The historic Wright Brothers flight in 1903 sparked enthusiasm for flying in all Americans. At the dawn of World War I, African Americans faced obstacles in most areas of life.

There were no leadership roles or advanced training available to any military. Many thought they did not qualify for modern combat duty—especially aircraft. Black pilots were well-trained or trained overseas.

Eugene Bullard
Barracks detail, street sweepers

The first licensed black pilot in the United States, Bessie Coleman, was awarded her pilot's license in 1922 by the Federation Aéronautique Internationale. Born in Texas, she learned French before being allowed to France to start flight training. She trained in France, becoming the first American woman to achieve a black woman as a student.

After her flight training in France, she returned to America to pursue a career as a “barnstormer,” performing exhibition flights across the United States before her death in 1926 in an aircraft accident.

Although she only performed for four years, her brief career inspired many young blacks to enter the field of aviation. Coleman donated much of the proceeds from her shows to several civil rights organizations.

Alfred "Chief" Anderson
A self-taught rector pilot at Tuskegee, he was the first black with the Albert Pansky to complete a transcontinental round trip flight. Quoted by Eleanor Roosevelt as well, you can fly all right.

"The Flying Hoboes’ (1932)
When pilots James Hamlett and Thomas C. Allen transferred from Los Angeles to Long Island in 1932, they made history for African Americans.

Chauncey Spencer (1906-2002)
At the age of ten, Chauncey fell in love with flying, yet after graduating from college, no aviation school in Virginia could accept him because of his color. He moved to Chicago in 1929 and joined with a group of African American aviators in organizing the National Aeronautic Association of America (NAAA). In May 1939, he and fellow aviator Dale Lawrence White, also an NAAA member, flew a rented Curtiss-Wright biplane with only four flight instructions in less than four that started in Chicago and ended in Washington, DC. Breaking that son in Europe was momentous; they demonstrated the aviation abilities of “Negroes” and lobbied Congress to include people of color in the Civil War. Spencer returned to Washington, DC, and announced the flight for the American Army Corps. Their flight drew national attention and proved that African Americans could be an asset contrary to the beliefs and opinions of most Army Air Corps and government leaders. They met with Harry Truman and others in Congress, convincing them to support their cause.

The Tuskegee Institute Training Program (TITP) increased the number of qualified black pilots.

- 14 pilots trained to operate basic African American flight training.
- 1 still excluded from military pilot training.
- Aviation Cadet program welcomed limited to officers, barracks detail, street sweepers.

Aviation pioneer, educator and activist, Willa Brown was instrumental in establishing the Coffey School of Aeronautics and in doing so, fulfilled Bessie Coleman's long-standing dream of an all-black flight school. With a master's degree from Northwestern University and a Master Mechanic's Certificate, Willa became the first African American woman to earn a commercial pilot's license. She was also the first African American to achieve an officer's rank in the Civil Air Patrol and lead the fight to integrate African Americans into the U.S. Army Corps.

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The Civilian Aeronautics Association (CAA) authorized Tuskegee
for full compliance of Public Law 18 and Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) Act

Civilian Aeronautics Association (CAA) authorized Tuskegee Institute to provide advanced pilot training courses as well as:

- Aircraft Maintenance School at Chanute Air Field, Illinois
- Armament School at Lowry Field, Colorado
- Communications School at Scott Field, Illinois

WHO WERE THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

The Tuskegee Airmen were dedicated, determined young men who volunteered to become America's first black military aviators, at a time when the country was divided by racism, intolerance, skill, prejudice, and isolation. They came from every section of the country, with large numbers coming from New York City, Washington, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit. Each one possessed a strong personal desire to serve the United States of America at the best of his ability.

Those who possessed the physical and mental qualifications were accepted as pilot candidates to be trained initially as single-engine pilots at Rantoul, Illinois. They were then placed in the 100th Bombardment Squadron of the 99th Pursuit (Fighter) Group at the Fort Monroe, Virginia, and the 408th Bombardment Squadron at Augusta, Georgia. After initial training, they were sent to Tuskegee for advanced training. The men were accepted as aviation cadets to be trained "as advancing as speedily as possible, under every qualification, the number of pilots necessary to fulfill the duties of the branch of the service to which they were assigned".

The black airmen who became single-engine or multi-engine pilots were trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF) in Tuskegee Alabama. The first aviation order was then begun in July 1941, and completed training new months later in March 1942. Tuskegee graduated nine officers, and a total of 257 men, mostly single-engine pilots, and 84 multi-engine pilots were trained there.

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Thirteen started in the first class. Five successfully completed the training, one of them being Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a West Point graduate who had been appointed to the U.S. Military Academy by President theodore Roosevelt. The other members were partitioned among the Army Air Forces and the National Guard, and all five received Army Air Corps silver pilot wings. From 1944 through 1946, nine hundred and ninety-four pilots graduated at TAAF, receiving commissions and pilot wings. Black navigators, bombardiers and gunners crews were trained at selected military bases elsewhere in the United States. Mechanics were trained at Chanute Air Base in Rantoul, Illinois until facilities were in place in 1943 at TAAF.

Four hundred and fifty of the pilots who were trained at TAAF served overseas in either the 99th Pursuit Squadron, or the 332nd Fighter Group. The 99th Fighter Squadron trained in and flew F-40 Warhawk aircraft in combat in North Africa, Sicily and Italy from April 1943 until July 1944 when they were transferred to the 332nd Fighter Group in the ETO. The outstanding record of black airman in World War II was accomplished by men whose names will forever live in hallowed memory. Each one accepted the challenge, proudly displayed his skill and determination while expressing a unique urge for freedom and inspiration, and all were inspired by the example of微博 for the subsequent years over 15,000 combat sorties (including 6000+ for the 99th prior to the ETO) were flown, with 950 railcars, trucks, and other motor vehicles destroyed, and 111 German airplanes destroyed in the air, another 150 on the ground.

- 14 Bronze Stars

A DISTINGUISHED WAR RECORD

- Over 15,000 combat sorties (including 6000+ for the 99th prior to the ETO)
- 950 railcars, trucks, and other motor vehicles destroyed
- 14 bronze stars
- 332nd Fighter Group
- 99th Pursuit Squadron
- 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses earned
- 744 Air Medals
- 8 Purple Hearts
- 14 Bronze Stars

The Aircraft Maintenance School
Chanute Air Field, Illinois

The Armament School at Lowry Field, Colorado

The Communications School at Scott Field, Illinois

The Aircraft Maintenance School
Chanute Air Field, Illinois
After pilot cadets passed primary flight training at Tuskegee Institute/Melton Field, they transferred to Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF).

- Little official confidence or support
- Located as a separate, segregated base far away from the center of military activities

Tuskegee Army Air Field became the focal point for training of African American military pilots during World War II.

- Had the facilities, engineering and technical instructors
- Climate for year round flying

The first pilot class of Tuskegee, Class 42-C, had five graduates who completed training on March 7, 1942. A total of 966 fighter and bomber pilots graduated from Tuskegee.

- Four hundred and fifty Black fighter pilots commanded by Lt Col Benjamin O. Davis Jr. flew overseas in North Africa, Italy, and Europe.

The 332nd Fighter Group included the 99th, 100th, 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons.

- Flew 15,553 sorties in 1,578 missions
- In P-40, P-39, P-47 and P-51 aircraft
- Were respected by fellow American bomber crews as the "Red-Tail Angels"
- A near-perfect record in defending escorted bombers
- Their German adversaries both feared and respected them as the "Schwartze Vogelmensohen" or "Black Birdsmen"

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A total of 257 aviation cadets graduated from Tuskegee Army Air Field as B-17 twin engine bomber pilots, and were assigned to the 477th Bombardment Group. The Tuskegee Airmen of the 477th Bombardment Group never saw action in WWII.

However, they earned the respect of fellow bomber crew and military leaders in three fight for equal rights, at Freeman Field, Indiana in April 1945.

- 101 members of the 477th peaceably protested illegal Base Regulation
- "Peaceful protest failure" led to change in command
- Key factor in Executive Order 9981 mandating "equality of treatment and opportunity" in the Armed Services

A total of 966 fighter and bomber pilots graduated from Tuskegee.

- First Graduating Class
  Class 42-C
  A total of 966 fighter and bomber pilots graduated from Tuskegee.

"First Mutiny"
The Tuskegee Airmen and Their Airplanes

The Trainers

The Tuskegee Airmen trained on four main types of aircraft, which were similar to training aircraft flown by pilot trainees at other Army Air Corps training facilities. Among the aircraft flown by the pilots were the PF-17s, BT-13s, AT-6s, and the P-40 Warhawk. The BT-13 was in service with the training group. The PT-17 and AT-6 were contemporaries. When the flying cadets entered the main training, they learned to fly these aircraft and graduated to the PT-13s, which would eventually be their realtime environment. However, the cadet's early training was in PT-17s, a modified version of the World War II trainer, the PT-22, that was built in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s as a military trainer aircraft. It served during the 1930s and 1940s as a biplane, of which at least 9,783 were built in the United States. The AT-6 was a single-engine trainer, which was built as a replacement to the PT-17 in December 1940. The AT-6 was powered by a 340-horsepower Franklin engine. It carried two machine guns, Browning .50 in the nose and one .30 in the tail. It could be configured to carry bomb, rockets, and external fuel tanks.

The Fighters

3rd May, 1944 the 332nd Fighter Group under the command of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. was assigned to a wing escorted by the 306th Wing of the 13th Fighter Command. They were given the mission of destroying aircraft on the ground and attacking existing machine gun emplacements. The F-5s were well armed and could perform well at high altitude. The P-40s were a well-recognized aircraft that were the first of the 332nd Fighter Group painted tails of F-437 red, thus the nickname “Red Tail.” Their neighbors, the pursuit brothers, would fly high and later bomber crews would affectionately call them the “Gee-Bees.”

The main fighter flown by the pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group from 1943 until the end of the war was the North-American P-51 Mustang fighter. The P-51 was the first of a new breed of fighters designed by the United States during World War II and it was used in both the European and Pacific Theaters. It was the first Allied fighter capable of reaching bomber and from large deep into Germany with enough fuel to engage the enemy and attack “targets of opportunity.” The British Royal Air Force (RAF) flew early models of the P-51 aircraft. There were several modifications to the P-51 which improved its performance and effectiveness. The P-51 model A, B, and C were built for the RAF before the USAAF purchased them. It is important to note that the Mustangs were not built in one model only; they went through various changes. The P-47 Thunderbolt, with its 4,000-horsepower engine was introduced in the “T” model. It was equipped with a heavier armament, the speed of 437 miles per hour. A bubble canopy, which allowed greater upward view of the pilot, was introduced in the T-20 version. The early P-51s were armed with four .50-caliber Browning machine guns, however, the P-432 and later versions were armed with six .50-caliber Browning M2-32 machine guns. The Mustangs could carry externally up to nine .50-caliber machine guns or one .50-caliber machine gun. Larger rockets began to 40-in. rockets and external fuel tanks.

The Bomber

By late 1944 the 477th was able to conduct combat training missions, which were conducted in two stages. When on combat fighting and training, the men also faced custom from white bombers and their crews. The group's role was to protect the Allied forces from the air. The 477th Bomber Command Group became the 477th Composite Group with the P-51s and P-47s and for a period in the Pacific Theater. The rear seat, however, before the 477th could be deployed overseas in a combat role.

The main German fighters faced by the Tuskegee pilots were the Heinkel He 162V0 and V1. The He 162 was presented by a 1,740 HP Gemot engine. It had a top speed of 415 mph (668 km/h), maximum speed of 350 mph (563 km/h) and a range of 1,200 miles. It was the first American design of a jet-powered fighter to see service in World War II. The He 162 was armed with two 20mm MG151 machine guns, firing through the propeller and two 20mm MG151 cannon in the wings.

The Enemy
Tuskegee Airmen after World War II

After the war in Europe ended in 1945, black airmen returned to the United States and faced continued racism and bigotry despite their outstanding war record. Tuskegee Army Air Field continued to train new airmen until 1946, with women entering the program in several support fields. Large numbers of black airmen elected to remain in the service but because of segregation their assignments were limited to the 332nd Fighter Group or the 477th Composite Group, and later to the 332nd Fighter Wing at Lockbourne Air Base, Ohio. Opportunities for advancement and promotion were very limited and this affected morale. Nevertheless black airmen continued to perform superbly. In 1949, pilots from the 332nd Fighter Group took first place in the Air Force National Fighter Gunnery Meet at Las Vegas Air Force Base, Nevada.

During this period, many white units were understaffed and needed qualified people but were unable to get the experienced black personnel because of the segregation policy. The newly formed U.S. Air Force initiated plans to integrate its units as early as 1947. In 1949, President Harry Truman enacted Executive Order Number 9981 which directed equality of treatment and opportunity in all the United States Armed Forces. This order, in turn, led to the end of racial segregation in the military forces. This was also the first step toward racial integration in the United States of America. The positive experiences, the outstanding record of accomplishment and the superb behavior of black airmen during World War II, and after, were important factors in the initiation of the historic social change to achieve racial equality in America.