

The army was convinced that any effort to undermine the system of segregated training would instigate race riots and hobble the war effort.



Above: First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, an avid supporter of equal opportunity for black Americans, joined Tuskegee's chief flight instructor C. Alfred "Chief" Anderson for an aerial tour of the air field. Left: Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., pictured in the cockpit of his P-51 Mustang, commanded the Ninety-ninth Fighter Squadron and, later, the 332d Fighter Group. Davis' skill as an administrator did much to dispel hostility toward black participation in military aviation. (Courtesy NASM, SI)



FROM THE BEGINNING, the program at Tuskegee was a success. Ninety-one of one hundred students qualified for civil pilot's licenses during the school's first year of operation, and by 1940 Tuskegee had become the largest black pilot training program in the country.

Keeping up with the need for airfields was a problem. For the first few months, from January through March 1940, student pilots used the municipal airport in Montgomery, forty miles away, because the landing strip at Tuskegee was not completed. As the program expanded, Tuskegee pilots made use of their own airstrip as well as airfields in Montgomery and at Alabama Polytechnic College (now Auburn University). Finally, aided by funds

that First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt helped raise, Tuskegee built a second airstrip in August 1941.

That same summer, Frederick Douglass Patterson, president of Tuskegee Institute, received word from the U. S. secretary of war that Congress had appropriated \$1,091,000 for the construction of an army air base at Tuskegee. Black cadets would now have the opportunity to receive basic, advanced, and combat training and to earn flight wings and commissions. Hangars, repair shops, classrooms, laboratories, administrative facilities, an infirmary, dining hall, firehouse, and dormitories were to be constructed to provide a self-sustaining and fully functional air base.

Tractors began leveling hills and uprooting trees on July 23, 1941, in preparation for laying the runways.