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The Tuskegee Airmen: African-American Heroes of World War II

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Asya Adkins of Seffner, an eighth grader at Burnett Middle School, was one of two first place winners in the Junior Division, Florida History Essay Competition sponsored by the Hillsborough County School System and the Tampa Bay History Center.

First Place Winning Essay
Junior Division

Asya Adkins

The story of the Tuskegee Airmen sheds light on the role of African-Americans in the military, an aspect of American history that has been forgotten or marginalized in many textbooks. Today it is unthinkable that until the end of World War II African-Americans were not allowed to serve in the United States Air Force, but in fact they were not. The Tuskegee Airmen showed commitment and proved that they could serve in the military despite prejudice and other struggles they faced on their way to honor. The success of the Tuskegee Airmen caused a major reaction in the United States of America.

Many Negro-Americans from all over the country began their journey to Tuskegee Institute where they would be trained to fly planes and perhaps go to war to fight in combat missions. As the cadets made their way to Alabama, they realized this was no easy task. Like the first person to greet them, their first commanding officer, Captain Noel F. Parrish, stated, “Your future good or bad will depend largely on how determined you are not to give satisfaction to those who would like to see you fail.”

As for other people not in the military, just getting the news that the Armed Forces was conducting an experiment by training Negro-Americans to fly planes, they became outraged. As a result, the government kept careful tabs on them and how they were being trained.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was a strong supporter of Negro-American aviators. She took a plane ride with Chief Anderson at Tuskegee against her Secret Service bodyguards’ wishes. Her bodyguards didn’t want her to fly with him because he was Negro-American, which they thought would increase the chances for an accident. First Lady Roosevelt also loaned the college $175,000 to construct Moton Field, Tuskegee Institute’s CPTP [Civilian Pilot Training Program] training field. This field was used to train the Tuskegee Airmen.

President Roosevelt was also a big help when he found out that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) planned a “March on Washington,” to protest against discrimination in government hiring. Around the same time, in June 1941, labor leader A. Philip Randolph called for [a new civil rights strategy, a massive,] 100,000 Negro-Americans to march on Washington to protest against discrimination in the Armed Forces and the defense industry. To avoid a confrontation at a time when the nation was preparing for war, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, forbidding racial discrimination in government hiring.
Several Tuskegee aviation cadets, maintenance personnel, and instructors stand beside a PT-17 biplane trainer at Tuskegee Army Air Field. (Courtesy the Col. Roosevelt J. Lewis Collection at Moton Field, Tuskegee National Historic Site, Ala., www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/tuskegee)

and training programs. In an address, the President said, “I do hereby reaffirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in the defense industries or in the government because of race, creed, color, or national origin, and I do hereby declare that it is the duty of the employees and of the labor organization in furtherance of said policy and of this order, to provide for full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin.”

In August 1941, the cadets that passed basic training at Tuskegee became the 99th [Pursuit] Squadron. They spent three months just training and perfecting their skills in case they did get called to war, but the McCloy Committee was trying everything to stop them from going. [The Army’s plans for employing and training black troops during World War II were largely based on the testimonies of World War I commanders of black troops gathered for testimony at the Army War College. General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army, directed a study be made of Negroes and flying, assigning review of the issue to the War Department’s permanent Committee on Negro Troop Policies. The committee was headed by John J. McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War. - ed.] The McCloy Committee claimed that Negroes had smaller blood vessels which stopped blood from getting to the brain. This would cause blackouts, which they said could make the Negro lose control of the airplane. The McCloy Committee came to this conclusion about their blood vessels from other Negroes dying in basic training, but some saw it differently.

Now the Army was looking for a place to send the squadron. Originally the Air Corps had planned to send them to Liberia to fight the Germans on the African front, but by the fall of 1942 the Allies were winning in Africa. Then the Air Corps decided to send the squadron to India and Burma. For some reason this idea was abandoned. Then the Allies began making plans to move from North Africa to Sicily. The Allies decided to deploy large numbers of troops to the Sicily campaign. The 99th was to be one of those
units. But exactly when and where had yet to be decided. By early 1943, officials in Washington were starting to ask why the 99th had still not gone into combat nearly seven months after finishing basic training. 5

Finally, in April 1943, over a year after graduation, word of moving was announced. Captain Parrish said, “You are fighting men now. You have made the team.” Then he restated, “Your future good or bad will depend largely on how determined you are not to give satisfaction to those who would like to see you fail.” 6

On April 2nd, the 99th climbed aboard a train that would take them to New York where they would board a troop ship. Hundreds of well-wishers came to the tiny Tuskegee train station to say good-bye. 7 As they chanted:

Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!
The fighting Ninety-ninth
We are the heroes of the night
To hell the Axis might
Rat-tat! Rat-tat-tat!
Round and planes we go
When we fly, the Ninety-ninth
This is how it go. 8

As the new pilots made their way to Morocco, Africa, they thought they were leaving racial discrimination behind. Little did they know that the worst was yet to come. When they got there they discovered they were to be on an all-Negro base and that wasn’t all. For a month they trained for combat, but never actually went. They only practiced dogfights with the fighters of the 27th. 9

It took two months to get assigned to a mission. In early June 1943 the 99th pilots went into combat. Their first mission was to strafe the Italian peninsula of Pantelleria. Each day for a week planes went out, strafing and sometimes dive-bombing gun positions identified by their intelligence officer. Not a single enemy fighter opposed them. They said it seemed more like training practice than warfare. 10 They participated in a few more petty missions, but finally got a taste of real combat on June 9th.

The squadron went on an escort mission to Pantelleria. 11 All the planes of the 99th returned safely. The pilots had passed the test for that day. They learned that a person could be trained to fly a plane and shoot guns, but only combat could teach true attack skills.

During another mission, two of the 99th Tuskegee Airmen demolished a German destroyer, earning them a Soldier’s Medal. In America, the McCloy Committee was still keeping tabs on them, writing a report that stressed that three of the Squadron’s two-hundred men had died, capitalizing on the dead and ignoring the positive.

Back in Sicily the role of the 99th was now to escort bombers on a mission over Sicily. On July 2nd, during a bomber escort mission over southwest Sicily, 99th pilot Lieutenant Charles Hall spotted a group of enemy fighters following the bombers just after their bomb drop. 12 He moved into the space between the bombers and the enemy fighters, turned on the German formation and began firing.

He saw his bullets enter one of the planes, which rolled sideways. He saw it crash in a cloud of dust confirming that he had indeed shot it down. Hall put his plane into a victory roll as he flew over his base. Everyone on the ground knew that the 99th had shot down an enemy plane, the first for the squadron. The men cheered and flashed “V” for victory as Hall landed. 13 They went on to do the same thing from July until the end of August.

Even with the success, the commander of the 99th wrote negative reports, and at each level of command more negative comments seemed to be added. By the time reports made it to the McCloy Committee, they were presented with reports from the highest levels of the Air Force, stating criticisms like, “The 99th was not aggressive, did not have the needed stamina and could not fight as a team.” 14 It was recommended that all Negro squadrons be assigned to non-combat roles. 15 Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. went back to the United States to help train the 302nd, 100th, and the 301st fighter groups, also in Tuskegee. The report eventually came to him. On October 16, Davis was ordered to testify before the McCloy Committee.

In his testimony, Davis pointed out that the 99th Fighter Squadron lacked combat experience. In the first days of combat, there certainly had been mistakes made due to inexperience, but these mistakes were quickly corrected and the reports said nothing about the improvements that had been made. Addressing the question of stamina, Davis pointed out that the 99th had
operated continuously for two months without receiving replacement pilots. During that time, the pilots often flew three to six missions a day, every day.

The government [disagreed with the negative reports] and decided [to reject the recommendation] that all Negro squadrons be assigned to non-combat roles. The following day, the Tuskegee Airmen were assigned to Italy to fight with the 79th and patrol the assault beaches at Anzio, preventing the enemy from bringing in more troops.

More squadrons went to war. The 100th, 301st and the 302nd Squadrons all joined and became the 332nd fighting group which even included the 99th. They arrived in Italy in early February 1944. Their first mission was to patrol Italy's western coast, protecting convoys and the Anzio harbor.

For three months the squadron saw little or no action and enemy planes were sighted only three times. The pilots soon found out that their P-39s were too slow to catch the Germans. But a new assignment and faster planes were in the future for the 332nd because General Ira Eaker, commander of the 15th Air Force, had a problem.

The General had been sending bombers to destroy German supply lines and factory centers in Northern France and Germany. Because the bombers had no escort fighters, many were being lost to the enemy fighters. Eaker was unable to get enough fighter commanders to agree to fly escort for the bombers. Some commanders argued that because the fighter planes could not carry enough fuel to escort the bombers all the way to the targets, they would be unable to protect them in the most dangerous areas, those near the target. When Eaker ordered the fighter planes equipped with extra fuel tanks, pilots refused to fly with them, claiming the heavy tanks affected the plane's maneuverability.

In a meeting, Eaker described his problem to Lieutenant Colonel Davis, noting that he had lost 114 men during one mission in February. Eaker needed fighter pilots willing to provide close protection to the bombers even if it meant not scoring personal victories. Davis knew a great opportunity when he saw one. His pilots would be flying in the offensive part of the war, supporting the attack on the enemy. They would be over enemy territory, taking the war to them and thereby making history.

Davis and Eaker agreed that the 332nd would be equipped with P-47 Thunderbolts, which could fly as high and as fast as the German fighters.

When Davis told his squadron, they were upset. They would have to protect someone who didn't believe in them and they hated the idea that they couldn't chase after the enemy planes without orders. Davis made it clear that if they left the bombers unprotected while trying to be heroes there would be consequences.

The squadrons would be flying missions over Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Yugoslavia, south and east of Germany, France, Spain and northern Italy. The 332nd flew its first important mission as part of the 15th Air Force on June 9th, 1943, three days after D-Day. This mission was to escort B-17 and the B-24 bombers sent to destroy factories in Munich, Germany. The 332nd led by Colonel Davis rendezvoused with the bombers taking care to maintain altitudes and formation that would enable them to protect both the B-17s and B-24s, which were flying at two different altitudes.

As they neared Munich, Colonel Davis was alerted to two enemy planes approaching the bombers from the rear and ordered the 302nd squadron to “Go get them!” At that point two enemy planes flew through Davis' formation. Some of the 332nd turned on the invaders. In the battle that followed five enemy planes were shot down. The bombers accomplished their mission and not a single bomber was lost. On their return to the base a message from the commander of one of the bombers said, “Your formation flying and escort is the best we've ever seen.” Colonel Davis received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his leadership of the mission. He said, “They must be angels, not losing one bomber. It's skills or a miracle. You must be the Red Tail Angels” (considering their planes' tails were red). The name stuck.

During July, the Red Tails flew many bomber escort missions to oil refineries, weapons and tank factories, and airfields. They shot down 39 enemy fighter planes and scored 39 aerial victories. They also helped the Allies by bombing the major Nazi Ploesti Oil Complex in Romania.

In August the 332nd continued its bomber escort missions to enemy oil fields. The war was now moving north and the
Twenty Tuskegee Airmen posing in front of a plane. The signatures of 11 airmen are inscribed on the original photograph. (Official U.S. Army Air Corp Training Command photograph. Courtesy of Tuskegee National Historic Site, www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/tuskegee)

Allied needed southern French ports as entry points for troops and supplies. They did succeed in their plan. By the end of August 332nd planes attacked three airfields destroying 22 planes and damaging 83 planes in Romania. They destroyed 83 enemy planes out of 150 in Yugoslavia, and 36 more in Czechoslovakia. Also in September the pilots of the 332nd became known as skilled bomber escorts, and it was discovered that the Germans were manufacturing a new kind of plane, powered by a jet engine. They could fly much faster than a propeller driven plane and could fly practically straight up.

The Allied considered the jet planes a great threat to the fighters and so began new bombing missions. Air Force commanders called for renewed efforts to bomb enemy aircraft factories. Despite their efforts, the Allies couldn't stop the German's production of jets. The Germans continued to manufacture the planes in camouflaged locations in caves and forests. The Allies began to spot them on December 9th during a bomber escort mission and the new planes performed just as they feared they would.

During most of January 1945 the 332nd was weathered-in by rain and snow. The squadron only flew eleven missions. In early March, Colonel Davis got a surprising and disappointing communication from Headquarters. The 302nd squadron was to be considered inactive and disbanded, though he was not told why. Later that same month, on the 24th, a flight of fifty Red Tails escorted bombers on a mission to bomb a tank factory in Berlin. This mission was the longest ever made by the fighters of the 15th Air Force, a 1,600 mile round trip.

The long flight meant that the fighters had to be equipped with tanks that would hold an extra 100 gallons of fuel. These were not available on their base, so they had to order them from another base. As
the Red Tails arrived over Berlin, they were stunned by the destruction below. A few battered anti-aircraft towers struggled to defend what was left of the once beautiful city. Though covered with wreckage and rubble, the tank factory continued to turn out Panzer tanks, so the bombers destroyed the factory.

As they left the target area, the Red Tails engaged twenty-five of the feared German jet planes. When the jets attacked the bombers, a group of Red Tails went after them. The P-51s turned swiftly from side to side as the jets pursued them causing the jets to speed ahead of the Allies’ guns. Then the Red Tails had the jets right in front of them and fired. The P-51s shot three jets down and damaged several more. Lt. Lee “Buddy” Archer, a member of the 302nd Squadron, is remembered as “one of the best.” He shot down the first jet planes of the war.

In April there were only a few targets left. The Germans surrendered on May 6, 1945. By July the 332nd was on its way home. From June 1943, when the 99th went into combat, until May 1945 when the war in Europe ended, African-Americans had built an incredible record for themselves. They never lost a single bomber [under escort], and no other fighter group has even accomplished that. Out of 1,578 missions, they destroyed 111 aerial aircraft, 150 ground aircraft, sixteen barges and boats, 58 box cars, three gun emplacements, one destroyer, fifteen horse-drawn vehicles, 57 locomotives, six motor transports, two oil and ammunition dumps, three power transformers, and one radar installation. They damaged 25 aerial aircraft, 123 ground aircraft, 23 buildings and factories, 24 barges and boats, 100 horse-drawn vehicles, 69 locomotives, 81 motor transports, 561 box cars, two power transformers, eight radar installations and seven tanks on flat cars. This is an incredible record.

The Airmen won a great deal of medals for their bravery while fighting in World War II. They earned one Legion of Merit, one Silver Star, two Soldier’s Medals, eight Purple Hearts, 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, fourteen Bronze Stars and 744 Air Medals and Clusters. For all of these accomplishments, three years later, in 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which ended segregation in various military branches of the United States of America.

Today there are many museums and statues honoring the Tuskegee Airmen and displaying exhibits of their bravery and courage. These exhibits show that African-Americans can serve in the military combat roles despite prejudice and the other struggles they faced. They showed their abilities to the people who believed in them, but most of all, they showed those that thought they were incapable that this was no impossible task. They showed the War [Department] of the United States that African-Americans could contribute to the efforts of fighting for freedom.

ENDNOTES

1. Frederick and Patricia McKissack, Red Tail Angels, the Story of the Tuskegee Airmen (New York: Walker, 1995), 3.
2. Jacqueline Harris, The Tuskegee Airmen Black Heroes of World War II (Parsippany: Dillon Press, 1996.), 45. This is a diary from one of the Tuskegee Airmen.
4. Ibid., 49-50.
5. Harris, The Tuskegee Airmen, 34.
6. History Channel, television program, Black History Month, Feb. 2002. Interview with three Tuskegee Airmen about their thoughts.

7. Harris, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, 46
8. Harris, *The Tuskegee Airmen*, 42.
9. Ibid., 50.
10. Ibid., 51.
11. Ibid., 52.
12. Ibid., 55.
13. Ibid., 55.
14. Ibid., 56.
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30. Ibid.

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• Deborah Gillian Straub, ed., *African-American Reference Library: African-American Voices*, 2 vols. (Detroit: Gale Group, 1996) This source gives information about who they were and where they were from.

• Margery Berube, ed., *Webster’s II College Dictionary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1995.) This source defines general military terms and criteria to earn a military medal.