

The Tuskegee Airmen

African American pilots were not allowed to fly for the U.S. military in World War I. Even after the Harlem Hellfighters of that war proved the courage and ability of Black soldiers in combat, a 1925 Army War College classified report concluded among other things that the intelligence of African Americans “was lower than that of whites” and that they lacked courage, were superstitious, and were dominated by moral and character weaknesses. Others – African Americans and white Americans – believed differently and advocated for change.

During the 1920s and 30s, civil rights groups such as NAACP and Black newspapers such as the Chicago Defender began to lobby the U.S. government to allow African Americans to fly for the military. By 1938 President Roosevelt, with war looming again in Europe, realized our country needed to expand pilot training and encouraged Congress to establish civilian pilot training programs at colleges and universities, including at Tuskegee Institute.

There was still skepticism about the trained pilots’ abilities to fly and participate in the war effort, but in March of 1941, Eleanor Roosevelt, on a visit to Tuskegee Airbase, used her influence to allay some of those fears. She requested that Charles Alfred Anderson, the head of the Institute’s Civilian Pilot Training Program and chief flying instructor there – and the only African American pilot to have received his commercial transport license – take her up for a flight. Her concerned Secret Service agents threatened to call the President. Stubborn Mrs. Roosevelt persisted, and Anderson gave her an hour-long ride. When back on the ground, Roosevelt proclaimed, “Well, you can fly alright!” She also had photographers record the event and wrote about it in her weekly column. She used her influence to convince the nation that African Americans were perfectly capable of piloting planes and then worked to convince President Roosevelt to establish an African American military squadron. Thus, in July of 1941, Tuskegee Army Airfield was dedicated and the “Tuskegee Experiment” – the Army Air Corps program to train African Americans to fly and maintain combat aircraft – began.

The first squadron deployed in 1942. Over the course of the war, and despite continued skepticism, resistance, and roadblocks, the Tuskegee Airmen’s nearly 1,000 pilots and 14,000 navigators, bombardiers, instructors, aircraft and engine mechanics, control tower operators and other maintenance, and support staff proved themselves invaluable to the success of the Allies. The bomber escorts earned the name Red Tails for the distinctive red color on the tails of their P-51 Mustangs and the affectionate name Red Tail Angels for the protection they gave to the heavy bombers they flew alongside.

As a result of the Tuskegee Airmen’s success in Africa and Europe in World War II, President Truman in 1948 made the decision to integrate the United States armed forces.

One Tuskegee pilot, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., became the first African American Air Force general. Some Airmen stayed in the military and served as aviation instructors. Some returned to civilian jobs. All served as role models and pioneers for the many African Americans who have followed them into the military services. However, it was not until 1963, after most of the Tuskegee Airmen were too old to fly, that Continental Airlines finally hired the first African American commercial pilot – and only after the pilot, Marlon DeWitt Green sued for being rejected and took his case to the U.S. Supreme Court. Green was too young to have been a Tuskegee Airman.

Fortunately, interviews, documentaries, books, and films flesh out the stories of the Tuskegee Airmen. Below are a few suggestions for where to look for more information.

Interviews with Tuskegee Airmen:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ktt2s9bQtfY&feature=emb_rel_end

Tuskegee Airman Harold Brown

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfqF7vbF83c>

Tuskegee Airman John Leahr

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNpSwVBeXtl&feature=emb_rel_end

Tuskegee Airmen visit the White House in 2012 for an airing of the film "Red Tails"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruMCpR30MZQ>

Pritzker Museum-sponsored interview of Tuskegee Airman and Chicagoan Lawton Wilkerson

Documentaries:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=095g3hMq5Eq>

Story of the Red Tale Angels chapter 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFEmqvyM0Pk>

Story of the Red Tale Angels chapter 2

Films:

2012 film "Red Tails" available on HBO Max and Prime Video

"Double Victory: The Tuskegee Airmen at War", a George Lucas 90-minute documentary

Books:

Black and White Airmen by John Gleishman. His story of World War II pilots John Leahr and Herb Heilbrun.

Keep Your Airspeed Up: The Story of a Tuskegee Airman by Harold H. Brown and Marsha S. Bordner. The story of Harold Brown, who in 6th grade decided that he wanted to be a military fighter pilot instead of a pianist.

See the website pritzkermilitary.org for other suggestions.