



History

Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II

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From 1941 to 1945, almost a thousand African-Americans graduated from the Tuskegee Army Flying School, many of whom distinguished themselves as pilots during World War II. Sixty-six Tuskegee airmen were killed in action and thirty-three were captured and served time as prisoners of war. Their story of fighting for victory against America's enemies while combating segregation at home is well told here in this historical investigation that skillfully blends interviews with archival research. The author is an associate professor of history and the director of the Oral History Program at the University of North Texas. From 2000-2005, he directed the National Park Service's Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project. Moye and four other historians conducted 800 interviews with airmen and others who provided support services.

Establishing an Army Air Corps pilot training program required overcoming widespread prejudice: contempt of African-Americans penetrated the government and military, and institutions dominated by southerners were steeped in the lies and bigotry of Jim Crow America. Intense lobbying by the black press and prominent African-American leaders, including W.E.B. Dubois; A. Phillip Randolph; Walter White, director of the NAACP; and William Hastie, aide to Secretary of War Henry Stimson, prodded President Roosevelt to fund a training program for black pilots at Tuskegee Institute in 1941.

The Tuskegee Airmen were commended for their performance in Sicily and in Operation Shingle, near Anzio, where the Airmen shot down twelve German planes. On the home front, black members of the military faced discrimination on bases, not just in the South but also the North: the Freeman Field Mutiny in Indiana resulted in the arrest of 104 African-American officers who protested when they were denied access to base facilities.

The author concludes that despite the challenges endured by the Tuskegee Airmen, their example led to the integration of the armed forces ten years before the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and provided the working model for the modern civil rights movement that

followed. This book is an important contribution that will be enjoyed by general readers and historians. Ultimately, who the Tuskegee Airmen were and what they fought for is encapsulated by pilot Harvey Alexander's remark: "I was aware of discrimination on the ground. But up in the air, I was as free as a bird because I was in control."