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IN THE EARLY MORNING hours of November 16, 1944, Capt. Luke Weathers, a young fighter pilot from Memphis, Tennessee, strolled out onto an airstrip in northern Italy and checked the condition of his plane. Weathers had made precautionary testing of his aircraft a part of his daily routine during his flight training days in Alabama, and he had continued the practice throughout his active duty assignments in North Africa and Europe. Today his mission was to escort B-17 bombers, known as "Flying Fortresses," from bases in northern Italy to targets in the Munich area of southern Germany. Most bombers, even the heavily armed B-17s, were vulnerable to enemy fighter aircraft; fighter pilots had to provide "close cover" escort on bombing missions such as these.

Escort duty was uneventful for Weathers and his fellow fighter pilots, Capt. Melvin Jackson and Capt. Louis Purnell, until eight Messerschmidt 109s (ME 109s) attacked a crippled bomber returning from the mission. All three American pilots peeled off from their positions, returned the fire, and Weathers hit one of the ME 109s.

Suddenly he noticed red balls of aircraft fire arcing over the canopy of his cockpit. He was being attacked from the rear. Jackson and Purnell fell in behind the attacking plane but had to abandon their pursuit when other Messerschmidts began firing on them as well. Instead of pursuing Jackson and Purnell, the Germans concentrated on Weathers' plane, closing in from all directions in a deadly tactic that Americans called the German "wolf pack." The odds were heavily in the Germans' favor, but Captain Weathers maintained his composure.

"It looked like they had me," Weathers remembered later, "so I decided to follow the falling [ME 109] plane. I made a dive, came out of it, and looked back. One plane was still on my tail. I was headed back toward Germany and didn't want to go that way. I chopped my throttle and dropped my flaps to cut my speed quickly. The fellow overshot me and this left me on his tail. He was in range so I opened fire. A long burst and a short burst [of gunfire] sent him tumbling to the ground." Weathers' aerobatic and highly dangerous maneuver allowed him to escape unharmed.

Luke Weathers, Melvin Jackson, and Louis Purnell were among the first black military aviators in American history. Trained in Alabama at Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University, they were members of the Tuskegee airmen, among the most highly decorated pilots in the European theater of war during World War II.

PRIOR TO THE WAR, few African Americans had the opportunity to learn to fly. Despite the odds against them, several black Americans managed to gain not only a pilot's license but a few headlines as well. "Brave Bessie" Coleman, who learned to fly in France, became the first black woman in the United States to hold a pilot's license. Coleman barnstormed across the country in the 1920s, thrilling air show audiences until her death in a tragic crash in 1926. In October 1932, James Herman Banning and Thomas Allen (called "suntanned editions of Lindy" by the *Pittsburgh Courier*) became the first black Americans to complete a transcontinental flight. One year later, Charles Alfred "Chief" Anderson and Dr. Albert E. Forsythe became the first African Americans to make a round-trip transcontinental flight.

In the years before World War II, many African Americans attempted to join the Army Air Corps (the precursor to the U.S. Air Force) but were summarily rejected because of their race. Determined to prove their flying skills, two young black aviators, Chauncey E. Spencer and Dale L. White, rented an old Lincoln-Paige biplane in Oaklawn, Illinois, and flew to Washington, D.C. After a number of complications, Spencer and White finally arrived in the capitol and were introduced to Rep. Everett Dirksen of Illinois and Sen. Harry Truman of Missouri. Truman was reportedly surprised to learn that the air corps excluded African Americans. "If you guys had the guts to fly this thing to Washington," he said, "I've got guts enough to see that you get what you are asking!"

It would not be easy. The War Department's policy of racial discrimination was based on a 1925 War College study which stated that black men, due to their "smaller cranial size," lacked the ability to perform as well as white men and, consequently, were "incapable of flying airplanes."