

Benjamin O. Davis Jr. Gets Fourth Star

Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. was "the first black everything" in the United States Air Force, says one historian. He was the service's first African-American lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant colonel, and so forth.

Now, the retired World War II hero and race relations pioneer has won another laurel: his fourth star. At a White House ceremony Dec. 9, President Clinton made Davis a four-star general in honorarium. He is only the third Air Force commander to be presented with this honor, the others being Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker and Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, who received their promotions in 1985.

Despite his distinguished Air Force career, Davis is best known for his role as a commander of the all-black Tuskegee Airmen during World War II. The son of an Army general, he had graduated near the top of his West Point class, despite the fact that none of the cadets in four years ever spoke to him except on official business.

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the creation of a black military flying group in 1940, Davis won his chance to train as a pilot. In 1942, he was named commander of the 99th Pursuit Squadron in Tuskegee, Ala. He led the 99th, and later the 332d Fighter Group, into battle as bomber escorts in Europe. His forces never lost a bomber to enemy fire.

"He was a straight arrow and really made a lot of guys toe the line, and they appreciate it today, even though they didn't appreciate it then," said Woodrow Crockett, who served with Davis on 149 World War II combat missions.

After the war, Davis served as commander of Lockbourne AAB, Ohio; helped form the Thunderbirds aerial demonstration team; and commanded 13th Air Force at Clark AB, Philippines, among other posts. He retired from active duty in 1970.

Tuskegee Airmen veterans, in conjunction with the Air Force Association and such Congressional allies as Sen. John McCain (R) of Arizona, lobbied successfully for Davis to receive this rare post-career promotion.

"General Davis richly deserves this honor," said Thomas J. McKee, AFA national president.