

The Tuskegee Airmen – Why Significant?

The Tuskegee Airmen and the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site are significant for several reasons:

(1) The struggle of African Americans for greater roles in North American military conflicts spans four centuries. Opportunities for African American participation in the U.S. military were always very limited and controversial. Quotas, exclusion, and racial discrimination were based on the prevailing attitude in the United States, particularly on the part of the U.S. military, that African Americans did not possess the intellectual capacity, aptitude, and skills to be successful fighters. Political pressure exerted by the black press, civil rights groups, historically black colleges and universities, and others, resulted in the formation of the Tuskegee Airmen, making them an excellent example of the struggle by African Americans to serve in the United States military.

(2) In the early 1940s, key leaders within the United States Army Air Corps (Army Air Forces) did not believe that African Americans had the intellectual capacity to become successful military pilots. After succumbing to the pressure exerted by civil rights groups and black leaders, the army decided to train a small number of African American pilot cadets under special conditions. Although prejudice and discrimination against African Americans occurred throughout the nation, it was more intense in the South where it had hardened into rigidly enforced patterns of segregation. Such was the environment that the military chose to locate the training of the Tuskegee Airmen.

(3) The military selected Tuskegee Institute (Tuskegee University) as a civilian contractor for a variety of reasons. These included the school's existing facilities, engineering and technical instructors, and a climate with ideal flying conditions year round; and the racial climate of central Alabama. Tuskegee Institute's (Tuskegee University's) strong interest in providing aeronautical training for African American youth was also an important factor, Tuskegee's students and faculty had designed and constructed Moton Field as a site for its military pilot training program and named it for the school's second president Robert Russa Moton.

(4) In 1941, the Army Air Corps (Army Air Forces) awarded a contract to Tuskegee Institute (Tuskegee University) to operate a primary flight school at Moton Field. Consequently, Tuskegee Institute (Tuskegee University) was one of a very few American institutions - and the only African American institution - to own, develop, and control facilities for military flight instruction.

(5) Moton Field was the only primary flight training facility for African American pilot candidates in the U.S. Army Air Corps (Army Air Forces) during World War II. Thus, the facility

symbolizes the entrance of African American pilots into the Army Air Corps (Army Air Forces) and the singular role of Tuskegee Institute (Tuskegee University) in providing economic and educational resources to make that entry possible, although on a segregated basis.

(6) The Tuskegee Airmen were the first African American soldiers to successfully complete their training and enter the Army Air Corps (Army Air Forces). Almost 1000 aviators were produced as America's first African American military pilots. In addition, more than 10,000 military and civilian African American men and women served in a variety of support roles.

(7) Although military leaders were hesitant to use the Tuskegee Airmen in combat, the airmen eventually saw considerable action in North Africa and Europe. Acceptance from Army Air Forces units came slowly, but their courageous and, in many cases, heroic performance earned them increased combat opportunities and respect.

(8) The success of the Tuskegee Airmen proved to the American public that African Americans, when given the opportunity, could become effective military leaders and pilots. Modeled on the professionalism of Chief Alfred Anderson, Benjamin O. Davis, and Daniel "Chappie" James, their performance helped pave the way for desegregation of the military, beginning with President Harry S Truman's Executive Order 9981 in 1948. It also helped set the stage for civil rights advocated to continue the struggle to end racial discrimination during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Consequently, the story of the Tuskegee Airmen constitutes a powerful and seminal metaphor for the struggle of black freedom in America.

(9) The Tuskegee Airmen reflect the struggle of African Americans to achieve equal rights, not only through legal attacks on the system of segregation, but also through the techniques of nonviolent direct action aimed at segregation in the military. The members of the 477th Bombardment Group, who staged a nonviolent demonstration to desegregate the officers' club at Freeman Field, Indiana, helped set the pattern for direct action protests popularized by civil rights activists in later decades.

(The above information is excerpted from the Tuskegee Airmen Long-Range Interpretive Plan 2003 and the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site's enabling legislation—Public Law 105-355)