RACISM AND THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

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Racism was prevalent in America leading into World War II, especially in the military. The movie *Red Tails* depicts the racism faced by the black airmen in the Army Air Force (AAF), known as the Tuskegee Airmen, in Europe. The airmen shown in the movie were only one part of the Tuskegee Airmen, who were in Europe and America, and played a great role in World War II. The Tuskegee Airmen fought against long-established rules and customs of racism in the military abroad, and in America during World War II. Facing racism since training, the Tuskegee Airmen did not settle for segregation in America, or while fighting in Europe during World War II, with full integration being the final goal. By handling the pressure for success from the begnning, excelling in combat overseas, and protesting against discrimination in America, the Tuskegee Airmen were fighting not only for their country, but for the advancement of blacks in the military and in America.

I

Before the creation of the Tuskegee Airmen, the military, including the AAF, employed discriminatory policies regarding blacks and the Tuskegee Airmen. As the war came along, a variety of factors played into the creation of what would become part of the Tuskegee Airmen; the 99th Pursuit Squadron. As they started to train, the Tuskegee Airmen faced the racist military policies first-hand, which had great effects on the men. Through the challenges they faced since the start, their creation proved to be bigger than themselves.

Within the military before World War II, discriminatory policies had been put in place hindering blacks' success. One of the most influential documents for these policies was a study done by the Army War College in 1925. This study makes several claims degrading blacks and the use of blacks in war:

> He is mentally inferior to the white man… Negro officers should not be placed over white officers, noncommissioned officers or soldiers… In the process of evolution the American negro has not progressed as far as the other sub-species of the human family. As a race he has not developed leadership qualities. His mental inferiority and the inherent weaknesses of his character are factors that must be considered with great care in the preparation of any plan for his employment in war.[1]

Although the study came before World War II, it affected the Tuskegee Airmen, as the conclusions from this study kept the military segregated into World War II, and used by military officials to maintain segregation, including in the AAF.[2]

Claims from the study directly influenced people's opinions on blacks joining the AAF. Although the study came well before the war, Tuskegee Airmen, such as Charles Walter Dryden, realized the influence the Army War College Study had on people's opinions during the time: "they felt that it was a waste of time and money to train black people to fly airplanes, to train them to be mechanics."[3] Dryden is referencing how the Army War College Study impacted not only military officials, but the public's opinion about blacks contribution to the AAF. This study had effects reaching across decades, and proved a vital source of defense for the War Department to keep the military segregated.

Hoping to refute the claims from the War College Study, steps were taken to create an all-black aviation squadron in the AAF for World War II. As blacks began to call for a greater role in the AAF during the beginning of World War II, more policies were put in place opening

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[1] The Army War College, Office of the Commandant, "The Use of Negro Man Power in War." *(Memorandum,* Washington D.C., 1925. Accessed on https://detroitchaptertai.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/ta-placards-04-red-tail.pdf.)

[2] William Alexander Percy, "Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee Flying Units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe during World War II," *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 3 (2003): 775-76, . www.jstor.org/stable/3397326.

[3] "Interview with Charles Walter Dryden" by Marissa Gamboa, From the Library of Congress, *Veterans History Project*. Film. https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.69713/mv0001001.stream (accessed Dec. 17, 2019).

up blacks to aviation training, such as civilian pilot training and eventually allowing enlistment within the Army and the AAF, all on a segregated basis.[4] With the announcement of the creation of an all-black aviation squadron in early 1941 to train at Tuskegee, the War Department faced a great deal of criticism from civil rights organizations and newspapers repudiating the segregatory policies, claiming it would keep the future airmen from being successful.[5] However, within the War Department, was Judge William Hastie, a civilian aide, who sought integration and worked with civil rights organizations; who did not object to the new squadron, as he felt that it at least gave blacks the opportunity to perform military aviation.[6] As civil rights organizations viewed World War II as an opportunity to expand civil rights, the backlash from the civil rights organizations on the War Department put pressure on the new squadron to succeed in order to help expand civil rights.[7]

With the creation of the new all-black squadron, the 99th Pursuit Squadron began training at Tuskegee Army Air Field in the summer of 1941, in a regimented racist atmosphere, as the commanding officers were mostly white.[8] During their training experiences, cadets training at Tuskegee faced segregation in every aspect of their training. Training in Alabama, segregation was a way of life there, and from that, the cadets did not have much social life while training.[9] One Tuskegee Airman recounts his experience initially training in Tuskegee, "Well, everything was segregated. We never went into the little town of Tuskegee. It was a very rigorous program.

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[4] Percy, "Jim Crow," 776-77.

[5] Lawrence P. Scottand William M. Womack, "The Experiment: The "Smoke Screen"," In *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen*, 147-48, Michigan State University Press, 1994. www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/j.ctt7zt78w.11.

[6] Phillip McGuire, "Judge Hastie, World War II, and the Army Air Corps," *Phylon (1960-)* 42, no. 2 (1981): 159, doi:10.2307/274720.

[7] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "The Experiment: The "Smoke Screen," 148-63.

[8] Percy, "Jim Crow," 777-78.

[9] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "The Experiment: The "Smoke Screen," 161.

We were right on the base, so we didn't see anything that was any different. Granted, we had white instructors and the base itself was segregated."[10] For some Tuskegee Airmen, like Harold Brown, the strict segregation was a culture-shock from what they experienced in the North. Unlike Brown, however, some of these cadets could not handle the harsh discriminatory policies and "washed out."[11]

The segregation they faced had consequences for the airmen. As a result of the harsh discriminatory policies and psychological abuse, the 99th Pursuit Squadron witnessed a greater "wash out," or failing, rate than the average across the entire AAF.[12] With the significant drop-out rate and pressure from civil rights organizations to succeed, pilots that went through the training, like Charles Walter Dryden, knew the importance of succeeding: "As we were going through flight training all of us had the feeling that we dare not fail because if we had failed then white folks would be able to say we told you they couldn't do it."[13] From the beginning, the pilots training at Tuskegee also knew the significance of being successful, which propelled their determination to excel. Additionally, Dryden's commentary illustrates that the airmen training knew their success was bigger than themselves, and was a matter of their race. The airmen carried this immense pressure into their time in combat.

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After the 99th Pursuit Squadron finished training in the spring of 1942, they were deployed to the Northern Africa theater to at Oued N'ja Field, in French Morocco, in April of

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[10] Harold Brown, interview by Mark Rumsey, *'I Just Wanted To Fly': A Tuskegee Airman Reflects On Pioneering WWII Squadron*, WFAE 90.7, January 30, 2018. Accessed on https://www.wfae.org/post/i-just-wanted-fly-tuskegee-airman-reflects-pioneering-wwii-squadron#stream/0.

[11] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "The Experiment: The "Smoke Screen," 159.

[12] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, 160-61.

[13] "Interview with Charles Walter Dryden."

1943.[14] In the initial months of combat training with the 27th Fighter Group, the men of the 99th Pursuit Squadron were treated with respect from the other officers; however, in May of 1943, the 99th joined with the 33rd Fighter group with commanding officer William Momyer.[15] The atmosphere for the 99th shifted drastically. On the base in Fardjouna, the 99th was excluded from all social events, and even some mission briefings as there housing was set up several miles away from the whites.[16] With all of this happening before the 99th could prove themselves in combat, it was evident the exclusion was based on their race.

After flying in combat with the 33rd for a few missions, the attitude still did not change. In one of the more racist opinions against them, William Momyer attacked the 99th's capability in combat, claiming they were not at a high enough level to perform in combat and they did not show the order to stay in formation when under attack.[17] Unfortunately for the 99th Pursuit Squadron, Momyer's report persuaded top AAF officials of the supposed lack of confidence and capability from the 99th by early fall of 1943.[18] Going further, the officials argued the extended training time for the 99th should have resulted in better results; however, it is important to note the 99th had extended training time because the AAF purposefully did not deploy them for

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[14] Daniel Haulman, *The Tuskegee Airmen Chronology: A Detailed Timeline of the Red Tails and Other Black Pilots of World War II.* Montgomery (Alabama: NewSouth Books, 2017), 17-29. The author, Daniel Haulman, has written various other books about the Tuskegee Airmen and Air Force history. He is currently the chief of organizational history at Maxwell Air Force Base, where much of the Air Force's historical records are stored. Subsequently, to write this book, Haulman, with the unique opportunity to access all of the actual squadron histories of the Tuskegee Airmen, provides excellent details and reliable sources when writing the book.

[15] Percy, "Jim Crow," 780-81.

[16] Percy, "Jim Crow," 781-83.

[17] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," In *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen*, 186-87, Michigan State University Press, 1994. www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/j.ctt7zt78w.13.

[18] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, 188.

several months.[19] Momyer's accusations proved to be an early obstacle for the 99th Pursuit Squadron in their fight against racism.

Eventually, a decision was made to allow Benjamin O. Davis Jr. testify for the 99th's accounts of combat in front of a War Department committee.[20] On October 16, 1943 Davis went to testify and defend his squadron regarding the accusations from Momyer.[21] Within the interview, Davis provided sound defenses against the accusations citing various accounts of missions, and even explaining how the weather affected their ability to execute the mission; importantly, Davis' testimony allowed the 99th Pursuit Squadron to remain in a combat role in the North African theater.[22] Coming early in the 99th's combat career, the outcome would have considerable impact on the Tuskegee Airmen's role in combat for the rest of the war. Within the War Department, Truman Gibson and General Benjamin O. Davis Sr. knew that Davis Jr.'s testimony would not only impact his squadron, but blacks within the whole military, and black's rights in America.[23] By influencing African-American's beyond just the 99th, Davis' testimony had greater significance than just keeping the 99th in combat.

With attempts to belittle the role of the 99th in the beginning of their tour, the squadron realized they would have to fight this racism and prove extremely successful in combat as well. After being relocated to the 79th Fighter Group in fall 1943, the 99th's situation altered for the better as they were accepted as equals by the commanding officer.[24] However, with knowing about the necessity for success, many men of the 99th felt an immense pressure, and not having

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[19] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 188.
[20] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, 189.
[21] Haulman, *The Tuskegee Airmen Chronology,* 38-41.
[22] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 190-91.
[23] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, 189-90.
[24] Percy, "Jim Crow," 789.

shot down a single enemy aircraft yet, their morale was low.[25] Here, Benjamin O. Davis Jr. played a crucial role in helping the 99th, and eventually the 332nd Fighter Group, handle the pressure as he instilled the principle that the most important part of their job was to carry out the mission.[26] With this devotion to the mission, the Tuskegee Airmen carried it with them throughout the war as they fought in Europe, knowing the stakes were high.

Carrying on from the Momyer report, with the 79th Fighter Group, the 99th Pursuit Squadron started to become more successful. In one of their first real fights with enemy aircraft, the 99th shot down five enemy planes, and the next day shot down four more planes, with losing one plane of their own; which proved a vital part in the success of the allied mission.[27] With the continuation of their success, the 99th began to be recognized by senior officials, and even helped the 79th Fighter Group earn a Distinguished Unit Citation.[28] With this citation for the whole group, the 99th's contribution proved they were effective and successful in a more equal environment.

The 99th Pursuit Squadron's time with the 79th, however, proved to be a frightening situation for the AAF officials and War Department. They repeatedly claimed the AAF, and military, was not a place to experiment socially, and integration would lead to a lower morale.[29] Yet the situation seen between the men of the 99th and rest of the men of the 79th directly opposed those claims. In their time together the relationship between the 99th and 79th grew

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[25] Percy, 791.

[26] Percy, 778-808. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. proved an essential part of the success of the Tuskegee Airmen. He had faced extreme racism throughout his career, beginning at West Point; where, he was shunned by his classmates for all four years, because of his race. Davis proved an excellent leader and handled the pressure of the Tuskegee Airmen extremely well.

[27] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 203.

[28] Percy, "Jim Crow," 793.

[29] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "The Experiment: The "Smoke Screen," 164.

socially on the base as well through the creation of a basketball league and collaboration on a base newspaper, *The Falcon.*[30] In one instance, the 79th willingly went against orders and invited the 99th to a celebratory dinner and dance, just to make sure they were included.[31] The scenes witnessed between the airmen go directly against claims from the AAF, proving those claims were created in order to keep the branch, and the Tuskegee Airmen segregated. By exposing the claims of the AAF, the significance of success further increased for the Tuskegee Airmen.

The next year in July, 1944, the men of the 99th Pursuit Squadron joined the all-black 332nd Fighter Group in Ramitelli, Italy, who had been in Italy since February.[32] With the 332nd, the Tuskegee Airmen gained incredible success in combat and an essential role in the missions, and under Benjamin O. Davis Jr., gained a reputation as the best bomber escorts in the whole theater.[33] With this reputation, the 332nd reached a turning point in their fight against the enemy, and racism. During a bomber escort mission into Germany, the 332nd escorted the bombers from Ramitelli to Berlin, and back; which, protected the bombers from German fighter jets.[34] From this highly successful mission, the 332nd Fighter Group earned a Distinguished Unit Citation.[35] While fighting in combat, the Tuskegee Airmen knew the stakes were high for their success, and they delivered. Additionally, they proved themselves extremely skilled pilots and proved many people within the AAF wrong in their opinions about integration, and blacks as pilots. Knowing the implications of success, the Tuskegee Airmen excelled in combat, and proved to be some of the best in the AAF.

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[30] Percy, “Jim Crow,” 793-94.
[31] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 202.
[32] Haulman, *The Tuskegee Airmen Chronology,* 23-86.
[33] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 216.
[34] Percy, “Jim Crow,” 807.
[35] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 226.

III

With airmen fighting abroad, the Tuskegee Airmen in America fought the harsh racist policies of the War Department and AAF. Most noteworthy of their fights were protests against segregated officer clubs. In the protests, the airmen's call for change was often ignored by AAF officials. With many parties involved in these protests, the Tuskegee Airmen who fought racism in America combined with the success of the airmen abroad helped achieve the goal of integration in the military.

In America, the Tuskegee Airmen trained in various bases around the country, all subject to harsh racist policies; however, they never accepted this discrimination. A turning point in the Tuskegee Airmen's fight against racism occurred with the episode at Selfridge Base. After the 332nd was moved from Tuskegee to Selfridge Base in Michigan in 1943, the airmen were shocked to see segregation on the base, considering there were state and military policies forbidding racist discrimination.[36] As they prepared for war, however, the new 553rd Squadron moved to Selfridge in winter of 1943, inheriting the segregated base.[37] The 553rd did not settle for this segregation, as by working together, the officers sought to desegregate the officer's club on base starting in 1944.[38]

Tuskegee Airmen Alexander Jefferson recounts the attempt to end the segregation at the Selfridge officer's club:

> And after that we were assigned to Selfridge Air Force Base in Michigan right north of Detroit, 25 miles north of Detroit… And it was at Selfridge we were clamoring to get into the Officers Club, segregated. On the base there were approximately 35 to 40 black pilots and with the enlisted men and had a tremendous amount of white personnel, white officers and personnel. But we were denied entrance into the Lufberg Hall. Lufberg Hall,

[36] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 191.
[37] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, 199.
[38] Haulman, *The Tuskegee Airmen Chronology,* 49.

> the Officers Club. We were turned away many times… One day I was out over Lake Huron flying gunnery… The radio said, all officers report to the post theater on the double, right as you are… So we went in, had a seat, and all of a sudden down the aisle comes a two-star general. And we said, what the heck's going on? He ranted on and on, he talked about two or three minutes, and these are the words I remember all my life. Gentlemen, this is my airfield. As long as I'm in command, there will be no socialization between white and colored officers.[39]

The last part of the quote illustrates the situation the Tuskegee Airmen almost always found themselves in within the bases throughout the war: despite there being army regulations prohibiting discrimination, many AAF officials and even the War Department supported keeping officer's clubs, and other facilities segregated.[40] By openly opposing the regulations, the Tuskegee Airmen had to not only train for combat, but also fight for basic equal treatment on the base. The Selfridge officer's club protest was not the end of their fight for equality.

Upon the arrival of the 477th Medium Bombardment Group at Freeman Field in Indiana in the spring of 1945, the AAF remarked there would be separate officer's clubs; however, when the airmen looked at them, they found their club to be much less lively than that of the white officers.[41] Like Selfridge, the airmen wanted to bring an end to the segregated officer's clubs at Freeman Field.[42] Knowing the risk of potentially losing their career, the airmen attempted several times to enter the club, each time being denied entrance and even arrested, but eventually released, these attempts angered the officials on the base, who then took action.[43] With the protests, the commanding officer wanted to keep the clubs segregated and desired to get the black officers to support the segregation by claiming their endorsement; however, with many of

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[39] Alexander Jefferson, interview by Lloyd Sweet, *Interview with Alexander Jefferson,* From the Library of Congress, *Veterans History Project.* Transcript. Accessed on https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.27677/transcript?ID=mv0001 (accessed Dec. 27, 2019).

[40] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 205.

[41] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, 222-27.

[42] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, 227-28.

[43] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, 227-37.

the officers refusing to support his order, 101 of the black officers were placed under arrest.[44] With the eventual release of all 101 officers, the episode at Freeman Field marks a scene of greater significance for the Tuskegee Airmen.[45] This incident illustrates the airmen's dedication to their fight for rights for blacks in the military. Going further, the airmen were willing to put their careers in jeopardy in the hopes for victories not only for themselves, but for African-Americans' rights.

With these protests, it's interesting to examine how the AAF defended their segregatory measures. Frequently used by the AAF to defend their actions, they argued since the airmen had separate facilities, it was not racist to maintain these standards of segregation.[46] Some historians even cite the "separate-but-equal" ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* as the influence for the policy and defense of the AAF.[47] Compared to these claims, reality for the Tuskegee Airmen was often in an unequal environment. Most glaringly was the disparity between the officer clubs at Freeman Field, which eventually led to protests.[48] Despite the claims from the AAF, it was evident the airmen were not being provided equal facilities. Additionally, being placed in these unequal environment directly fueled the airmen's desire to fight for more rights. Tuskegee Airmen within America during the war often faced harsh discriminatory practices and treatment deliberately protested the segregation knowing it contributed to the battle greater than themselves. The Tuskegee Airmen's refusal to accept segregatory policies marked their desire for success in their fight against racism.

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[44] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 237-38.
[45] Haulman, *The Tuskegee Airmen Chronology,* 145.
[46] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts,"198-239.
[47] Lawrence J. Paszek, "Negroes and the Air Force, 1939-1949," *Military Affairs* 31, no. 1 (1967): 1, doi:10.2307/1985212.
[48] Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, "War on Two Fronts," 227.

With the war coming to a close, and many airmen coming home from Europe, integration within the military had still not been achieved. After coming home and still facing racism, the airmen eventually gained integration in 1948.[49] With Executive Order 9981, President Truman called that, "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin."[50] Additionally, some sources claim the Tuskegee Airmen's success was what influenced Truman, including Tuskegee Airman Harold Brown:

> There is no way in the world that Truman would have integrated had the 332nd Fighter Group been failures. We were expected to fail. The whole thing was called the Tuskegee Experiment, really. And no one -- the military in particular was just waiting for it to fail. It didn't fail. We were extremely successful. And had we not been successful, I cannot see Truman doing what he did and integrating the way he did.[51]

Brown's comments cement the fact Tuskegee Airmen were fighting for black's advancement. With his insight, Brown again highlights the importance of success for the Tuskegee Airmen as he figures these advancements in their rights would not have happened had they not excelled in all aspects of their careers.

CONCLUSION

With Tuskegee Airmen fighting in combat abroad, and fighting racism in America, the significance of their success was monumental. Throughout the war, the airmen knew the advancement of blacks would be influenced by their outcome, increasing the pressure on success. By proving successful in combat overseas, they proved many wrong. In America, they never settled for segregation and put it all the line for the advancement of African-Americans'

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[49] Percy, "Jim Crow," 809-10.

[50] Harry Truman, "Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces" (*Executive Order*, White House, 1948), Accessed on https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=84&page=transcript.

[51] Harold Brown, interview by Mark Rumsey, *'I Just Wanted To Fly.'*

rights. Confronting tremendous obstacles, the Tuskegee Airmen battled more than just enemies in the war, but for the advancement of African-Americans' rights. This paper does not fully look in depth on the influence of the Tuskegee Airmen after the war, or go more in depth on all of the men who contributed to the Tuskegee Airmen's fights and successes. Also, the paper does not examine the situation of the airmen directly after the war. However, these shortcomings provide areas to further research the influence of the Tuskegee Airmen on the civil rights movement and military decisions after the war. Advancements in research will only further the understanding of the significance of such an influential fighting force as the Tuskegee Airmen.

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