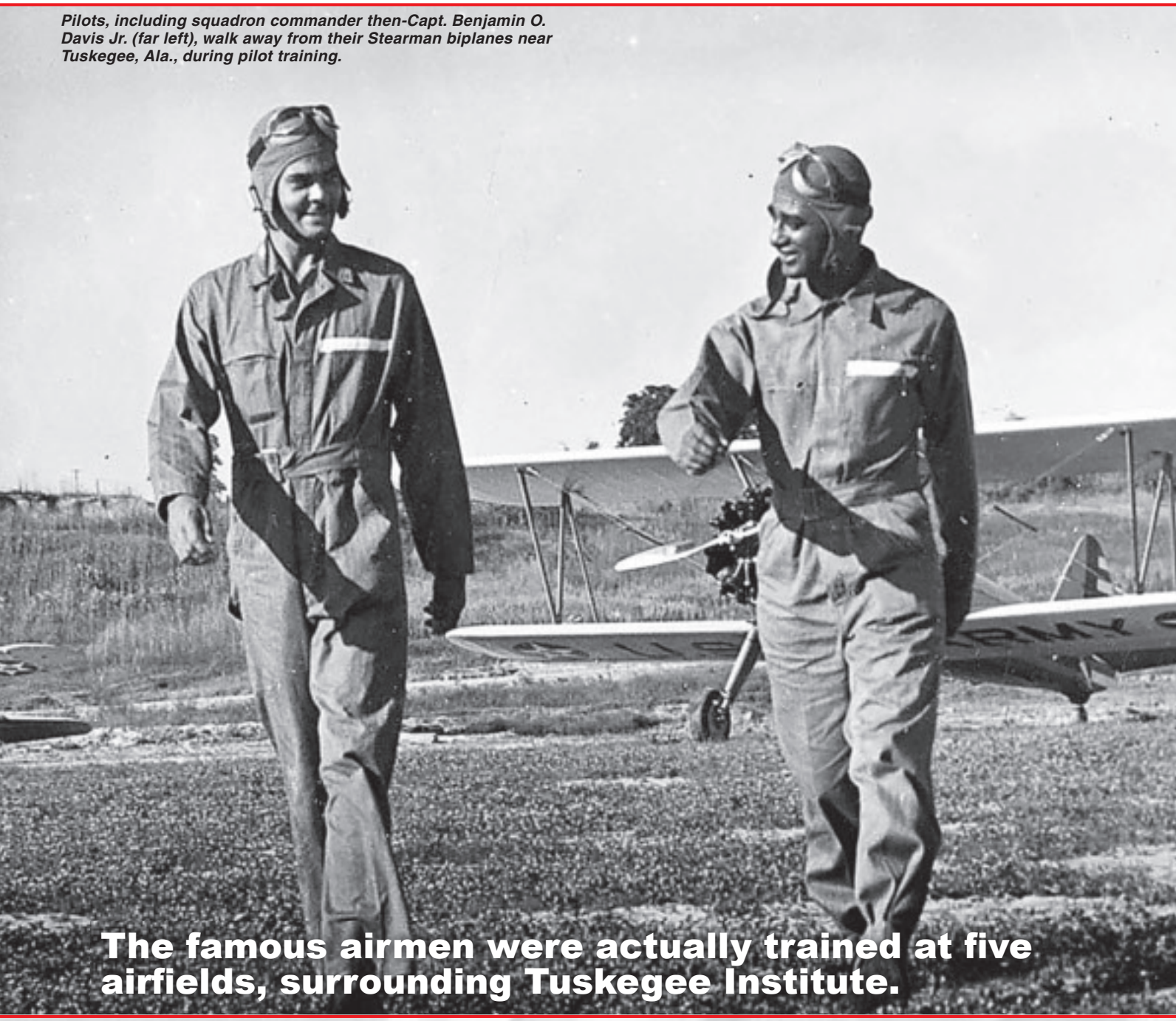
THE TUSKEGEE Airfields

By Daniel L. Haulman



Pilots, including squadron commander then-Capt. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. (far left), walk away from their Stearman biplanes near Tuskegee, Ala., during pilot training.

The famous airmen were actually trained at five airfields, surrounding Tuskegee Institute.

The first black pilots in the American armed forces became famous as the Tuskegee Airmen. The 332nd Fighter Group, the only African-American flying group in combat, lost fewer escorted bombers to enemy aircraft than other fighter escort groups in World War II, proving that black aviators could fly and fight as well as their white counterparts.

The name Tuskegee Airmen was taken from the most important of their training bases, Tuskegee Army Airfield, but there were four other fields where they also trained—Griel, Kennedy, Moton, and Shorter Field.

The Tuskegee area of Alabama was chosen for a number of reasons.

First, the flying weather was better on more days of the year than in the North.

Second, real estate was relatively cheap and the airspace uncongested; Tuskegee was a rural area with plenty of land available for development, and no large nearby cities smoldering with racial tension.

Third, the War Department had decided that the first black military pilots would be assigned to segregated units, and segregation was already part of the local culture.

Tuskegee Institute's president, Frederick D. Patterson, actively lobbied for his school to be the center of black military pilot training. It was already training black civilian pilots and nourished a reputation as one of the foremost African-American institutions of higher learning in the country. Even if it got an Air Corps contract for just the primary phase of black military pilot training, the school would benefit, and construction of a large Army airfield nearby would help the town and county.

At first, many leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) opposed the Tuskegee flying training program, precisely because it was segregated.

USAF photo

Photo via National Archives

Capt. Roy Morse leads a group of Tuskegee airmen in a class learning to send and receive Morse-coded messages.

Ultimately, though, the NAACP's leaders supported the Tuskegee program, because they preferred that the black pilots be trained in Alabama, and be assigned to segregated flying units, than not be trained at all.

Black pilot training at Tuskegee Institute had begun in 1940, with the Civilian Pilot Training Program. For that purpose, the institute bought and improved a small private airfield called Kennedy Field, about five miles south of the school. The field was only 55 acres, and had no paved runways, but there were four small hangars, populated with Piper Cubs and Waco biplanes.

MORE ROOM NEEDED

Charles A. Anderson—called "Chief" by the other fliers because he was the chief flight instructor—led a team of seven flying instructors: three black and four white.

The most famous event at Kennedy Field was the March 29, 1941, visit by Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Anderson took her for a flight, and she became an avid supporter of black flying training at Tuskegee Institute. She sponsored fund-raising to build a larger airfield north of Tuskegee, where the primary phase of military pilot training could take place. By then, the first black flying unit, the 99th Pursuit Squadron, had been activated at Chanute Field, Ill., but had no pilots. They were to be trained at Tuskegee.

The larger airfield was called Moton Field, named after Robert R. Moton, Tuskegee Institute's second president.

The first class of 13 black military aviation cadets entered primary flight training at Kennedy Field on Aug. 21, 1941, because Moton Field wasn't finished. They and their instructors moved to Moton as soon as it was ready for flying operations, in September 1941. Today, Moton Field is an airport and home of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site.

Many visitors, before they read the exhibit text carefully, imagine that all Tuskegee Airmen flying training took place at Moton Field, but it only hosted the primary flying training phase. During that phase, cadets flew PT, or primary training, aircraft. Moton Field had PT-13 and PT-17 biplanes—identical except for the engine manufacturer—and later the PT-19 monoplane, used at the field by mid-1944. African-Americans came from all over the country to begin their military flying training at Moton Field.

George L. Washington, who headed Tuskegee Institute's Division of Aeronautics, served as general manager at Moton Field. Another civilian, Lewis A. Jackson, who had worked as a flight instructor at the Coffey School of Aeronautics in Chicago, served as director of training. Jackson worked closely with Anderson and other black civilian flight instructors at Moton Field. There were also some white flight

Photo via National Archives

Second Lt. LeRoy Battle prepares for a training flight at Moton Field, Ala. In 1945, Battle would serve in the European theater.

FIVE AIRFIELDS OF TUSKEGEE DURING WORLD WAR II

Name	Kennedy Field	Moton Field	Tuskegee Army Airfield	Griel Field	Shorter Field
Function	Civilian pilot training; War Training Service	Primary pilot training	Basic, Advanced, and Transition pilot training	Liaison pilot training, auxiliary field for TAAF	Practice auxilary field for Tuskegee Army Airfield
Total Area	55 acres	275 acres	1,681 acres	320 acres	241 acres
Landing Area	Sod, 3 strips. Longest one 1,900 feet.	Sod, all-way. 4,200 x 300 feet.	Four asphalt-paved runways, three 5,000 feet long, one 4,500 feet long, all 300 feet wide.	Turf, all-way. 3,560 x 3,270 feet.	Turf, all-way. 3,560 x 3,270 feet.
Hangars	Four small, largest dimension, 88 feet	Two brick, one 140 x 120 feet, one 130 x 100 feet	Three large, steel and wood, each 184 x120 feet, each with two 89x20 foot doors	None	None
Other Facilities	Two shops for engine and aircraft repair, gasoline and oil supply.	Two shops for engine and aircraft repair; Gasoline and oil supply; telephone communications, bus and taxi service.	Engine and aircraft repair shops, gasoline and oil supplies, communications, extensive lighting, accomodations (6 officers, 1,000 enlisted), radio facilities, railroad siding, and bus and taxi service.	Wind tee and wind sock.	Wind tee and wind sock.
Location	5 miles SSE of Tuskegee by road, 4 miles by air.	4 miles N of Tuskegee by road; 2.8 miles by air.	10 miles NW of Tuskegee by road; 6.7 miles by air.	6 miles W of Tuskegee Army Airfield.	11.75 miles WSW of Tuskegee Army Airfield.

Source: US Army Air Forces Airport Directory, Continental United States, Volume I (Washington, D.C.: Aeronautical Chart Service, Army Air Forces, 1945).

Photo via Air Force Historical Research Agency

An aerial view of Tuskegee Army Airfield taken during the late 1940s. Tuskegee was the largest of the five airfields at which African-American pilots trained.

instructors, some of whom were in the Air Corps, and they commanded the military cadets.

Tuskegee Institute hired the Iowa-based African-American firm Alexander and Repass to construct Moton Field. George A. Reed served as the field's engineer, responsible for the operation and maintenance of the physical plant. He oversaw the building of Moton Field from June to November of 1941, making sure it met the Air Corps' standards for primary flight training.

Like Kennedy Field, Moton Field had no paved runways, but it was much larger, covering 275 acres. It was located about four miles north of Tuskegee and eventually comprised two large brick hangars, two repair shops, and several other smaller buildings. Although owned by Tuskegee Institute, Moton Field served the Air Corps, which provided the airplanes and military officers to oversee the training.

Maj. Noel F. Parrish, a white officer, commanded the field from July 19 until Dec. 3, 1941, when he was succeeded there by Maj. William T. Smith, a West Point graduate. There were several other white officers providing leadership at Moton Field.

Among them were Capt. Harold C. Magoon, Capt. John G. Penn, and 1st Lt. John H. McBeth. Magoon supervised the check rides of the cadets when their primary flight training was complete. Besides Jackson and Anderson, black instructors included Milton P. Crenchaw and Claude R. Platt.

A flying cadet at Moton Field received 60 hours of training in the PT-17 over a course of nine weeks. Each of the next two phases of flight training—basic and advanced—also took nine weeks. In those

Photo via Air Force Historical Research Agency

Some of Class 44-A at Tuskegee Army Airfield. The pilots trained in single-engine and twin-engine aircraft.

phases, other kinds of aircraft were used, and Moton Field was too small to accommodate them. For those phases, black pilots moved to Tuskegee Army Airfield.

Completed around the same time as Moton Field, Tuskegee AAF was the largest of the five fields, covering nearly 1,700 acres. It was about 10 miles northwest of Tuskegee and a few miles northwest of Moton Field. Tuskegee AAF eventually included four large intersecting paved runways and three large double hangars, each 184 by 120 feet. The field comprised extensive barracks and other buildings like those at other Army Air Forces installations. Unlike Kennedy and Moton Fields, Tuskegee Army Airfield was owned by the Air Corps, which built and operated it directly, instead of under contract with Tuskegee Institute.

Tuskegee Army Airfield was a first in another way; not only was it the first major base for basic and advanced military flight training of African-American pilots, but it was also the first major Army Air Forces base built by a black construction company: McKissack and McKissack. The project cost $1.5 million dollars, a huge sum at the time. Engineers had to reshape the land to overcome terrain and drainage problems.

On Aug. 6, 1941, a Tuskegee Army flying school was activated at Tuskegee Army Airfield with Maj. James A. Ellison serving as its first commander, but the black aviation cadets hadn't yet begun their training at Kennedy or Moton Fields. On Sept. 19, black enlisted support personnel began arriving at Tuskegee AAF, to join white enlisted personnel who were already there.

It wasn't until Nov. 8 that six of the 13 black flying cadets who graduated from primary flight training at Moton Field arrived at Tuskegee AAF, to begin the next basic phase of flight training, using BT-13 monoplanes. Two days later, the enlisted personnel of the 99th Pursuit Squadron arrived at Tuskegee AAF.

It would be the first black flying squadron, but it didn't have any pilots yet.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US entered World War II on Dec. 8, 1941. That same month, Parrish, who'd been in charge of training at Moton Field, moved to Tuskegee AAF to be director of training.

January 1942 was a crucial month. Five of the six black cadets who'd entered basic flying training graduated to advanced training at Tuskegee AAF. For that phase, they would fly AT-6 aircraft. During the same month, Col. Frederick V. H. Kimble succeeded Ellison as commander of the field and the flying school.

The 99th Pursuit Squadron, which had moved to Tuskegee AAF in November, waited for its first pilots to complete their training. On Feb. 19, 1942, it was joined by a second black flying squadron, the 100th Pursuit Squadron. Neither of the units had any pilots until March 7, when the first class of black military pilots graduated from advanced pilot training.

Class 42-C had only five members, but they included Capt. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., a former West Point cadet whose father was the first African-American general in the US Army.

USAF photo

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, an enthusiastic booster of the Tuskegee airmen, is pictured here in a Piper J-3 trainer with Charles "Chief" Anderson, who led a team of seven flying instructors.

Hangars once at Tuskegee Army Airfield were moved to civilian airports after the base closed. This one is in Clanton Ala.; others are at airports in Montgomery and in Troy. All are still in use.

Photo via Daniel L. Haulman

The first black pilots who graduated from advanced flying training at Tuskegee AAF remained there as they learned to fly P-40s with the 99th and 100th Fighter Squadrons. When those units had enough pilots, they became operational, but weren't immediately sent overseas to take part in combat. Instead, they continued training at Tuskegee until Oct. 13, when the 332nd Fighter Group—the first black flying group—was activated at Tuskegee AAF.

SHUTTING IT DOWN

The 100th Fighter Squadron was assigned to the new group, as were two new black fighter squadrons, the 301st and the 302nd. The 99th Fighter Squadron wasn't assigned to the 332nd when the organizations were at Tuskegee, because it was older than the other units and prepared to deploy for combat first.

Tuskegee AAF hosted a large number of training and operational aircraft. They included BT-13s for basic flying training, single-engine AT-6s for advanced training of future fighter pilots, twin-engine AT-10s for advanced training of future bomber pilots, P-40s for the 99th Fighter Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group, and even a couple of B-25 bombers.

In December 1942, Parrish, by then a lieutenant colonel, became the commander of the field and its flying school, replacing Kimble. Parrish was more popular among the black cadets than Kimble, because he relaxed the base's segregation policy. Many white officers served with Parrish in administrative and flying training functions at Tuskegee AAF, but they didn't live on the base with the black cadets. Eventually, African-American pilots—many of whom had gained combat experience in Europe—also joined the training staff. By the time the base closed in 1946, most of the flight instructors at Tuskegee AAF were black.

In March 1943, the 332nd moved from Tuskegee to Selfridge Field, Mich. In April, the 99th deployed from Tuskegee AAF for duty in North Africa. The departure of the four flying squadrons and the group in the spring of 1943 allowed Tuskegee AAF to focus on flying training. The departure of most of the P-40s also freed up room for the training aircraft, though a few remained for transition training.

Forty-four classes of pilots completed advanced training at Tuskegee AAF, but not all of them became fighter pilots after completing single-engine training. Twin-engine pilot training commenced at Tuskegee AAF in September 1943, even as single-engine training continued.

When the 332nd Fighter Group deployed from Selfridge to Italy, where the 99th Fighter Squadron was already serving, the 477th Bombardment Group was activated at Selfridge. Graduates of twin-engine pilot training at Tuskegee Army Airfield went to the 477th.

In mid-1944, an outdoor entertainment amphitheater opened on the northern edge of the base. Ella Fitzgerald and the Ink Spots were the first performers who played the venue, which later hosted celebrities such as Louis Armstrong and Lena Horne, who proved the most popular.

Tuskegee AAF had two auxiliary fields during World War II. The 320-acre Griel Field, six miles west, trained liaison pilots for the Army. These aviators eventually served Army ground units as artillery spotters and observers. Griel was a grass field with no hangars, barracks, or fuel supplies.

The other auxiliary grass strip was Shorter Field, a 241-acre plot about 12 miles west-southwest of Tuskegee AAF. It also lacked hangars, barracks, and fuel supplies. Pilots in the advanced phase of training at Tuskegee AAF practiced takeoffs and landings at Shorter Field. It was a destination for pilots from the main base on their first solo flights.

From November 1941 through the end of June 1946, almost 1,000 black pilots had trained at Tuskegee AAF; at that point, the last of 44 pilot training classes there graduated. The war was over, and the need for military pilots plummeted. In June 1947, the facility closed for good when the last unit there was inactivated. Like hundreds of other flying training fields around the country, it was never used again. Its most important buildings—such as the three large double hangars—were dismantled and moved to serve at civilian airports in other parts of Alabama. One Tuskegee AAF hangar stands today at each of three airports at Montgomery, Clanton, and Troy.

The five Tuskegee airfields were indispensable to the war effort; their success forever changed the face of American combat aviation. ■

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