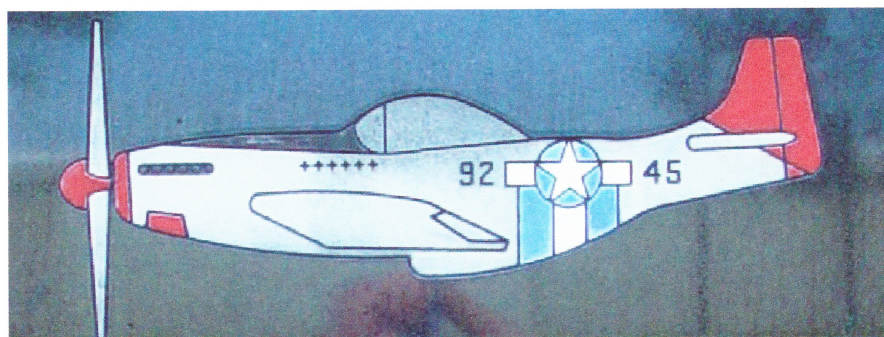


FROM BLACK REJECTS TO RED TAIL ANGELS



**A Paper for the Hopkinsville, Kentucky
Athenaeum Society
May 3, 2007**

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During the time covered by this paper, very significant racial discrimination existed in the United States. The goal of this paper is to talk about the accomplishments of individuals and groups of individuals in a particular field, in spite of the very real discrimination problems that existed at the time. However, part of the situation was such that at least some reference to these problems must be made at times. Since this is designed to be an historical report, I will at times use the respectful language appropriate for the time. However, let me emphasize that the intent of this paper is based on nothing but admiration and respect for the persons and groups presented.

Some of you are at least partly aware of some of my history and enthusiasm regarding flying, including the fact that I started flying lessons shortly before I was old enough to drive a car. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that this paper is related to flying. In the years that followed the first flight by the Wright Brothers, interest in flying and learning to fly grew rapidly, and more and more people did learn to fly. However, among at least one group of people the interest grew but the opportunity to learn did not. It appeared that no one wanted to get involved in teaching Blacks, the Negro, how to fly. There was apparently a wide-spread belief that they did not have the intellect and other abilities to consider flying an airplane!

Although at times historical accounts do not agree, it is generally accepted that the first American Black to obtain a pilot's license was a person whose life story would be far more than an Athenaeum paper by itself, so only a few highlights will be mentioned here. Eugene Jacques Bullard was born in Columbus, Georgia, October 9, 1894. His mother was Creek Indian and his

father and grandparents, Blacks, came from Martinique in the West Indies. His grandparents arrived as slaves and spoke the French language. Eugene's father told the children stories from books he had read including one telling that in France a man was accepted as a man regardless of the color of his skin. This story, along with some other significant factors prompted Eugene to leave home at the age of eight. He made his way around the southeastern United States and got jobs working around horses until at age twelve he managed to stow away on a German ship bound for Scotland. In time he was trained as a boxer and did quite well, eventually settling in Paris and finally reaching the country he had dreamed of. Later, during the first World War he joined the French Foreign Legion on his nineteenth birthday. He had an outstanding record in the Legion, receiving at least two French medals of honor. Wounds received in the ground war made him no longer fit for duty in the infantry, but he was able to join the French Flying Corps. An American friend had bet him \$2,000 that he could not get into aviation and become a pilot, but he earned his wings on May 5, 1917, and collected his \$2,000! This reportedly made him the first Black fighter pilot in history and the first American Black to obtain a pilot's license. He continued an outstanding record in the French Flying Corp, being assigned to the now famous Lafayette Escadrille. When the United States entered World War I he wanted to transfer to his country's air force and although he passed the required physical his application was ignored for the duration of the war. He was discharged from the French armed forces in 1919 and eventually returned to the United States. On one occasion in 1960 President-General Charles de Gaulle of France, while in New York, publically embraced him as a true French hero. Eugene Bullard died in 1961 and was buried with full honors by the Federation of French War Officers in Flushing Cemetery in New York. In 1994, seventy-seven years after passing his American flight physical,

the United States Air Force posthumously commissioned him a Lieutenant. His 1917 Pilot's License is now on display at the Air Force Enlisted Heritage Hall, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

Born in Atlanta, Texas, a small town near Texarkana, Bessie Coleman also wanted to rise above the many restrictions of her race at that time. She eventually developed an intense interest in aviation, but no one could be found who would teach a Black, much less a Black female, how to fly an airplane. Then, at the recommendation of a very successful Black friend she decided to work toward preparations to go to France to learn to fly and get her pilot's licence. It took a lot of work to get to France followed by seven months of flying training. Then in June, 1921, she was awarded her pilot's license, becoming the first ever Black female licensed pilot. She returned to the United States in September, 1921, where she received a proper welcome. For the next five years she participated in air shows, encouraged other Blacks to fly, and was working toward opening her own flying training school for Blacks. Then on April 30, 1926, in preparation for an air show while flying with her mechanic, a bizarre accident resulted in her death. It has been reported that about 10,000 mourners paid their respects at her coffin in Chicago's South Side.

Another person who was a notable pioneer in Black aviation was Charles Alfred Anderson. He became interested in flying during his teens or earlier, in the early 1900s, but again this was during the time when no one was interested in teaching Blacks how to fly. He saved money until at age twenty he had enough to take flying lessons but it appeared that no school would accept a Black student. He then took his saved money and after borrowing a little more was able to buy his own airplane. Even with his own airplane he could not find a willing

instructor until he met Ernest Buehl, an emigrant who had been a pilot for Germany during World War I. Anderson finally got his pilot training and obtained his Private Pilot Certificate in 1929. He continued learning and in 1932 became the first Black to obtain a Commercial Pilot's License, then known as a Transport License. He then met Dr. Albert E. Forsythe and taught him how to fly. Then, together they became the first Black pilots to make a round-trip transcontinental flight in 1934. By 1939 Anderson had started the Civilian Pilot Training Program at Howard University. Howard University is a coeducational private, historically Black institution chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1867 and is located in northwest Washington, D.C.. Later he was hired as the first Black pilot instructor at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, which at that time had the largest Civilian Pilot Training Program for Blacks. As their chief civilian flight instructor he became known as "Chief Anderson." He was an inspiring instructor who was well known and loved by the thousands of expert pilots he eventually trained during his 53 years as an instructor.

Prior to 1940 the Army Air Corps would not allow Negroes to participate in their programs in any way, but a significant change was about to start. Because of the overall military situation at that time along with pressure from a number of sources, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the Army Air Corps to begin building an all-Negro flying unit. To develop the pilots needed for this new segregated squadron, a new military training base was opened at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama. This location was chosen because the Civilian Pilot Training Program was already in place with facilities, engineering and technical instructors, and good climate for year-round flying. At first the pilot candidates were Negro college graduates selected for what the Army called, "an experiment". The experiment also included training ground

support personnel with all of them forming the 99th Pursuit Squadron which was activated March 22, 1941.

On April 19, 1941, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Tuskegee Army Air Field on what one source described as a fact-finding mission. When there she met "Chief" Charles Anderson, the head of the program. Different reports have slight variations in the wording of the conversations but they are essentially the same. Mrs. Roosevelt asked, "Can Negroes really fly airplanes?" Anderson replied, "Certainly we can, as a matter of fact, would you like to take an airplane ride?" The Secret Service agents with Mrs. Roosevelt apparently went into near panic and called the President, who replied, "Well, if she wants to do it, there's nothing we can do to stop her." Mrs. Roosevelt accepted and climbed into the back seat of Anderson's Piper J-3 Cub. Anderson then took off and flew her around for half an hour. After landing, Mrs. Roosevelt said, "I guess Negroes can fly." She then asked that a photograph of the two of them in the plane be taken and processed right away for her to take back to Washington to show the President. This picture, which became famous, was taken by photographer P. H. Polk. Keep this name in mind for a later comment.

The originally formed 99th Pursuit Squadron was quickly given the name, "The Tuskegee Airmen", and was re-designated as the 99th Fighter Squadron on May 15, 1942. For every Black pilot there were ten Black civilian, officer and enlisted men and women on ground support duty. I am fortunate to have an original copy of *Life* magazine, dated March 23, 1942. In this issue there is a full two-page article including pictures with the following title: "Negro Pilots Get Wings - U.S. Army grants commissions to first colored cadets". The article states that, "At Tuskegee, Alabama, March 7, Colonel Frederick V. H. Kimbel, U.S.A., pinned wings on the

blouses of five young Negro lieutenants, members of the first graduating class of the Army's first Negro air school. Since last July they had undergone all the primary and advanced training to which white Army cadets at Randolph and Kelly fields are subject. Now they are charter members of the Air Force's 99th (all Negro) Pursuit Squadron, established last summer at a \$2,000,000 airdrome near Alabama's famed Tuskegee Institute and now developing into one of the Army's biggest training bases.

Leader of the Squadron and No. 1 graduate of the air school is Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., West Pointer and son of Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis, the Army's first Negro general officer, now on special duty with the War Department in Washington. White instructors of the 99th agree that their Negro charges, by virtue of exceptional eyesight, courage and coordination, will prove crack combat pilots." And so they did, as we shall soon see. The article further points out that cadets in primary training received hazing from older hands who had completed their solo flights. This is the same hazing faced by white aviation cadets. "As at West Point and Annapolis, green cadets at Tuskegee base must execute orders snappily, do small chores and answer fantastic questions politely and precisely."

From 1940 to 1946, approximately 1,000 Black pilots were trained and received their wings at Tuskegee. After basic single engine pilot training some went on to become advanced multi-engine pilots. More than 10,000 Black men and women in military and civilian groups supported the Tuskegee Airmen. They served as flight instructors, officers, bombardiers, navigators, radio technicians, mechanics, air traffic controllers, parachute riggers, electrical and communications specialists, nurses, laboratory assistants, cooks, musicians, and supply, fire-fighting, and transportation personnel. Further pilot training was also received by some at one or

more other bases. My wife and I, along with some friends, recently had the privilege of visiting the Tuskegee Airmen Memorial at the former Walterboro Army Air Field in Walterboro, South Carolina. The Walterboro Army Air Field, opened in August, 1942, was a sub-base of the Columbia, South Carolina, Army Air Base and was the largest sub-base in the 3rd Air Force. It served as a final training base for some Tuskegee Airmen prior to overseas duty and housed a military population of as many as 6,000. While we were at the memorial, one elderly man from Walterboro reported that the people did not like the Tuskegee Airmen at first. He said that the residents were always ducking their heads when they flew over and that there were, in fact, a number of crashes, which I am sure was true at all such training bases. He then added that when the airmen were over there in the real war the citizens of Walterboro became very proud. In June, 1943, the Tuskegee Airmen entered into combat over North Africa and then throughout the European Theater. On July 2, 1943, Captain Charles B. Hall became the first Tuskegee Pilot to down an enemy aircraft in aerial combat, an FW-190, a German fighter. Captain Hall was rewarded for his prowess with a Coca Cola! One of the large plaques at the Walterboro memorial reads: "The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II" "In honor of the Tuskegee Airmen, their instructors, and ground support personnel who participated in training for combat at the Walterboro Army Airfield during the Second World War. Because of their heroic action in combat, they were called Schwartze Vogelmenschen, 'Black Bird Men' by the Germans who both feared and respected them. White American bomber crews, in reverence, referred to them as the 'Red Tail Angels' because of the identifying red paint on their tail assemblies and because of their reputation for not losing any (bomber) aircraft to enemy fighters as they provided fighter coverage for missions over strategic targets in Europe." This record continued for more than 200

combat missions of this type – a record unmatched by any other fighter group. These “Red Tail” fighters often discouraged enemy fighters from even trying to attack the bombers they escorted. One B-24 bomber pilot reported this about the various support fighters: “The P-38s always stayed too far out. Some of the Mustang groups stayed in too close other groups, we got the feeling that they just wanted to go and shoot down 109s (a German fighter aircraft) The Red Tails were always out there where we wanted them to be ... We had no idea they were Black; it was the Army’s best kept secret.” This last comment about not knowing they were Black was apparently true for some but not for all. The all Black 332nd Fighter Group was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for its longest bomber escort mission to Berlin, Germany, March 24, 1945. It destroyed three German ME-262 jet fighters and damaged five others without losing any of the bombers or any of its own fighter planes to enemy fighters.

The Tuskegee Airmen flew several different types of aircraft including the P-39, P-40, P-47 and P-51 fighter planes as well as multi engine aircraft. They also participated in many different kinds of combat missions in addition to the better-known bomber escort ones. The P-51 Mustang, certainly one of our best fighters of the time, was designed, developed, placed into full-scale production and eventually went through several modifications all during the years of World War II. During the earlier years of the war we did not have a fighter plane capable of high altitude and long range service that was needed for long range bombing missions into Germany. Because of this the U. S. Army Air Force’s efforts in a daylight bomber campaign was beginning to falter with incredible losses. With the newly-developed P-51 Mustang the need was fulfilled and fighter escort could be provided deep into the heart of Germany. Tuskegee Airmen pilots were some of the ones assigned to fly this our newest and overall best fighter. During the war the

Tuskegee Airmen flew 1,578 missions of various kinds. Among many, many other important targets they destroyed 111 German airplanes in the air and another 150 on the ground, and sank one destroyer with P-47 machine gun fire. Sixty-six Tuskegee Airmen pilots were killed in action or accidents and 32 were downed and captured as POWs. The Tuskegee Airmen earned 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 744 Air Medals, eight Purple Hearts and fourteen Bronze Stars.

One story is a good illustrative example of the training, skill and discipline of the Red Tail Mustang pilots. On this date some of the Red Tail Mustang pilots were escorting a group of our B-24 bombers. One of the Mustang pilots, Lieutenant Weathers, spotted a string of German fighters, BF-109s, heading toward a crippled B-24. He dropped his wing tanks, for better speed and maneuverability, and turned into the German formation. He gave the German lead plane a burst with his .50 caliber guns and it nosed up, smoking, and soon went hurtling down to the ground. When Weathers looked back all he could see was the nose cannon of another BF-109, pointing right at him. He quickly dropped flaps and chopped throttle, instantly slowing his Mustang, and the BF-109 flew right past him. A few bursts, and Lieutenant Weathers had his second kill of the day. That was a really neat bit of flying! Two more of the BF-109s were still in view and looked like easy pickings, but the voice of the Group CO echoed in Weathers' mind, "Your job is to protect the bombers and not chase enemy aircraft for personal glory." Lieutenant Weathers returned to the bomber.

The saga of the Tuskegee Airmen took place during a time when in this country racial discrimination and segregation was basically the only known way of life. This of course presented them with many hardships, but they persisted with their fantastic record. Their

accomplishments played an important role in beginning much needed changes in this area. The recognition and changes have come slowly but hopefully will continue – partly because of their unbelievable story. In 1948, President Harry Truman enacted Executive Order Number 9981 – directing equality of treatment and opportunity in all of the United States Armed Forces, which in time led to the end of racial segregation in the United States military forces. On November 6, 1998, President Clinton approved Public Law 105-355 which established the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site at Moton Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, to commemorate and interpret the heroic actions of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II. For this, Congress authorized \$29 million, with the University, Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., and the National Park Service serving as partners in its development. However, a relatively recent report indicated that only \$3.6 million has been appropriated so far. Perhaps many of you have seen the PBS documentary entitled, “The Tuskegee Airmen” released in 2004 and now available for home video. You may have also seen the New Era article of March 29, 2007, which reported that the Tuskegee Airmen will receive a Congressional Gold Medal during a ceremony in the Capitol Rotunda. President Bush, members of Congress and other dignitaries are expected to join some 300 airmen, widows and relatives for this occasion. It is never too late to give the honor, thanks and recognition that these African Americans valiantly earned so many years ago. It is my hope that in a very small way this paper does just that.

You may recall that when I told of the visit to Tuskegee by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt a now famous picture of her in the J-3 Cub airplane with pilot Charles Alfred Anderson was taken by photographer P. H. Polk. A fitting close for my paper is that in August, 1983, there was a space shuttle launch with the first African American astronaut, Guion S. “Guy” Bluford on

board. This event at Kennedy Space Center in Florida was documented and photographed by an honored guest, photographer P. H. Polk! Reportedly Mrs. Roosevelt had asked the question, "Can Negroes really fly airplanes?" For African Americans today, the answer to that question is, "How high would you like to go!"