The Tuskegee Airmen

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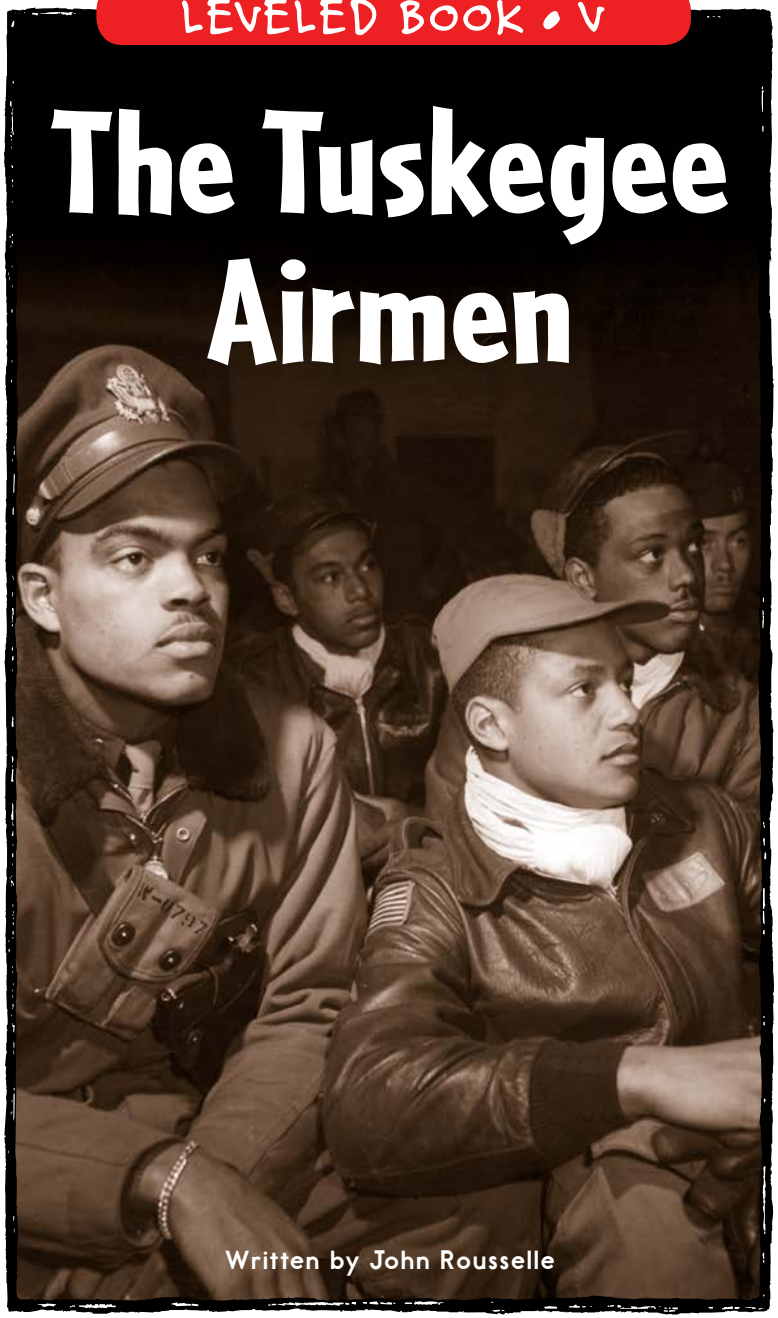
The Tuskegee Airmen



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Front cover: Members of the 332nd Squadron, the Tuskegee Airmen attend a briefing at their base in Ramitelli, Italy, in 1945.

Back cover: Tuskegee Airman Edward C. Gleed, originally with Military Intelligence, became a pilot, a squadron commander, and then group operations officer. His leather Red Tails flight jacket is on display at the Museum of the U.S. Air Force.

Title page: Tuskegee Airman Sr. Master Sergeant USAF Retired, George Porter of Sacramento, California, holds the bronze replica of the Congressional Gold Medal. President George W. Bush gave one to each of the original Tuskegee Airmen on March 29, 2007.

Table of Contents: Early and later versions of the amazing Mustang P-51 fighter both display the identifying red tail paint of the Tuskegee Airmen's Red Tail squadron. The later version of the P-51 (bottom) had a bubble canopy for greater visibility in all directions.

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Correlation

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Table of Contents

Dr. Roscoe Brown (inset), among the first pilots to train with the Tuskegee Airmen, describes a dogfight with attacking enemy planes. The pilots' main mission was to fly along with large bomber groups and protect them from enemy attacks.

Target for the Day: Berlin

Flying high above Germany, Lieutenant Roscoe Brown Jr. kept careful watch in his P-51 Mustang **fighter**. It was March 25, 1945, the final year of **World War II**, and Lt. Brown was leading a group of Mustangs from the 332nd Fighter Group. The fighter pilots were protecting two hundred American bombers. The target for the day was a tank factory in Germany's capital city, Berlin. Lt. Brown's job was to keep the American bombers safe from enemy planes.

The sleek, fast, and heavily armed Messerschmitt 262 was the world's first turbine-powered fighter—a jet plane. It was a lethal weapon in the hands of skilled German pilots.

As the bombers closed in on the target, Brown looked around for any signs of enemy fighters. Suddenly, he saw a large group of planes coming in fast from ahead and above. The Germans had sent Messerschmitt 262 jet fighters up to defend their capital. These were the most advanced fighter planes in the world. They were fast and heavily armed, and were flown by some of Germany's best pilots.

The primary job of the famed Tuskegee Airmen squadron was to escort and protect bomber groups. The Red Tails were also called on to protect unarmed aircraft that provided detailed photographs of potential targets on the ground.

"Bogeys! Bogeys!" Brown called out on the radio, letting the other pilots know that he had planes in sight that might be enemies.

The Americans watched as the German Me-262 jets circled around to the rear of the bomber **formation** like a pack of wolves closing in for the kill. Suddenly, four of the German jets dived to attack. The jets all opened fire as they raced past the American bombers, but most of their shots missed their targets.

Lt. Brown searched the sky behind him and saw another group of four Me-262s closing in fast on the bombers from behind and below. "Drop tanks!" he called over the radio, pulling the handle to drop the fuel tanks carried under each wing of his Mustang. The extra fuel tanks were needed to get his plane this far into Germany, but fighting with them still on the plane was a very bad idea. Now his fighter was ready for action.

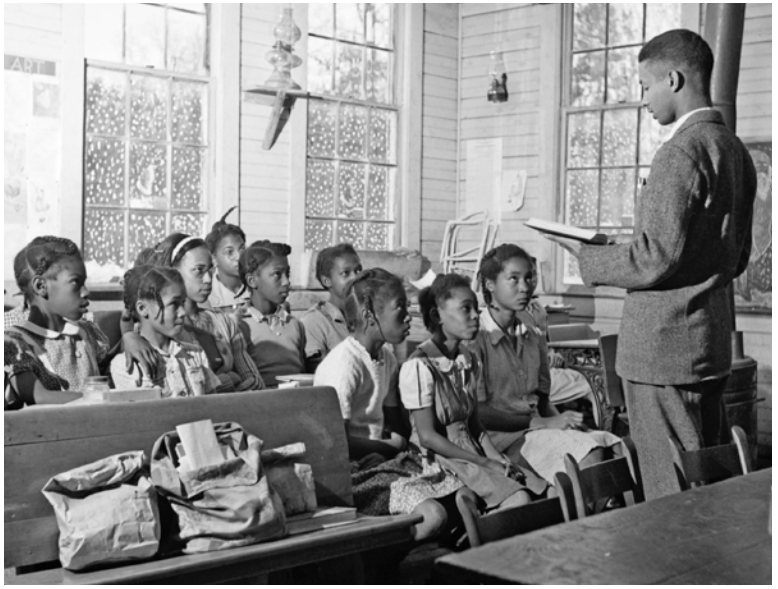
Brown rolled his plane and dove directly toward the enemy jets, picking up speed along the way. As he pulled out of his dive at the level of the Me-262s, he fired his guns at the nearest enemy plane. His aim was good, and his shots made one of the jet's engines burst into flames. Moments later, the German pilot bailed out, giving Lt. Brown a confirmed victory.

Four of the pilots among the first group of men trained by the U.S. Army Air Corps as part of the all African American 332nd Fighter Group.

In the same fight, two other American pilots from the 332nd Fighter Group also shot down Me-262s. Brown's fellow pilots also damaged five other jet fighters without losing any planes of their own or any of the bombers.

For their actions that day, the 332nd Fighter Group received a Presidential Unit Citation—one of the highest honors given to a group of airmen during the war. But what was most incredible was that these American heroes were almost not allowed to serve as pilots at all—because they were black.

This map shows the borders and names of the European countries involved in World War II. From the Ramitelli Airbase in Italy, Tuskegee pilots protected hundreds of strategic bombing missions over Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, and Poland.



White and black students attended separate schools in Virginia in 1947. School buses often carried police officers to ensure the separation of black and white students.

The Tuskegee "Experiment"

During the 1930s, African Americans lived under unfair laws in many southern states that kept them **segregated** from whites. Those laws said that African Americans had to attend different schools, eat in separate restaurants, and use separate drinking fountains and public restrooms because of the color of their skin. The military was also segregated—black soldiers lived and trained in units that were kept separate from other races and were always under the command of white officers. The Army Air Corps refused to train any black pilots at all.

In the late 1930s, many U.S. leaders saw that the country was heading toward war in Europe against Nazi Germany and its allies. As the U.S. Army Air Corps began to get ready for the war, they saw that they didn't have enough pilots. Leaders in the black community thought they knew an answer to this problem. They asked the government to let African Americans train as pilots, but some leaders in the military were against doing that. They believed that African Americans could never be good **combat** pilots.

In 1941, the U.S. Congress finally forced the Army Air Corps to create an all-black flying unit. This unit would be an "**experiment**" to test whether black pilots could do the job as well as white pilots. Some people wanted the black pilots to succeed, but many people both inside and outside the military wanted them to fail.

In March 1941, the 99th Pursuit Squadron was created as the first all-black unit of the Army Air Forces. It began training African Americans to work as aircraft mechanics and in other support jobs. In June, the **squadron** moved to train at airfields around Tuskegee, Alabama. Starting with a group of 47 officers and 429 enlisted men, the Tuskegee Airmen (as they became known) eventually grew to include 996 pilots and over 15,000 other military staff who supported them. The commanding officer of the 99th Pursuit Squadron was Captain Benjamin O. Davis Jr. Capt. Davis was a graduate of West Point Military Academy who later became the first African-American general in the U.S. Air Force.

The Tuskegee Airmen faced many challenges and obstacles before they ever saw combat. During their training in Alabama, they had to put up with **discrimination** both on and off their military bases. The black airmen were placed under white officers who were sometimes unfair in their treatment of them. They were not allowed into some areas of their bases that were open to whites and often had problems with the local townspeople and police.

The 477th Bombardment Group

Early Civil Rights Protest

The Tuskegee Airmen also included the 477th Bombardment Group who trained to use B-25 bombers. The bomber group was moved to a base too small for the huge planes; experienced officers were denied command positions. In 1945, officers of the 477th staged a peaceful protest when they were forbidden use of the same base officers' club as white officers. This protest was an early milestone in the civil rights movement.

First Combat

This unfair treatment upset the Tuskegee Airmen, but Capt. Davis told them that the best way to respond was to show that they could fly and fight as well as or better than any white unit.

They finally got their chance when the 99th was sent to fight in North Africa in April 1943. Their first **mission** was to attack a German base on a small island off the coast of Sicily. The 99th Squadron used their P-40 Warhawk fighters to knock out gun positions on the island. They also began flying **escort** missions for friendly bomber squadrons—the type of mission they would later become most famous for. Their efforts helped to force the German soldiers on the island to give up in less than two weeks.

Capt. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. shaped the 332nd Fighter Group into an organized and respected fighting force. Capt. Davis became the first African-American air force general. His father was the first African-American general in the army.

World War II pilots flew in a time before the development of modern electronic aviation equipment. They learned to fly in old trainer planes, to navigate using maps and aerial photographs, and to rely on their eyesight and quick reflexes.

The Critics

Despite the success of this first operation, some people in the War Department were not happy. They complained that one group of pilots from the 99th had flown off to chase after enemy fighters, leaving some friendly bombers with little protection. They also complained that the 99th hadn't shot down any enemy planes during their missions. Several white senior officers in army air forces said that the 99th should be pulled from combat operations. Gen. George Marshall, the army chief of staff, was not about to give up the "experiment" so easily. He ordered an official review to study how the 99th had done, but he also decided to let the squadron keep fighting.

The official review eventually showed that the 99th had done well during the attack on the island, but by the time it came out, the 99th had answered their critics in a different way. In the summer of 1943, Lt. Charles B. Hall scored the unit's first victory when he shot down a Focke-Wulf 190, one of Germany's best fighter planes. This marked the first time an African-American pilot had shot down an enemy aircraft while flying for the U.S. military. Pilots from the 99th went on to shoot down twelve German planes in two days during the invasion of Italy. As they gained combat experience, they built up a record of excellence that became more and more difficult for their critics to challenge.

Eleanor Roosevelt

One of the Tuskegee Airmen's earliest supporters was First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt visited the program in 1941 and asked to fly with one of the Tuskegee pilots. When she landed after flying for more than an hour in a Waco biplane with C. Alfred "Chief" Anderson (shown here), she happily said, "Well, you can fly all right!"

The Red Tails

In September 1943, Benjamin O. Davis Jr., now a lieutenant colonel, took charge of the 332nd Fighter Group. The 332nd included three new African-American fighter squadrons: the 100th, 301st, and 302nd. Eventually, the 99th Fighter Squadron became part of the 332nd Fighter Group during operations in Italy. The 332nd switched to more advanced aircraft such as the P-47 Thunderbolt. Later, they began flying the plane they would become forever known for: the P-51 Mustang. The Mustang was an amazing fighter plane that was perfect for long-range bomber escort missions deep into enemy territory.

The 332nd painted the tail sections of their P-47s and P-51s red to show the pride they felt for their unit. The red color also was a reminder of the Tuskegee Airmen's motto of **equality**: "All blood runs red." Pilots of the 332nd began calling themselves the "Red Tails."

The red tails on the aircraft made them easy to identify by friends and enemies alike. When friendly bomber crews saw how good the pilots of the red-tailed planes were at their jobs, they began calling them the "Red-Tailed Angels." Most of the American bomber crews had no idea that pilots from 332nd were black; one of them even called it the "Army's best-kept secret" of the war. The German pilots who learned to fear the fighting skills of the pilots of the red-tailed Mustangs called them the "Black Bird Men."

The Red Tails were often called on to protect and escort home damaged bombers. Damaged bombers were easy targets for the determined German Air Force pilots. On this day, two Tuskegee planes answered a distress call from the bomber *Jeze Belle* and the attacking plane was shot down.

In the final years of the war, the 332nd flew 200 bomber escort missions while losing less than 25 bombers in total to enemy aircraft. This was an incredibly low number of losses. Other fighter escort groups sometimes lost that many bombers to enemy fighters during a single mission!

Do You Know?

In June 1944, pilots of the 332nd were able to sink an Italian navy destroyer by attacking it with the machine guns of their P-47 Thunderbolts. This was the only time during the war when planes using only their machine guns sank a major navy ship.

By the end of the war, the Tuskegee Airmen had proved their courage, skill, and fighting abilities to everyone. They had destroyed 112 enemy aircraft in the air and another 150 on the ground, as well as damaging hundreds more. They also destroyed more than 950 railroad cars, trucks, and other vehicles and received hundreds of medals for their achievements. Just as importantly, they won the respect and gratitude of the white bomber crews whom they protected on mission after mission. These results came with a price. The Tuskegee Airmen lost sixty-six pilots to enemy attacks and accidents and had thirty-two pilots captured.

The Red Tails' success wasn't limited to protecting bomber squadrons and destroying attacking aircraft. Their swift attacks on critical ground targets crippled enemy supply lines and transportation routes.

Berlin, the capital city of Germany, was heavily damaged from air raids by the British, American, and Russian forces during World War II. (top) The Reichstag Offices in Berlin before the start of the war. (center) The Reichstag after numerous bombings. (bottom) The rebuilt Reichstag today.

George Watson Sr., a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, holds the last photograph of the Tuskegee Airmen before the unit was desegregated in 1948.

Returning Home

After fighting to free Europe from the Nazis, the Tuskegee Airmen returned home to a country that still treated them as second-class citizens. No welcome-home parades greeted these returning heroes.

The military, however, took note of their amazing achievements. The Tuskegee Airmen had shown that racial segregation was an unfair system that could not claim to be based on real differences in ability. Their success was one reason that President Harry S. Truman decided to end segregation in the military in 1948. But the fight to win full **civil rights** for all Americans was just beginning.

Dr. Roscoe Brown (speaking) and retired Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson (left) at the 2007 Congressional Gold Medal Award ceremony that honored the amazing achievements of the Tuskegee Airmen. Over 300 surviving Tuskegee Airmen attended the ceremony, held in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda.

Do You Know?

The First Black Fighter Pilot

Although the Tuskegee Airmen became the most famous black American military pilots, they weren't the first. Eugene Bullard was an American volunteer fighter pilot who flew for the French Air Force during World War I. Bullard is thought to have shot down two German aircraft during his missions for the French. When the United States entered the war in August 1917, American volunteers who were already flying for the French were given the option to switch to the U.S. Army Air Service—all except Bullard, who was not allowed to transfer because he was black.

Glossary

civil rights *(n.)* legal, social, and economic rights that guarantee freedom and equality for all citizens (p. 22)

combat *(n.)* fighting between military forces (p. 11)

discrimination *(n.)* the unfair treatment of a person or group based on gender, race, age, religion, or other differences (p. 13)

equality *(n.)* the condition in which everyone has the same rights (p. 17)

escort *(v.)* to go with someone or something, often to provide protection (p. 14)

experiment *(n.)* a scientific test or trial (p. 11)

fighter *(n.)* a fast, armed military airplane designed to battle other aircraft (p. 4)

formation *(n.)* a specific pattern formed by a group (p. 6)

mission *(n.)* a set purpose for doing something; a special task or assignment (p. 14)

segregated *(adj.)* kept apart based on group differences, such as race (p. 10)

squadron *(n.)* a military unit made up of more than one small group of soldiers, airplanes, or ships (p. 12)

World War II *(n.)* a global war with Germany, Italy, and Japan against Britain, France, the United States, Russia, and other nations (1939–1945) (p. 4)