

## *The Tuskegee Airmen*

Due to the rigid pattern of racial segregation that prevailed in the United States during World War II, over 920 Black military aviators were trained at an isolated training complex at Tuskegee Institute. Four hundred and fifty Black fighter pilots, under the command of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., fought in the aerial war over North Africa, Sicily, and Europe, flying the P-39, P-40, P-47, and P-51. These gallant men flew 15,553 sorties and completed 1,578 missions with the 12th Tactical US Army Air Force (USAAF) and the 15th Strategic USAAF. Colonel Davis later became the US Air Force's (USAF) first Black general officer and ultimately, the USAF's first Black lieutenant general.

They were called the "Schwartzze Vogelmenshen" (Black Birdmen) by the Germans, who both feared and respected them. White American bomber crews reverently referred to them as "The Black Redtail Angels" because of the identifying red paint on their tail assemblies and because of their reputation for not losing bombers to enemy fighters while providing fighter escort.

The 99th Fighter Squadron, which had already distinguished itself over North Africa, Sicily, and Anzio, joined three other Black squadrons; the 100th, 301st, and 302nd. These four squadrons, designated as the 332nd Fighter Group, comprised the largest fighter unit in the 15th Air Force. From Italian bases, they destroyed enemy rail traffic, coast-watching surveillance stations, and hundreds of vehicles during air-to-ground strafing missions. Sixty-six of these pilots were killed in aerial combat while another thirty-two were either forced down or shot down and captured, becoming prisoners of war. The Black airmen from Tuskegee returned home with 150 military decorations, including the Distinguished Flying Cross, Legion of Merit, and Red Star of Yugoslavia.

The 477th Composite Fighter-Bomber Group (B-25 Bombers and P-47 Fighters) was formed by some members of the 332nd Fighter Group as well as other Black pilots, navigators, bombardiers and crewmen trained for bomber duty. The 477th never entered combat because of Germany's and Japan's surrender in 1945. The persistent demands of the 477th for parity and recognition as competent military professionals, combined with the magnificent wartime record of the 99th and the 332nd, led to a review of the US War Department's racial segregation policies.