

Within the black community, the debate over how to bring about equality of opportunity in the military was intense.



Graduating class, Tuskegee Army Air Field, June 1942: (Left to right) William A. Campbell, Willie Ashley, Langston Caldwell, Herbert Clark, George Bolling, Charles B. Hall, Graham Mitchell, Herbert Carter, Louis Purnell, Graham Smith, Allen G. Lane, Spann Watson, Fayette McGinnis, James T. Wiley, and Irwin Lawrence. (Courtesy Herbert E. Carter)

“North American AT-6As with their 600 horsepower engines, 160 mph cruising speed, and 30 calibre machine guns.”

DeBow, Ben Davis, George Roberts, and other pilots spent four days at Eglin Field, Florida, shooting at ground targets. They not only qualified but set a better record than a squad of British cadets before them. Also, DeBow claimed, “[We] practiced night formation flying with our wing tips just six inches apart.”

WHILE FLIGHT TRAINING continued with great success, other aspects of life at Tuskegee Army Air Field presented difficulties. Despite the War Department’s original plan to run the base with black personnel exclusively, the command structure, for the most part, was white and remained a continuing source of frustration to black officers throughout the war. All military rules regarding segregation of the races were observed, which meant that white officers had no officially sanctioned contact with blacks except during duty hours. The army was convinced that any effort to undermine this system

of segregated training would instigate race riots and hobble the war effort.

Other problems arose as white communities surrounding the base became displeased about the influx of black pilots, administrators, and support personnel. Racial tensions flared. As a consequence, morale was low when Capt. Noel F. Parrish, a native of Lexington, Kentucky, arrived in May 1941 to take over as base commander. In order to reduce tensions in the community, Parrish immediately sought to make the base so self-sufficient and attractive that personnel would not want to leave.

Parrish assigned to Capt. Eldridge Williams the task of creating a morale-building physical fitness program. Williams organized football, basketball, baseball, and tennis teams that competed on a collegiate level with other black teams throughout the country. Maj. Fred Minnis, Education, Recreation, and Morale Officer, held local talent reviews, provided the latest films, and brought a variety of celebrities to Tuskegee, including Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong, Joe Louis, Langston Hughes, Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, The Camel Caravan orchestra and singers, and opera stars Grace Moore and Richard Crooks.