

Ralph Jones, one of the base support personnel, arrived in October before construction was complete and described the scene:

We arrived at a little train station called Cheehaw in Alabama, which described the place adequately. From Cheehaw we were trucked to the base . . . really what was to become the base, for on our arrival we immediately dubbed it tent city. There were no permanent buildings for the Army personnel and the airstrip was still under construction.

The first class of cadets transferred to Tuskegee Army Air Field in November 1941, less than one month before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

IN THE YEARS BEFORE World War II, African Americans had challenged the U.S. military policy of racial segregation. In 1938, while the nationally circulated black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, campaigned for extended opportunities for blacks in the military, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) encouraged the War Department to integrate its personnel in proportion to the country's total population of black Americans, thereby creating more opportunities for blacks in the military, including the air force.

Within the black community, the debate over how to bring about equality of opportunity in the military was intense. Many African Americans, like Tuskegee's President Patterson, supported a separate training facility for blacks at Tuskegee. But others, like Howard University Law School Dean William Henry Hastie, opposed the formation of a segregated unit, claiming it was discriminatory and ultimately restrictive of opportunities. The government remained firm: Segregation of the races was the policy of the U.S. military.

After the passage of the Selective Services Act of 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced that opportunities for blacks in the army would be maintained in proportion to the number of African Americans in the population at large, and that pilot, mechanic, and technical training for blacks in the air corps would be increased. The policy of racial segregation, however, remained unchanged.

Segregating the air corps proved far more difficult than segregating infantry regiments. Pilots often had technical problems, even on maneuvers, and were forced down far from their home base. When a black pilot was forced to spend time on a base that had no facilities for

Charles B. Hall

"Buster had one problem, if it could be considered as such. He was totally without fear." —Capt. George Roberts



ON JULY 2, 1943, Charles B. "Buster" Hall, Ninety-ninth Fighter Squadron, became the first black pilot to shoot down an enemy aircraft. As part of the Sicilian campaign, he piloted one of six P-40s assigned to escort sixteen B-25s in the bombing of enemy-occupied Castelvetrano airfield.

"It was my eighth mission," Hall later told an interviewer, "but the first time I had seen the enemy close enough to shoot at. I saw two FW-190s following the Mitchells just after the bombs were dropped. I headed for the space between the fighters and bombers and managed to turn inside the Jerries. I fired a long burst and saw my tracers penetrate the second aircraft. He was turning to the left, but suddenly fell off and headed straight into the ground. I followed him down and saw him crash. He raised a big cloud of dust."

Upon Hall's return to the air base, the squadron awarded him a rare "ice-cold bottle of Coca-Cola." According to fellow pilot Louis Purnell: "We chilled the Coke in a one-gallon fruit juice can packed with ice. It was in the shade of a grove of olive trees that the bottle of Coke—probably the only one in the Mediterranean theater of operations—came to a well-deserved end."

Hall also received the Distinguished Flying Cross and commendations from Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. (*Elmer D. Jones, courtesy NASM, SI*)