

NEGRO PERSONNEL IN THE AIR FORCE

1. The history of Negroes in the Air Force may be said to date from October 1940, when it was decided by the Secretary of War that Negro organizations would be established in each major branch of the Army. By V-J Day there were approximately 140,000 Negroes serving with the (then) Army Air Forces. Negro organizations included a fighter group which had completed 18 months of combat service in the Mediterranean Theatre, a medium bombardment group which had been fully manned and equipped and was in the last stages of unit training, and a host of non-flying units in the 2I and overseas. The non-flying units included Air Cargo Resupply Squadrons, MP Companies (aviation), Ordnance Ammunition Companies, Aviation Engineer Battalions, Signal Construction Battalions, Quartermaster Truck Companies (aviation), Airdrome Defense Battalions, Air Base Security Battalions, and Medical Detachments. All of these non-flying units were initially staffed with white officers.

2. The first Negro units to be organized in the Air Force were designated "Aviation Squadrons" and were stationed at various Air Bases where the individuals could be utilized in accordance with their qualifications and the requirements of the Base.

3. Plans were immediately initiated for the formation of a Negro flying unit, and in January 1941, Undersecretary of War Patterson announced that a Negro pursuit squadron would be organized. The flying training program for Negro pilots was started at Tuskegee, Alabama on the airfield owned by Tuskegee Institute, in the summer of 1941. The base was staffed with white officers and experienced flying instructors, and graduated the first group of Negro pilots in the Air Force on March 7, 1942. Successive classes were graduated each month until there were forty Negro pilots, enough to form the 99th Pursuit Squadron.

4. Starting in the spring of 1941, even before the pilot training program, between 250 and 300 Negro ground crew personnel for the 99th had been receiving technical training at Chanute Field, Illinois and had been assigned to Tuskegee for duty. The 99th completed unit training in October 1942 and departed for North Africa in the following April.

5. In September 1942, Secretary of War Stimson announced that "The (Tuskegee) school is being expanded and additional schools for the training of technicians are being established so that not later than June 30, 1943, a complete fighter group with all the necessary crew and base services will be ready for combat. As soon as this group is thoroughly trained and prepared for combat, it will be committed." The flying personnel for this unit were trained at Tuskegee; there, in October 1942, the 332nd Fighter Group was activated. It was composed of 3 fighter squadrons and the 96th Service Group. The 332nd contained approximately one hundred administrative and flying officers, all Negroes. The administrative officers had been trained in Air Corps officer candidate schools in such services as supply,



personnel, military intelligence and statistical duties. The ground crews had been trained at various Army Air Force technical schools throughout the country. Soon after its activation, the 332nd Group was transferred to Selfridge Field in Michigan for unit training. In October, 1943, Lt. Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who had been in command of the 99th Squadron and who had spent some time in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations with that squadron, was recalled to command the 332nd Fighter Group. Lt. Col. Davis, one of the few Negroes who have graduated from West Point, had been a member of the first class to graduate from the Tuskegee Flying School. In January 1944, on completion of unit training, the 332nd Fighter Group left for overseas.

6. Overlapping the training program for the 332nd Fighter Group was another training program, to permit the activation of a medium bombardment group. The 477th Bombardment Group was activated at Selfridge Field, Michigan, in January 1944. It was composed of four squadrons and consisted of approximately 300 officers and 1800 enlisted men. The commanding officer, Colonel Robert R. Selway, was white, as were certain other top officers. The rest of the personnel were Negro. Attached to the 477th was the 387th Service Group, staffed by white officers and 1,000 Negro enlisted men; it dealt with problems of supply and maintenance.

7. The 477th Group continued unit training throughout 1944. After the end of the European war, it was reconstituted into a composite fighter-bomber group, consisting of two B-25 squadrons and one P-47 squadron. In June, 1945, Colonel Davis, having returned from overseas duty as commander of the 332nd Fighter Group, became commanding officer of the 477th. All of the officers of the new group were Negroes. The 477th Composite Group was scheduled to leave for the Pacific in 1945; however, the war came to an end before the unit left for overseas, and it never had a chance to participate in combat.

8. Contrary to the general belief, Negroes in the Air Force were not a select group. Negro personnel in the Air Force were generally comparable in qualification to Negro personnel in the Army as a whole. Four-fifths of the Air Force Negro personnel were in the two lowest AGCT groups. The difficulty of training and utilizing large groups of men in these categories was generally recognized throughout the Armed Forces. Of necessity, the great majority of Negro personnel were utilized in service type units. Each unit was essential in the functioning of the huge Air Force organization, performing the difficult, boring, and unglamorous jobs needed to keep the Air Force flying.

9. The work performed by the hundreds of Negro service units was as essential to Air Force operations as was the work of the flying outfits. But the 332nd Fighter Group and the 477th Composite Group received more publicity than all the other Negro Air Force units combined. It was presumed by many that the success of these two groups was to determine the future of Negroes in the Air Force. It was further presumed that the success of these outfits should prove whether or not Negroes were capable of performing in the highly skilled and technical branches of the Air Corps. Throughout the war the eyes of both the Army and the public were on the Negro mechanics, gunners, pilots, bombardiers, navigators and specialists.

10. There have been protests against the fact that only a relatively few Negroes were performing highly specialized duties in the Air Force. Was there any justification in this protest?

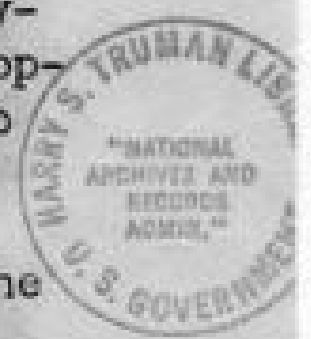
11. In 1941, when the Air Force began to train Negro pilots and other specialists, the training programs were so small that there were more than enough Negroes for the available vacancies. Up until 1943, there was a waiting list of qualified Negroes for the existing vacancies in the 332nd Fighter Group.

12. But by the end of 1943, the picture had changed. The waiting list had disappeared; it had been absorbed by the two Negro flying groups and by other services throughout the armed forces. More Negro airmen were needed as replacements for the two groups. Yet a shortage of available cadets existed, a shortage which continued until the end of the war. Instead of organizing new Negro flying units, the Air Force was concerned with maintaining the two in existence.

13. Why weren't there enough Negroes to fill the needs of only two flying groups? A small part of the answer lay in the delayed opening of air opportunities for Negroes, which caused the operation of Selective Service to doom many potential flyers to service outfits in all branches of the Army. These men, if stationed overseas, could not be recalled for air training. A more cogent reason for the shortage was found in the qualifications of the applicants. No difficulty was met in finding Negroes who could pass the mental and physical tests for flight training; enough were available. But very few aircrew applicants, white or colored, were able to obtain a passing score of 7 points, out of a possible 9 points, on the standard nine point test (stanine) which became a requirement for acceptance for flight training in 1943. This test measured motor responses. The results were intended to show the type of reaction which flight and combat conditions could be expected to produce in the aircrew applicant.

14. The large percentage of white aircrew applicants unable to pass the stanine test did not cause an extreme shortage of white aviation cadets, for throughout the United States, tens of thousands of white men applied for the existing vacancies in the white flying units. Enough of these applicants were qualified to fill all vacancies. But there were comparatively few Negroes who possessed the necessary physical and educational qualifications needed to apply for aircrew training, so that the small percentage of these men who were able to pass the psychological test was not even enough to fill the needs of the two Negro flying groups. In order to fill the quotas of the 332nd Fighter Group and the 477th Bomb Group, the Air Force had to lower the minimum score on the test for Negro aircrew applicants from 7 to 5, and sometimes to 4 and sometimes to disregard it altogether. Only by this method were all of the vacancies in the two groups filled, but it would have been impossible for the Air Force to organize an additional Negro flying group after 1943.

15. The men who were accepted for the two colored flying groups received excellent training. Every Negro pilot received his wings at Tuskegee Army Air Field. At the Negro pilot-training school, every effort was made to produce competent pilots upon graduation. Instructors and supervisory personnel at the air field, most of whom had instructed at white stations, always followed



the policy of eliminating students who did not meet standards as they knew them. Flying training was inspected as vigorously at Tuskegee as at any other station; Army inspectors agreed that the training of the students was of standard quality and produced Negro pilots whose proficiency was equal to that of white pilots.

16. Aside from the training received at Tuskegee, all individual training of Negroes in the Air Corps was performed at installations having a large number of white personnel. Prospective bomber pilots, after receiving their commissions at Tuskegee, went on to advanced flying schools to study bomber techniques. Enlisted personnel needed for ground crews for the 332nd and the 477th Groups, were trained at the regular Air Corps technical training schools. When large numbers of Negroes were in training at any of these schools at one time, they were occasionally assigned to separate classes and usually to separate training organizations. Where small numbers of Negroes were involved, separate classes were seldom attempted, but the provision of separate living quarters, in accordance with Army policy, was the standard practice. The only completely integrated training was in the Air Corps Officer Candidate Schools where Negro officer candidates lived and trained simply as individuals along with the other men.

17. Along with the general demobilization and reorganization which occurred after the war, the personnel of the 332nd and 477th were consolidated into the 332nd Fighter Wing. This wing consists of the 332nd Fighter Group (3 Fighter Squadrons), the 332nd Maintenance and Supply Group, the 332nd Airdrome Group, and a medical group, stationed at Lockbourne Air Force Base, Columbus, Ohio.

18. Other Negroes in or with the Air Force are in types of units such as Air Ammunition Squadrons, Motor Transport Squadrons, Air Vehicle Repair Squadrons, Signal Heavy Construction Companies, (Avn), and Engineer Aviation Battalions.

19. There is little doubt that a certain number of Negro personnel in the Air Force were not utilized to the best of their capabilities. In some specialties there were more qualified Negroes than there were vacancies; in other specialties there were more vacancies than there were qualified individuals to fill the vacancies.

20. This situation is undesirable in many respects, and has been under study. As a result of our studies the Air Force plans a policy of integration under which Negro officers and airmen may be assigned to any duty in any Air Force activity in accordance with the qualifications of the individual and the needs of the service. This will not necessarily mean the immediate end of all Negro units in the Air Force. It definitely will mean, however, that Negro personnel will not be restricted to Negro units and will be procured, trained and assigned on the basis of individual merit and ability rather than Negro quotas to man Negro units.