

I believe the exemplary record of the Tuskegee Airmen's 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group during World War II contributed to President Truman's decision to desegregate the United States armed forces, since it proved that black men could fly in combat as well as white men. I believe the efforts of members of the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group to desegregate facilities at Freeman Field in 1945 also contributed to the end of racial segregation on military bases, and, ultimately, to the end of racial segregation in the armed forces. However, there were certainly other factors that contributed.

## 18. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT 332<sup>ND</sup> FIGHTER GROUP MEMBERS PAINTED THE TAILS OF THEIR FIGHTER ESCORT AIRCRAFT RED WITHOUT ANY DIRECTION FROM HIGHER AUTHORITY TO DO SO.

A popular story about the Tuskegee Airmen is that one day someone in the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group impulsively decided to paint the tails of the group's escort fighters red so that others would "know who they were" and so that they would get credit for being the best of the fighter escort groups in the combat theater. The story suggests that aircraft of the other fighter escort groups were not painted in any distinctive color, and that the Tuskegee Airmen were the only ones to fly fighters with red tails.

In truth, each of the seven fighter escort groups in the Fifteenth Air Force had its own assigned color marking scheme. By the middle of July 1944, the 306<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing had four P-51 groups, of which the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group was one, and three P-38 groups. The prescribed aircraft markings involved not only the tail but other parts of the aircraft as well, but the tails of the P-51s were the most distinctive.

Once each of the fighter escort group aircraft was painted as assigned, each group could be identified more easily not only by the other fighter groups but also by the bombardment groups and wings whom they would escort. The colors helped the members of the large formations tell friend from foe, and, among friends, which group was which. This was especially important when there were several different bombardment groups and fighter escort groups on the same mission.

## 19. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT ALL BLACK MILITARY PILOT TRAINING DURING WORLD WAR II TOOK PLACE AT TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE

Many articles about the Tuskegee Airmen imply or insinuate that all the black pilots in the American military during World War II received their flying training at Tuskegee Institute. In actuality there were three main phases of military flying training: primary, basic, and advanced. Only the primary phase took place at Tuskegee Institute. Along with other black institutions of higher learning, Tuskegee Institute operated a civilian pilot training program. This was accomplished at the institute's Kennedy Field, south of downtown Tuskegee. That, however, was to train civilian pilots, who were not yet members of the Army Air Corps or the Army Air Forces. There were other places all over the country where black pilots trained, as civilians.

Tuskegee Institute also operated, under contract with the Army Air Forces, a primary flying training school at Moton Field, another facility owned by Tuskegee Institute. The primary phase was for military pilots, but although the cadets were in the military, many of the instructors were civilians. Military officers supervised the overall training at Moton Field, and determined which of the pilots would move on to the basic and advanced phases of military pilot training.

The basic and advanced phases of military pilot training, for the Tuskegee Airmen, took place not at Tuskegee Institute or any of its facilities, but at Tuskegee Army Air Field, which was several miles northwest of Moton Field. Tuskegee Army Air Field was much larger than Moton Field, and was wholly owned and operated by the Army Air Forces. The flying school at Tuskegee Army Air Field was not part of Tuskegee Institute.

## 20. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN WERE THE ONLY FIGHTER PILOTS FOLLOWING THE OFFICIAL POLICY OF "STICKING WITH THE BOMBERS."

When Lt. Gen. Ira Eaker commanded the Eighth Air Force in England, his policy for the fighter escorts of his bombers was to "stick with the bombers." That policy was reflected in a sign in the office of the commander of the VIII Fighter Command, Major General William Kepner. The sign read: "The first duty of the Eighth Air Force fighters is to bring the bombers back alive." Eaker did not invent the policy that fighter pilots escorting bombers would stay with the bombers and not leave them unprotected by going off chasing after enemy fighters. The policy was already defined in Army Air Forces Field Manual 1-15, "Tactics and Technique of Air Fighting," published on 10 April 1942. It directed fighter escort pilots to "carry out their defensive role." Col. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., in his autobiography, mentioned that General Eaker requested the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group to be the bomber escort mission and move to join the Fifteenth Air Force. In the same book, Davis insisted that the mission of his fighters was to "stick with the bombers" in order to prevent them from being shot down. From these sources, it appears that the policy of "sticking with the bombers" prevailed at the time the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group assumed and performed its bomber escort missions.

## 21. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN'S 332<sup>ND</sup> FIGHTER GROUP FLEW MORE DIFFERENT KINDS OF AIRCRAFT IN COMBAT THAN ANY OTHER ARMY AIR FORCES GROUP DURING WORLD WAR II

I am not certain of how this misconception originated, but it appeared at the Enlisted Heritage Hall, a museum at Gunter Annex of Maxwell Air Force Base. A display plaque claimed that the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group, the only Tuskegee Airman group in combat, flew more different kinds of aircraft in combat in World War II than any other group in the Army Air Forces.

## 22. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN BELONGED TO SOME OF THE MOST HIGHLY DECORATED UNITS IN U.S. MILITARY HISTORY

The idea that the Tuskegee Airmen were more highly decorated than the pilots of any other flying unit, even in their theater during World War II, is not supported by the evidence. The honors of the groups and squadrons show that the Tuskegee Airmen organizations, in fact, were less highly decorated than some of the other Army Air Forces flying organizations with which they served during World War II.

## 23. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN NEVER GOT THE RECOGNITION THEY DESERVED

One often reads or hears that the Tuskegee Airmen never got the recognition they deserved. The claim was true at first, when in the first couple of decades after World War II, when most of the unit histories remained classified, overall histories of the war and the role of the Army Air Forces in the war tended to ignore the black units, and not mention the Tuskegee Airmen at all. But the claim is no longer true, and at times the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group and the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron receive more publicity than many of the other squadrons and groups that served with them in the Twelfth and Fifteenth Air Forces.

## 24. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT TUSKEGEE AIRMAN CHARLES MCGEE FLEW MORE COMBAT MISSIONS THAN ANY OTHER PILOT IN THE AIR FORCE

Sometimes one hears or reads the claim that Tuskegee Airman Colonel Charles McGee, who flew combat missions as a fighter pilot not only in World War II, but also in Korea, and Vietnam, compiled a record of more combat missions than any other Air Force pilot. Colonel Charles McGee should be honored for having flown 409 combat missions as a fighter pilot in the Air Force, and for having flown in three wars, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, but the claim that he flew more combat missions than any other USAF pilot, or any other USAF fighter pilot, is false. The claim that he flew more combat missions than any other USAF fighter pilot in three wars is also false.

**CONCLUSION** Whoever dispenses with the misconceptions that have come to circulate around the Tuskegee Airmen in the many decades since World War II emerges with a greater appreciation for what they actually accomplished. If they did not demonstrate that they were far superior to the members of the six non-black fighter escort groups of the Fifteenth Air Force with which they served, they certainly demonstrated that they were not inferior to them, either. Moreover, they began at a line farther back, overcoming many more obstacles on the way to combat. The Tuskegee Airmen proved that they were equal to the other fighter pilots with whom they served heroically during World War II. Their exemplary performance contributed to the fact that all of the military services, the Air Force was the first to integrate, in 1949.

Summaries and Excerpts from a paper written by Daniel L. Haulman, PhD Chief, Organizational Histories Branch Air Force Historical Research Agency

