

The Tuskegee Airmen were the first Black military aviators in the U.S. Army Air Corps (AAC), a precursor of the U.S. Air Force. The tails of their planes were painted red for identification purposes, earning them the enduring nickname "Red Tails." Though these were the best-known of the Tuskegee Airmen, Black aviators also served on bomber crews in the 477th Bombardment Group, formed in 1944. A popular myth arose during the war—and persisted afterwards—that in more than 200 escort missions, the Tuskegee Airmen had never lost a bomber. The truth wasn't uncovered until years later, when a detailed analysis found that enemy aircraft shot down at least 25 bombers they escorted. Nonetheless, that was a much better success rate than other escort groups of the 15th Air Force, which lost an average of 46 bombers.

Tuskegee Airmen Legacy By the time the 332nd flew its last combat mission on April 26, 1945, two weeks before the German surrender, the Tuskegee Airmen had flown more than 15,000 individual sorties over two years in combat. They had destroyed or damaged 36 German planes in the air and 237 on the ground, as well as nearly 1,000 rail cars and transport vehicles and a German destroyer. In all, 66 Tuskegee-trained aviators were killed in action during World War II, while another 32 were captured as POWs after being shot down.

Army forces Integrated After their brave service, the Tuskegee Airmen returned home to a country where they continued to face systematic racism and prejudice. But they did represent an important step forward in preparing the nation for the racial integration of the military, which began with President Harry Truman who issued Executive Order 9981 desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces and mandating equality of opportunity and treatment on July 26, 1948. A number of the original Tuskegee Airmen would go on to longer careers in the military, including Davis, who would become the first Black general in the new U.S. Air Force; George S. "Spanky" Roberts, who became the first Black commander of a racially integrated Air Force unit before retiring as a colonel; and Daniel "Chappie" James Jr., who would become the nation's first Black four-star general in 1975.

Trained at the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama, they flew more than 15,000 individual sorties in Europe and North Africa during World War II. Their impressive performance earned them more than 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, and helped encourage the eventual integration of the U.S. armed forces.

Segregation in the Armed Forces During the 1920s and '30s, the exploits of record-setting pilots like Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart had captivated the nation, and thousands of young men and women clamored to follow in their footsteps. But young African Americans who aspired to become pilots met with significant obstacles, starting with the widespread (racist) belief that Black people could not learn to fly or operate sophisticated aircraft. But as the AAC began ramping up its training program, Black newspapers like the Chicago Defender and Pittsburgh Courier joined civil rights groups like the NAACP in arguing that Black Americans be included.