

*The Tuskegee airmen proved that no discrepancy existed between the effectiveness of properly trained black and white soldiers.*



*The base commander at Tuskegee Army Air Field reviews aviation cadets and their Vultee BT-13 basic trainers. (USAF Photo Collection, Negative No. 20798 A.C., courtesy NASM, SI)*

By March 7, 1945, American forces had discovered the Remagen Bridge intact and had begun crossing the Rhine River into the heart of Germany. On March 24, the Tuskegee airmen played a pivotal role in this advance as the Fifteenth Air Force attempted a sixteen-hundred-mile attack on Berlin led by Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., and the 332d Fighter Group, the cadre of which was formed by the Ninety-ninth Fighter Squadron. The target was the Daimler-Benz Tank Works, and the mission was designed as a diversionary effort to draw off German fighters which might otherwise have been deployed against the Allied airborne landings north of the Ruhr Valley.

On that same day, the 332d Fighter Group, flying cover for B-17 bombers, encountered several jet-propelled Messerschmidt 262 fighters. The Tuskegee airmen claimed three of the eight German jets destroyed. For successfully escorting the B-17s and exhibiting "outstandingly aggressive combat technique," the 332d Fighter Group was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation.

During the last few months of the war, Tuskegee served as a training facility for a host of programs primarily for African Americans. But few, if any, of these trainees would see combat in World War II. On April 25, 1945, less than two weeks before the war in Europe ended on May 7, the 332d flew its last mission, chalking up four more victories over enemy aircraft while on a photo reconnaissance mission over Prague.

When hostilities ended in the Pacific, President Harry Truman announced a two-day holiday. The military and civilian personnel at Tuskegee Army Air Field spent their vacations enjoying the base facilities. Lucky Millinder and his orchestra entertained the largest crowd ever at the post amphitheater.

After the war, operations continued at Tuskegee until June 29, 1946, when the last class of pilots graduated and was transferred to other units. Many of the men and women who trained at Tuskegee never used their skills because opportunities for African Americans were limited in a segregated army. The demobilization that followed soon after the war also forced many into becoming reservists. Most of those who managed to retain their active duty status ended up at Lockbourne Air Base, near Columbus, Ohio.

The Tuskegee airmen, however, had every reason to celebrate. They had proven to American society that no discrepancy existed between the effectiveness of properly trained black and white soldiers. Perhaps their success in action during World War II helped change attitudes towards integration in the American military; certainly their success brought about a strong sense of pride among those who served. Two years after the last Tuskegee airman graduated, President Truman ordered the desegregation of the armed forces, and the Defense Department announced the end of mandated segregation in the U.S. military. Wherever they were, the Tuskegee airmen must have cheered.

