



The Tuskegee Airmen

Overview:

In the 1940's, the United States Military, like so much of the nation, was segregated. The so-called Jim Crow Laws kept blacks from entering public places such as libraries, restaurants and movie theaters. Although African Americans served in the armed forces, they were restricted in the types of jobs and positions they could hold. On April 3, 1939, Public Law 18 was passed which provided for an expansion of the Army Air Corps. One section of the law offered hope for those African Americans who wanted to advance their military careers beyond the kitchen or the motor pool. It called for the creation of training programs to be located at black colleges which would prepare blacks for service in a variety of areas in the Air Corps support services.

On January 16th, 1941, the War Department announced the creation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron. This was to be an all black flying unit trained at the Tuskegee Institute founded in Tuskegee, Alabama, by Booker T. Washington in 1881. Charles A. Anderson, a self-taught African American pilot had established a civilian pilot training program at the Institute in 1939. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had visited the Tuskegee Institute and had requested a plane ride from Mr. Anderson. Despite the nervous misgivings of the Secret Service, Mrs. Roosevelt spent over an hour in the skies over Alabama. Precisely what Mrs. Roosevelt said about the flight is uncertain, but reports are she remarked to Mr. Anderson, "I always heard that colored people couldn't fly airplanes," but after her experience "saw no reason why blacks could not fly."

Since there were no black officers, eleven white officers were assigned to train and prepare a total of 429 enlisted men and 47 officers who would become the Tuskegee Airmen, the first black military personnel in the flying school. Mrs. Roosevelt was so impressed with the program that she established and maintained a long-term, long-distance friendship with some of the pilots.

From 1941 to 1946 over 2,000 African Americans completed training at the Tuskegee Institute, nearly three quarters of the qualified as pilots. The rest went on to become navigators or support personnel. Together they were known as the Tuskegee airmen. During the war the 99th Pursuit Squadron which was later renamed the 99th Fighter Squadron flew in the skies over the Mediterranean and Europe. The missions were primarily as bomber escorts. The 99th Fighter Squadron had the distinguished record of never losing a bomber to enemy fighters. In addition to shooting down enemy attack aircraft, they also shot down the belief that African Americans were not suited to responsible military service.

In 1948 President Truman ordered the desegregation of the United States Military.

Note: This overview was prepared from information contained in *Franklin D. Roosevelt - His Life and Times*, part of the G.K. Hall Presidential Encyclopedia Series, and the *New York Times*.

Documents:

This packet of documents includes correspondence between Eleanor Roosevelt and Cecil Peterson, a student at the Tuskegee Air Corps Advanced Flying School. Mrs. Roosevelt initiated the correspondence because she was interested in hearing the firsthand experiences of life at Tuskegee and she and Mr. Peterson continued their letters throughout the war.

Eleanor Roosevelt was also in contact with the president of the Tuskegee Institute, F.D. Patterson. The letters from Mr. Patterson illustrate that Mrs. Roosevelt's support of Tuskegee was instrumental in the success of its programs during that period.

Questions:

The following are suggested essential questions surrounding the Tuskegee Airmen:

- What justification did the United States Military have for maintaining segregated Units?
- How would you characterize Eleanor Roosevelt's role in the creation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron?
- Why was desegregation more easily accomplished in the Military than it was in the population as a whole?
- What impact did desegregation of the Military have on the advancement of Civil Rights in America as a whole?
- What specific challenges did the Tuskegee Airmen face that other Air Corps units did not?

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May 26, 1942

Dear Mr. Peterson:

See Miss Ilma has given me your name because I am a member of the board of the Young Men's Vocational Foundation and she suggested that you might like to have an occasional letter and packages sent you.

I am so much interested that you are at the flying school in Tuskegee, because I have seen it. I also understand that you were at Quoddy and because I have seen that, too, I can tell a little bit what your background of training has been.

I am sending you some hard candy and a book which I thought might interest you, and if you will write me what kind of things you are interested in, what you would like to have sent you, and keep me in touch a little bit with what you are doing, I hope I can be a more intelligent correspondent.

I hope you get on well in the Army and that you will write me.

With all good wishes, I am

Very sincerely yours,

Mr. Cecil Peterson
Recruit Detachment
Air Corps Advanced Flying School
Tuskegee, Alabama

MCT:HY

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June 9, 1942

Dear Mr. Peterson:

I remember you very well now that you have reminded me. I am glad to send you a pair of track shoes. I hope by now you have received the candy and the book which I sent to you.

Very sincerely yours,

Mr. Cecil Peterson
100 Pursuit Squadron
Tuskegee Army Flying School
Tuskegee, Alabama

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Tuskegee Institute

FOUNDED BY BOOKER T. WASHINGTON, 1861

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE, ALABAMA

Washington, D. C.
July 28, 1941

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Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt
The White House
Washington, D. C.

JUL 28 '41

My dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am deeply grateful for the conference you were kind enough to grant me at the White House on Wednesday, July 23rd.

I was pleased to have the opportunity to report to you the progress made to date in aviation, and phases of the defense program in which you have such a warm interest. Likewise I was happy to talk over the possibility of increasing the usefulness of Tuskegee Institute in connection with National Defense, as well as bring to your attention the need in Florida which, I feel, should be met for the best interest of Negro soldiers. I have followed up contacts in connection with both of these matters, and feel that satisfactory progress is being made.

Those concerned in the programs under consideration will, I am sure, be greatly heartened to know of your sympathetic interest.

Respectfully yours,

F. D. Patterson
President

PATTERSON



83 Interceptor
Control Squadron

TUSKEGEE ARMY
FLYING SCHOOL

SOUTHEAST AIR CORPS
TRAINING CENTER
July 7, 1942

TUSKEGEE
ALABAMA

congratulations Paul Agnew
of course - Tall country
about the year 1942

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Since your last wrote, I have been
lucky in three ways. My transfer to
the new squadron was effected, secondly,
I was promoted to Private First class and
since then given charge of a squad and
am now an acting corporal.

Your letters and gifts have been
very inspiring and have prompted me
to try to be a better soldier.

My work is very interesting. Infor-
mation regarding the squadron functions
is restricted otherwise you would be
interested to know some of its operations.
I hope I could be able to tell you
personally after the war.

Soon this short radio course will
be over and I'll be of some service to
Uncle Sam.

I wish that you would do something
for me. Just tell the President that there's
a private down here rooting for him by
the name of C. P. and that I do wish him
very much luck.

Hoping you and he both are well,

I am,

Very sincerely yours
Ceil Peterson

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July 16, 1942

CECIL

Dear Private Peterson:

I was glad to have your letter and to hear of your successive promotions. My congratulations to you. I am sure your work is most interesting and I shall look forward to hearing more about it when the war is over.

I will give your message to the President and know how very much he will appreciate it.

We are having a rather quiet summer here at Hyde Park, though I have not yet had many continuous days here, as I seem to have made a good many engagements which take me to New York and Washington and other places that I can reach by train or plane, every few days. Later in the summer I hope to be here for longer periods.

When the President is here we live at the big house, his old home. During these times, however, he seldom gets away from Washington and when I am here alone we live at my cottage, several miles away from the big house. It is in a beautiful location in the woods by a large stream, the Val Kill. The stream has been widened into a lake of about three or four acres in size, just by the cottage, and we have, therefore, a very pleasant view from every angle.

This is beautiful country and we all enjoy being here whenever we can. My children are all far away and none of my grandchildren can be with me this summer. There are, however, two little girls

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staying with me, who make life ~~more~~ interesting and gay for all of us. They ride every day, and swim in the pool. I do not ride, as in former years, as my horse is old and I have not had the time to get accustomed to another. My old horse just enjoys herself grazing in the fields, and this is little enough "old age pension" for her long years of faithful service.

Like everyone else, we are trying to conserve gas and tires. I have a bicycle which one of my boys gave me several years ago, and I have taken to bicycle-riding again and find that I enjoy it very much. I find it very convenient for trips to the big house and running errands in the neighborhood.

I am always pleased to hear from you and I hope that things will continue to go well for you.

With all good wishes, I am

Sincerely yours,

Private Cecil Peterson
B3d Intercept Control Squadron
Tuskegee Army Flying School
Tuskegee, Alabama

ESLER



FIELD

6/11/43

928th Air Base Security Battalion

ESLER FIELD, LOUISIANA

May 23, 1943

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Thank you for the advice which I shall be glad to follow.

Last week it looked as though we would have gone by this time but an epidemic of mumps apparently caused us to remain. It is also evident that the 928th will be here for another two to three weeks since unpacking is going on. But, in the Army, anything can happen, anywhere and anytime.

Three days ago I hiked with the organization for 25 mile from 1030 PM to 0400 in the morning and we bivouaced (pitched tents) until 0600 in the morning when we broke camp and returned to the field.

I look forward for another long one this week beginning Monday when the outfit will camp off the ground for a whole week.

I am happy about the news of the final defeat in North Africa. Believe my, there will be more good news soon when we establish out initial bridge heads on the European continent. Once again please convey my most sincere and best wished to the President in whatever steps he might make to bring closer the end of this war. Thank you.

I hope you are well and that you stay well, God Willing.

Sincerely

Lee Peterson

*Send to
Mrs. Roosevelt
with
EP*

100 Pursuit Squadron
Tuskegee Army Flying School
Tuskegee, Alabama
June 4, 1942

Dear Mrs Roosevelt,

In answering your
letter the other day I
forgot to include the
size of track shoes I
would like to have - size
eleven (11). Thank you
very much.

Sincerely
Cecil Peterson

Track
Shoes sent
6/9/42

The White House
Washington

AUG 7 17. 55 AM 1943

ack
8/11/43
Thank
8/11
CPM

WB1 56 NL

WUX TUSKEGEE ALA AUG 6 1943

MRS F D ROOSEVELT

WHITE HOUSE

TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE HAS REPAID ROSENWALD FUND IN FULL LOAN
FOR AVIATION PROGRAM. FEEL YOUR PRESENCE AND ENDORSEMENT OF
REQUEST DURING ROSENWALD MEETING AT TUSKEGEE WAS A MAJOR
FACTOR IN FAVORABLE ACTION. AM HAPPY MEN IN AVIATION NOW
AT FRONT ARE JUSTIFYING IN FULL MEASURE THE GREAT CONFIDENCE
YOU AND OTHERS EXPRESSED IN THEM. WITH DEEPEST GRATITUDE
F D PATTERSON.