

Herbert E. Carter

"The mechanics and pilots of the Ninety-ninth were the best in the Mediterranean theater of operations."—Herbert E. Carter



LT. COL. HERBERT E. CARTER, USAF (Ret.), a former pilot and squadron aircraft maintenance officer trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field, recently told an interviewer that the unsung heroes of the war were the “men [who] worked ten to twelve hours daily to ensure that their aircraft were operational.” Such involvement contributed enormously to the team spirit that developed between pilots and ground crews. “To them, a missed mission or an aborted flight was an unfavorable reflection on themselves and their flight. On the other hand, a flight that resulted in air-to-air victories by the pilot, or air-to-ground target destruction, was a celebration.”

The mechanics and technicians trained at Tuskegee were also called on “to retrieve aircraft that had crash-landed for whatever reasons,” often behind enemy lines. They either salvaged the aircraft wreckage on-site or tried to retrieve the whole aircraft. When Carter returned to the United States in July 1944, after seventy-seven missions (rotation eligibility back to the states was only fifty missions), he and the other pilots regretted “leaving the mechanics and technicians of the Ninety-ninth, knowing they were there for the duration.”

Above: Capt. Herbert E. Carter presents Crew Chief of the Month award to Sgt. Willie McNair. Sgt. Lewis H. Sobers looks on. (Courtesy Herbert E. Carter)

the Ninety-ninth Fighter Squadron in Liberia to search for German U-Boats along the west African coast, but the Allied invasion of North Africa removed the German threat to Liberia. It did not, however, decrease the need for tactical fighters in the Mediterranean theater of war.

Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson visited the air field in Tuskegee in February 1943 to discuss possible overseas assignments for the “Black Birdmen,” or *Schwarze Vogelmenschen*—as the Germans would later call them—with Captain Parrish, who repeatedly appealed to the War Department for activation of his fliers. One early rumor asserted that the Ninety-ninth was being shipped out to North Africa, but Tuskegee’s pilots had to endure another month of drills on aerial combat, formation, and night flying before the squadron was ordered to Camp Shanks, New York, for embarkation.

The four hundred men of the Ninety-ninth Fighter Squadron were initially assigned to an airfield in French Morocco. In June 1943, they received their first combat assignment, a strafing mission against the heavily fortified island fortress of Pantelleria. On the morning of June 9, a squadron of planes led by Charles “A-Train” Dryden was attacked by twelve Focke-Wulfs and Messerschmidts acting as escorts for eighteen bombers en route to attack Allied forces in Tunisia. Tuskegee airmen historian Robert A. Rose later summed up Dryden’s account of the action:

... the Jerries peeled off from 12,000 feet and dived through the Warhawks [U.S. aircraft] at better than 400 MPH. Two Focke-Wulfs caught [Lee] Rayford’s right wing. Spann Watson came from Rayford’s right and fired a burst at the two Germans. The Nazis flipped and broke away. Willie Ashley had lost considerable altitude, having gone into a spin, but upon recovering he found a Focke-Wulf crossing his sights. He got in a raking burst, and the German went into a flat smoking glide to the sea. Other enemy planes turned and retreated toward Sicily while Ashley pursued. Finally, enemy ground fire forced him back.

THIS WAS THE FIRST of many combat sorties for the Ninety-ninth Fighter Squadron, which, along with other Tuskegee-trained squadrons in the 332d Fighter Group, helped destroy the German war machine across central and eastern Europe. They flew hundreds of missions over European territory and were part of the Allied invasion forces in Sicily, southern France, and Greece.