



Above: In August 1943, Maj. George S. "Spanky" Roberts, a graduate of the first class at Tuskegee Army Air Field, assumed command of the Ninety-ninth Fighter Squadron, which skillfully supported Allied landings at Anzio, January-February, 1944. Right: A primary task of the 332d Fighter Group was to protect Allied bombers, like this B-24, in bombing raids over central and eastern Europe. (U.S. Air Force, courtesy NASM, SI).



Sgt. James T. Moseley, a pianist and composer from Muskogee, Oklahoma, organized an orchestra for dances, The Imperial Kings of Rhyme. Young ladies from local colleges—including Talladega College, Atlanta University, Spelman College, and, of course, Tuskegee Institute—were invited to attend, with transportation and overnight quarters provided.

On Sunday afternoons, Capt. Ulysses G. Lee, a former literature professor at Howard University, and Cpl. John Lucas, a classical pianist, presented musical programs, often featuring hymns and spirituals by the post chapel choir and marches by the post band. The big attraction on Sunday was "Blue Hour," a popular dance at the Officers' Club, where officers and their women friends frequently took turns as vocalists.

GRADUATION DAY at Tuskegee saw the convergence of people from all over the country to witness the culmination of months of intensive training. Louis G. Hill, who had completed flight training and was stationed at Tuskegee Army Air Field, remembered seeing "carts and wagons loaded with families and scrubbed children [who] lined the roadway to Tuskegee Institute. . . . It takes a lot of courage to succeed," he recalled over forty-five years later, and "it takes hope to fulfill dreams. Out of all the things that happened in my life, that scene, backgrounded by the red Alabama clay, stands out boldly in my mind."

The guest speaker at the first graduating class of pilots at Tuskegee, Gen. George E. Stratemeyer, re-



By 1940 Tuskegee had the largest black pilot training program in the country.

ment of their young lives and a time of great pride for their families. After graduation, Lt. Charles DeBow took the train to Indianapolis with his parents. Years later, he recalled their trip:

I'll never forget that ride. Dad kept finding an excuse to walk down the aisle to the water cooler. On the way back to our seats, he'd find an excuse to start a conversation with somebody, anybody, about "those colored boys who just got their wings at Tuskegee." Then he'd add casually, as if it had just occurred to him, "You know, there's one of them right here in this car." Then he'd point to me and say, "There. That's Lieutenant DeBow. He's my boy."

OVERSEAS ASSIGNMENTS did not come as easily or as quickly as the Tuskegee airmen hoped. In fact, all African American soldiers had trouble getting assignments abroad because the War Department was unable to agree on a policy for overseas use of black soldiers. Some Tuskegee pilots and ground crews began to call themselves the "Lonely Eagles," a variation of Charles Lindbergh's nickname, "Lone Eagle." As late as the fall of 1944, the *Pittsburgh Courier* was still bemoaning the War Department's racial discrimination and noting the frustration of blacks at Tuskegee. As an example, the *Courier* mentioned Capt. Algernon Sparks, a black warrant and finance officer who claimed to have been "passed over by a white lieutenant with less experience." After one year at Tuskegee, Captain Sparks summed up his contributions to the war effort in the title of a song: "Time on My Hands." He also noted a vast improvement in his Ping-Pong game. Like many other men at Tuskegee, the frustrated Sparks whiled away the hours at a time when the army was in dire need of men on the battlefield.

EVENTUALLY, of course, many African American troops did see action overseas. In early 1942, the War Department sent black troops to Liberia to defend against the threat of a Nazi advance and to build an air base. The War Department also considered using

mind the graduates that their training was viewed as an experiment, not only by the War Department but by American society. Failure meant letting themselves down, of course, but worse, it meant dashing the hopes of all African Americans:

You will furnish the nuclei of the Ninety-ninth and One Hundredth Pursuit Squadrons. Future graduates of this school will look to you as old pilots. They will be influenced profoundly by examples which you set. Therefore, it will be of the highest importance that your service be of a character worthy of emulation by younger officers.

Despite the responsibilities and challenges handed them that day, it was for many the most exciting mo-