

They did more than fight the enemy. They blew open the door to the Air Force for African-Americans.

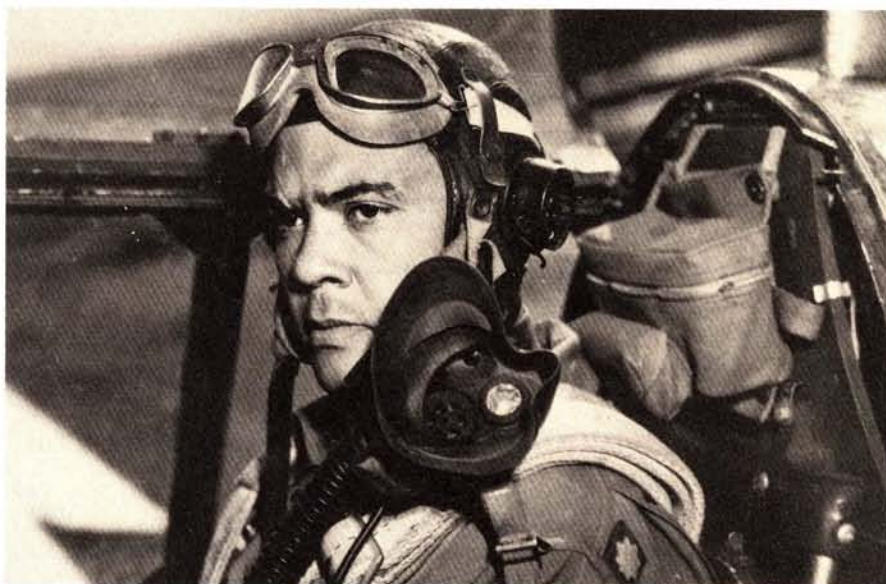
Tuskegee Airmen

By Col. Alan L. Gropman, USAF (Ret.)

THE Army Air Corps in January 1941 contained no African-Americans. One decade later, tens of thousands were serving in a racially integrated Air Force, working in every specialty. This revolutionary reform was inspired by the success of America's first black combat pilots, airmen who flew in World War II and in the immediate postwar era. The aviators were trained at Tuskegee AAF, Ala., and have always been known as the Tuskegee Airmen.

The Air Force was the first service to integrate its ranks fully. It began the process in 1949 because the Tuskegee Airmen, despite suffering terrible discrimination in World War II, had demonstrated that they could fly and fight against Hitler's best. This achievement undermined the foundation of segregation—the belief that blacks were inferior to whites. If blacks could arm, maintain, and fly airplanes as well as whites could, no one could assert a legitimate basis for segregation.

And on this last point, no question remained. During the last phase of World War II, the Tuskegee Airmen escort squadrons were employed as



Col. Benjamin O. Davis (above) led the way. In an address to the Tuskegee Airmen Convention in 1995, Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, USAF Chief of Staff, recalled one mission on which Colonel Davis led fifty-four aviators on the first Italian-based bomber-escort mission to Berlin: "You fought off waves of German fighters and . . . made history because you shot down three German jet fighters while losing only one friendly fighter. No bombers were lost."



frequently as any other fighter squadrons in their theater, and they were uniquely successful in defending AAF B-17s and B-24s against German attack. In the post-World War II period, the service's lone black flying wing continued to be a competent fighter organization, often winning major awards.

Many who have studied the subject of armed forces integration credit President Harry S. Truman with this reform. The fact is, however, that the Air Force's racial integration announcement came in April 1948, months before the presidential decree. Only in July 1948 did the President announce his Executive Order 9981. At that, the order called only for equal opportunity and never mentioned integration.

The magnitude of the Air Force's decision to integrate is increased by the record of US military studies in the 1920s and 1930s.

Ten Times Wrong

Shortly after the end of World War I, the War Department asked the Army War College to study the possible military role of blacks, with an eye to expanding their participation

in the combat arms. Between 1924 and 1939, the Army War College investigated the underemployment of blacks on ten separate occasions. Each time, racism kept the students and faculty from reaching rational, fair-minded conclusions.

It seems inane now, but these studies asserted that blacks possessed brains significantly smaller than those of white troops and were predisposed to lack physical courage. The reports maintained that the Army should increase opportunities for blacks to help meet manpower requirements but claimed that they should always be commanded by whites and should always serve in segregated units.

The Air Corps at that time did not employ blacks in any role. However, President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 directed the Air Corps to build an all-black flying unit. The presidential order propelled the air organization to create the 99th Pursuit Squadron. To develop the required pilot force, the Air Corps opened a new training base in central Alabama, near Tuskegee.

Central Alabama was a terrible place to train black pilots. The whites

in the area were opposed to the very existence of a black flying training base and openly hostile to the trainees. Life off the post was often downright dangerous for the airmen.

Their first commander, Col. Frederick V. H. Kimble, was a poor choice for the job; he was at best indifferent and in all likelihood antagonistic to their success. Moreover, the flying instructors at the airfield during World War II, with the exception of Col. Noel F. Parrish, refused to socialize with the black pilots. All but Colonel Parrish refused to join the Tuskegee AAF Officers' Club. Once in the Mediterranean combat zone, Tuskegee Airmen were deliberately isolated in the 33d Fighter Group.

Because there was only one black fighting outfit, promotion in the organization was severely limited. There was only one colonel, and because he survived his combat missions, no others reached that rank. The same was true of squadron commanders in the four fighter units. If they managed to endure, nobody else could move up to their rank, and nobody did. A Tuskegee Airman could not fill a vacancy in any other fighter



Above is Col. Noel F. Parrish, the only instructor at Tuskegee AAF, Ala., who would socialize with the black pilots during World War II.

unit. Few Tuskegee Airmen rose above the rank of lieutenant from 1942 through the end of the war, despite the fact that many flew three times the number of combat missions required of fighter pilots before departing the combat zone.

Threat to Morale

All of these elements harmed morale, and the spirit of the 332d Fighter Group (which, by 1944, had united Tuskegee Airmen from the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302d Fighter Squadrons) was somewhat damaged by segregation and the discrimination that accompanied it. However, the 332d's attitude and *esprit* were positive compared to that of the other Tuskegee Airmen flying unit, the 477th Bomb Group (Medium). The bomber group never got into combat as a result of its white commander's bigoted personnel policies. The commander was eventually fired because he had sabotaged his unit but not before he did great damage to the spirit of his troops.

Given the daily indignities faced by the Tuskegee Airmen, it is something of a miracle that they accomplished all they did.

In the spring of 1941, the first African-American enlisted men began training to become maintainers and the first thirteen pilot candidates entered training. From that time until the end of the war, Tuskegee AAF graduated 950 pilots and formed four



Brig. Gen. Idwal Edwards, a personnel specialist, saw segregation as an inefficient and defective policy and sought to eliminate it.

fighter squadrons and four medium bomb squadrons. About half the pilot trainees flew in combat.

These men flew more than 10,000 sorties. During 200 escort missions to heavily defended targets in Germany and Romania, the Tuskegee Airmen never lost a friendly bomber to an enemy fighter. In 1944 and 1945, they shot down more than 100 enemy aircraft in air-to-air combat and destroyed many more on the ground. They also sank a destroyer with machine guns (another unique accomplishment) and destroyed many locomotives and other transportation assets.

Because of the success of the 332d Fighter Group and several other much smaller units, the War Department again reexamined the role of blacks in the armed forces. This massive study, "Participation of Negro Troops in the Post-War Military Establishment," concluded that blacks with the same training and aptitude as whites performed satisfactorily.

One of the general officers who supervised this study was USAAF Brig. Gen. Idwal H. Edwards, who was fully aware of the accomplishments (and trials) of the Tuskegee Airmen. General Edwards had investigated racial problems affecting the Army and the Army Air Forces between 1944 and 1947 and believed segregation was inefficient and, worse, incited racial disharmony and often provoked riots. He later became the

Air Force's first deputy chief of staff for Personnel.

Dead-End Policies

General Edwards believed that segregation was a defective personnel practice. The services were forced to place educated and high-aptitude blacks in all-black units, and almost all of these were support units. Thus, blacks who had sufficient education and aptitude to rise in rank and contribute in combat areas were prevented from doing so.

After the war, the number of highly skilled black officers and enlisted men exceeded the needs of the 332d Fighter Wing (which had succeeded the 332d Fighter Group), then based at Lockbourne AAB, Ohio. Despite their skills, they could not fill shortages elsewhere because no other flying organization used skilled and trained blacks. Conversely, vacancies in the units of the 332d could not be filled by personnel in the rest of the Air Force because these units had to remain segregated.

General Edwards knew this practice was wasteful, but he could do nothing about it so long as the Air Force was segregated. When the Air Force became independent in 1947, General Edwards directed Lt. Col. Jack F. Marr, a subordinate staff officer, to study racial segregation to see if abandoning it was advisable.

At Lockbourne, the all-black fighter wing's aircraft were flown and successfully maintained by blacks. Colonel Marr also found that competent blacks worked alongside competent whites (though the two groups never messed or billeted together) in a friction-free atmosphere at other bases, despite official segregation. The Colonel concluded that USAF could desegregate safely and that sound management called for discontinuing the separation of the races.

Colonel Marr's study confirmed General Edwards's thinking. In the spring of 1948, the personnel chief convinced Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, the first Air Force Chief of Staff, and Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the vice chief, that sound personnel management practices demanded racial integration. These general officers had no trouble selling this idea to their civilian leaders, Secretary Stuart Symington and Assistant Secretary Eugene M. Zuckert, because both abhorred racial segregation. The Air

Force, furthermore, was in harmony with the thinking of Defense Secretary James V. Forrestal, who also favored integration.

Secretary Zuckert and General Spaatz announced in April 1948 that USAF would soon integrate because it accepted no doctrine of racial superiority or inferiority.

The Air Force was the first service to announce this dramatic change. At the time that the Air Force was declaring its intent to integrate, Secretary of the Army Kenneth C. Royall was asserting that the Army had no intention whatsoever of racially integrating. He also formally complained to the Secretary of Defense that the Air Force was breaking the united front and demanded that Secretary Forrestal stop Air Force integration.

With hindsight, it is easy to see how Secretary Royall and the Army acted as they did; they had no experience comparable to the Air Force's success with the Tuskegee Airmen. During World War II, all-black Army units, except the 92d and 93d Divisions, were tiny, and all of them, including the two infantry divisions, had white leaders at the top and in many other supervisory positions. In the postwar military, there were no Army (or Navy or Marine) units like Lockbourne's 332d Fighter Wing, an outfit with a complex and highly demanding mission that every day gave the lie to the basis for segregation.



Colonel Davis put to rest the myth that whites would not work for black officers. General Fogleman credited Davis's men with proving "to people with unbiased eyes that the Tuskegee Airmen could fly and fight with the best of them."

Selling the Policy

It took General Edwards about a year to carry out his policy because some senior officers had to be sold on integration. However, there was widespread support. In addition to the Chief and vice chief of staff, supporters included Gen. Nathan F. Twining, who commanded the World War II Tuskegee Airmen as Fifteenth Air Force commander, and Lt. Gen. Elwood R. "Pete" Quesada, who commanded the postwar Tactical Air Command, which included the 332d FW at Lockbourne.

Some senior Air Force officers claimed that the country was not ready for military integration, or that the military ought to wait for civilian integration, or that they and the troops would not cooperate.

A persistent contention was that whites would never tolerate black supervision, but even that objection was buried by Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., commander of the Tuskegee Airmen at Lockbourne from 1946 to 1949 and base commander.

It was Colonel Davis who led the 332d in combat in both ground-attack and escort roles, and it was he who demanded a level of professionalism and discipline that earned the praise of Gen. Ira C. Eaker himself. In the postwar period, therefore, Colonel Davis deliberately planned to overcome the old saw that whites would never work for blacks.

Although the 332d Fighter Wing at Lockbourne was all black, the tenant units at the base were white, and these outfits had to work with their black hosts for support. More significantly, the civilians employed by the 332d and Lockbourne were white and had black supervisors. Every inspector general inspection conducted by Tactical Air Command in this period determined that Colonel Davis and his post had smooth and harmonious personnel relations. Whites would indeed work for blacks.

Colonel Davis and his men thus had destroyed another myth.



Once in Europe, General Fogleman noted, the Tuskegee Airmen in "a series of 200 bomber-escort missions over Germany . . . became known as the Red Tail Devils" and compiled an enviable combat record, which would not have been possible without top-notch maintainers like these.



General Fogleman closed by summing up the combat record: "By war's end, the Tuskegee Airmen had shot down 111 enemy aircraft and destroyed another 150 on the ground. They disabled more than 600 boxcars, locomotives, and rolling stock and sank one German destroyer and forty other boats and barges . . . and never lost a bomber to enemy fighters." In the process, they paved the way for Lt. Gen. Benjamin Davis (right); the US military's first black four-star general, Gen. Daniel "Chappie" James; and thousands of others.

The Air Force pressed on with integration. General Edwards briefed the uniformed leadership in April 1949, telling the senior commanders that the "Air Force [had] adopted a policy of integration under which Negro officers and airmen may be assigned to any duty in any Air Force unit or activity in accordance with the qualifications of the individual [and the need] of the service." This was done, he said, out of a need for efficiency, economy, and effective airpower.

The 332d was to be broken up, and its pilots and mechanics were to be sent to formerly all-white units based on the needs of the Air Force. According to General Edwards, blacks entering the Air Force would be asked to meet the "same standards as anyone else and will be classified, assigned, promoted, or eliminated in accordance with standards that will apply equally to all personnel."

A Single Criterion

General Edwards put no limits on the number of blacks who could qualify for integrated positions, and he insisted that the only criterion for employment was ability. He directed

that commanders give this new policy their wholehearted support and undivided attention, for without their backing and care it would not work. General Edwards then promulgated several documents—the regulation calling for integration and a classified supplement to the regulation that insisted the men be assigned according to their specialties (barring commanders from employing engine mechanics as janitors and so forth) and that told commanders that they were personally responsible for making the new policy work.

By the end of 1949, 7,402 African-Americans still were serving in all-black units. But 11,456 were serving in mixed-race units, and 7,033 were in transit to units that had formerly been all white. Blacks at that point made up seven percent of the enlisted force and twelve percent of the troops in Air Force basic training. By the end of 1951, the last all-

black service unit was dissolved and the Air Force was officially integrated.

Colonel Davis departed Lockbourne for the Air War College and from there to the Pentagon and from there to command of a fighter wing in Korea, eventually reaching the rank of lieutenant general. After General Davis retired, another Tuskegee Airman, Daniel "Chappie" James, became a four-star general and commander in chief of North American Air Defense Command.

Unquestionably, the Air Force benefitted from employing people of all races based solely on ability, and so did the United States. This essential reform began with the Tuskegee Airmen and their demonstration of discipline, skill, and courage. This reality was made explicit by Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman at the Tuskegee Airmen Convention last August in Atlanta, Ga.

"In the end," said General Fogleman, "the men and the women of the Tuskegee experience broke forever the myths that allowed segregation, inequity, and injustice to exist with a thin veil of legitimacy.

"You engaged one of the most formidable military establishments in the world—the Luftwaffe. . . . When you engaged this force in combat and came away victorious, you carried not only your own pride and your personal accomplishments but also the idea that never again would anybody deny a man or woman the opportunity to serve our country in any capacity because of the color of his or her skin."

General Fogleman concluded, "We look back with pride on your outstanding accomplishments—your skill in combat, your strength of character in the face of prejudice and racism. Despite the bigotry, you would not be denied the opportunity to serve your country in desperate times. 'Service before self' is a key concept of our modern-day Air Force. 'Service before self' was more than just a phrase to the Tuskegee Airmen. It was a way of life." ■

Col. Alan L. Gropman, USAF (Ret.), an instructor at National Defense University, has published widely on the topic of the Tuskegee Airmen. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, a book review of Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan, by Ronald H. Spector, appeared in the June 1986 issue.