

# Walter J. Palmer

*Palmer flew 158 missions, probably the highest number of sorties flown by a Tuskegee-trained pilot in World War II.*



**I**N JULY 1944, LT. WALTER PALMER, a graduate of Tuskegee Army Air Field's tactical fighter school, was flying protective cover for bombers in Europe with the One Hundredth Fighter Squadron of the 332d Fighter Group.

We were "about five thousand feet above the bombers," Palmer recalled, "as they prepared for their bomb run [in southwestern Germany]. . . . We noticed 'bogeys' attempting to break through our protective formation in order to get to the bombers. As they approached, we engaged them. I got on the tail of a FW-190 and squeezed the trigger. My first victory was recorded on film. After pulling back up, I came up under another [Focke-Wulf]. Since he did not see me, I closed the distance until I was within range and gave the trigger another squeeze; however, nothing happened because my guns had jammed. I foolishly decided—in the anxiety of battle—that the only thing left to do was to chop off his empennage with my propeller. I didn't stop to think my plane would go down as well.

"At any rate, . . . [the German pilot] decided to head into the mountains. . . . I reasoned he might know his way into those mountains and I did not. So I headed home and performed my 'Victory Roll' over the field so my crew chief and the others of my crew would know to get ready for the celebration. Several members of our squadron got victories that day." (*Courtesy Walter J. Palmer*)

blacks, base commanders had difficulty carrying out the rules of segregation. These same rules presented problems in personnel deployment, mass mobilization, and aerial combat.

After African Americans were permitted to become pilots, another problem arose: Who would command them? Not only did the War Department need a regular army officer who was black, but a black officer who could fly airplanes. Between 1920 and 1940, only one black man had graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point and had served with distinction, according to the War Department—Capt. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., class of 1936 and son of the army's only black general.

Davis was selected to command the first class of cadets at Tuskegee, a class that would form the core of the first black fighter squadron in the air corps, the Ninety-ninth Fighter Squadron. Davis' superiors assumed he would learn to fly and he did, although he was never as skillful a pilot as others in the squadron. In fact, his instructors joked that Davis banked his biplane trainer with a precision seen only on the West Point parade ground. But more importantly, Davis was a regular line officer who understood army procedures and knew how to motivate men.

Preflight training at Tuskegee lasted five grueling weeks. From five in the morning until lights out at ten o'clock, the cadets drilled and studied first aid, radio, codes, aircraft identification, military law, courtesy, and army organization. New cadets also had to withstand hazing from the upperclassmen. One cadet, Walter J. Palmer, wrote that about one-fifth of his class of fifty cadets dropped out, because "nothing was worth that much physical and mental harassment."

Lt. Charles H. DeBow, Jr., who graduated with the first class of cadets at Tuskegee Army Air Field, recalled his training at Tuskegee for a writer from *American Magazine* in 1942. Primary flight training was supervised by the army, DeBow said, "but the actual instructors were colored civilians trained under the Civilian Aeronautics Authority (CAA)." Basic flight training began in November 1941, when Davis took over command of the cadets, and advanced training commenced in January 1942.

With this new training came new airplanes, like "the Big Vultee BT-13s, with 400 horsepower engines, 130 mph cruising speed and plenty of new problems." DeBow was astonished at every new piece of aircraft that arrived. "Those ships were something," he said, particularly the