

Name: _____ Class: _____

Tuskegee Airmen

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2017

The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of African-American fighter pilots and bomber pilots, including their support crew, who flew for the U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II. Despite facing racial discrimination, their missions were some of the most successful in the American military. As you read, identify the challenges faced by the Tuskegee Airmen and then analyze the impact that this group had on race relations in America.

- [1] When most people think of the Civil Rights Movement and the end of legalized segregation in the U.S., they think of the 1960s. However, the movement did not start then, and it was not confined to the streets and diners in the South. One of the earliest successes for racial equality actually occurred in the 1940s in the U.S. military, thanks to the hard work of a group known as the Tuskegee Airmen.



"Eight Tuskegee Airmen in front of a P-40 fighter aircraft" by Signaleer is in the public domain.

Tuskegee Airmen: an Early Civil Rights Success

The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of African American fighter pilots and bomber pilots, including their support crew, who trained at the Tuskegee Air Fields in Alabama during World War II. They became the 332nd Fighter Group and the 477th Bombardment Group¹ in the U.S. Army Air Forces at the height of the war, and their missions were some of the most successful in the American military.

During World War I, several decades earlier, African Americans were denied the ability to become fighter pilots and help the war effort. This sparked a growing controversy in the African American community. In April of 1939, after a 20-year battle, Congress finally allocated funds to set up a special division to train African American pilots to fly fighter planes.

Most people were highly skeptical of the new unit. Racism was still very present in and out of the military, and many Army officials did not believe African Americans had the skills or the intelligence to learn everything a pilot needs to know.

1. A bombardment group, or bomb group, was a group of bomber aircraft the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) during World War II.

Training for Battle

- [5] Over 400 African Americans enlisted to be in the new division. The entrance requirements were very strict, including high experience requirements and a series of IQ and other intelligence tests. Because of discriminatory² policies in the Army, all the officers in charge of the new recruits were white.

The practical training took place at the Tuskegee Air Fields in Alabama, and the trainees also took courses at Tuskegee University nearby. They quickly proved their personal drive to learn and their skills as pilots. Their proficiency³ struck blows at previous race-based policies in the military; they soon needed to undergo highly advanced training that African Americans had previously been barred from receiving.

The Tuskegee Air program gained national attention when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt paid them a visit in 1941. She rode as a passenger of pilot C. Alfred “Chief” Anderson, who had become an unofficial leader and tutor in the group because of his skills. After the trip, she remarked, “Well, you can fly all right.”

Combat-ready

By 1943, in the middle of the U.S.’s involvement in World War II, the Tuskegee Airmen were ready for combat. In one of their earliest missions, a group was assigned to attack a strategically located island in the Mediterranean Sea, near Italy. They successfully got over 1,000 Italian troops to surrender and were instrumental⁴ in the capture of the island.

In later assignments, they became most famous for their ability to escort larger bomber planes. The airmen became known as Red Tails, or Red Tailed Angels, because of the distinctive red markings on the tails of their small fighter planes. Soon the sight of a swarm of Red Tailed escort planes kept enemy fighters from trying to attack the bomber planes they protected.

- [10] The 332nd Fighter Group became one of the most successful squadrons of fighter planes in the Army. For example, in March of 1945, they destroyed three German fighter jets and damaged five more without losing any of their own planes to the enemy.

Continuing Racism

The 477th Bombardment Group faced more challenges, as one of their early commanders was an overt racial segregationist.⁵ The pilots wanted to be treated as well as their white counterparts, which included having access to an officer’s club on their training base in Michigan. Their commander would not allow them to enter.

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2. **Discriminatory** (*adjective*): making or showing an unfair preference for one category over another, in terms of race, age, sex etc.
 3. **Proficiency** (*noun*): a high degree of competence or skill; expertise
 4. **Instrumental** (*adjective*): serving or acting as an instrument or means; useful; helpful
 5. Segregationists believed that people of different races should be kept apart. In this instance, the commander believed black and white pilots should not fly in the same unit.

After two transfers to two different states and continuing discrimination, a large group of the pilots forced their way into an officer's club in Indiana, and over 100 of them were arrested for disobeying orders. The charges were soon dropped because they were so unfair, but the events demonstrated the severe racism African American military personnel continued to face even though they were so successful.

Legacy and the End of Segregation

At the end of World War II the Tuskegee Airmen were well-known for being some of the best pilots in the military. The escort groups had among the lowest loss records in the Army Air Forces. Their success was due to their extensive pre-war experience and their personal strength and drive during training and combat.

In the years after the war, the U.S. Air Force became a separate entity from the Army, but many of its white squadrons⁶ were at least somewhat under-qualified for the tasks they needed to perform. However, they could not hire any experienced black airmen because of segregation policies. This eventually led President Truman to sign Executive Order 9981 in 1948, which called for equal treatment policies and effectively ended segregation in the military. This was one of the earliest steps to ending segregation across the country; it would not have been possible without the hard work and expertise of the Tuskegee Airmen.

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6. A squadron in the air force, army aviation, or naval aviation is mainly a unit made up of a number of military aircraft and their aircrews.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes the central idea of the article? [RI.2]
 - A. The Tuskegee Airmen started the Civil Rights Movement by proving that black pilots are more skilled than white pilots.
 - B. The Tuskegee Airmen proved that black and white pilots had the same potential, which helped break racial barriers.
 - C. Despite breaking racial barriers, the Tuskegee Airmen faced racial discrimination and were never recognized for their military success.
 - D. Black pilots in the military had to work twice as hard as white pilots, and due to a lack of funds they were underprepared.

2. Which statement best describes the relationship between the Tuskegee Airmen and the Civil Rights Movement? [RI.3]
 - A. The desegregation of the military is commonly viewed as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.
 - B. The success of the Tuskegee Airmen quickly led to the desegregation of other institutions in America.
 - C. The success of the Tuskegee Airmen is one of the earliest victories in the fight for racial equality in America.
 - D. The Tuskegee Airmen organized many protests in Michigan and Alabama to force the government to desegregate the military.

3. PART A: Which of the following best describes the meaning of “struck blows” in paragraph 6? [RI.4]
 - A. challenged
 - B. protested
 - C. smacked
 - D. exposed

4. PART B: Which quotation from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. “all the officers in charge of the new recruits were white” (Paragraph 5)
 - B. “The entrance requirements were very strict” (Paragraph 5)
 - C. “They quickly proved their personal drive” (Paragraph 6)
 - D. “program gained national attention” (Paragraph 7)

5. How does the section entitled "Continuing Racism" (Paragraphs 11-12) contribute to the overall meaning of the article? [RI.5]

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. The Tuskegee Airmen chose to fight in World War II for the United States, even though they were treated like second-class citizens in their own country. What do you think motivated these pilots? How, eventually, did they overcome this adversity?
2. African Americans also played a prominent role in the American Civil War. Over 200,000 African Americans, equaling 10% of the entire military force, served in the Union military. 37,000 died fighting for the Union. Most were escaped slaves who served in segregated units under white officers. What similarities or differences do you see between the African-American soldiers in the Civil War and World War II? In your opinion, what motivated them?
3. According to this article, the military was essentially desegregated by the end of World War II. Yet, still today, some combat roles in the military are not open to women. Do you think this is an example of discrimination? Why or why not?