

TUSKEGEE AIRFIELDS DURING WORLD WAR II

Daniel L. Haulman
Air Force Historical Research Agency
23 June 2014

The first black pilots in the American armed forces have become famous as the Tuskegee Airmen. They were named after the place they learned to fly, but many more people are familiar with their combat record than with the airfields at which they first trained. For example, thousands of people know that the 332nd Fighter Group, the only black 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, but few have ever heard of Kennedy or Moton or Griel or Shorter Fields. Black military aviation began at five airfields around Tuskegee, and this is their story.

The Tuskegee area of Alabama was chosen for a number of reasons. It had more days of good flying weather than in the North. Unlike many other areas of the country, which faced high real estate prices for bases and air traffic congestion problems, Tuskegee was a rural area with abundant land waiting to be developed and no large nearby cities smoldering with racial tension. 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. In addition to that, President Frederick Patterson of Tuskegee Institute actively lobbied for Tuskegee to be the place for black military pilot training. Tuskegee Institute was already training black civilian pilots, and nourished a reputation as one of the foremost black institutions of higher learning in the country. Even if Tuskegee Institute would only have a role in the primary phase of the black military pilot training program, under contract with the Army Air Corps, such a program would help Tuskegee

Institute as much as Tuskegee Institute helped it. Construction of a large Army Air Field around Tuskegee would also benefit the town and the county.

At first, many leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) opposed the Tuskegee flying training program, because of its segregated nature. In the end, NAACP leaders supported it, because they preferred that the black pilots be trained in Alabama, and be assigned to segregated flying units, than they not be trained at all.

In 1940, black pilots began training at Tuskegee Institute in the Civilian Pilot Training Program. For that purpose, the institute bought and improved a small private airfield called Kennedy Field, between four and five miles south of Tuskegee. The field was only 55 acres, and had no paved runways, but there were four small hangars, with Piper Cubs and Waco biplanes. Charles Alfred Anderson, called “Chief,” by the other flyers because he was the chief flight instructor, led a team of seven flying instructors, which included three blacks and four whites.

The most famous event ever to occur at Kennedy Field was March 29, 1941 visit by Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Chief Anderson took her for a flight, and she became an avid supporter of black flying training at Tuskegee Institute. Mrs. Roosevelt sponsored fund raising for the building of 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, Illinois, but it did not yet have any pilots. Those pilots were to be trained at Tuskegee.

The larger airfield was called Moton Field, named after Robert Russa Moton, Tuskegee Institute’s second president. On August 21, 1941, the first class of thirteen black military aviation cadets entered primary flight training at Kennedy Field, because Moton Field was not yet completed. They and their instructors moved to Moton as soon as the field was ready for

flying operations, in September, 1941. Moton Field today is the Tuskegee airport, and the location of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site. Many visitors to the site, before they read the exhibit plaques carefully, imagine that all of the Tuskegee Airmen flying training took place at Moton Field, when actually, it was the home only of the primary flying training phase. During that phase, cadets flew PT, or primary training, aircraft. Moton Field had PT-13 and PT-17 biplanes, which were identical except for the engine manufacturer, and later the PT-19 monoplane, which was used at Moton 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 there. Jackson worked closely with Chief Anderson and other black civilian flight instructors at Moton Field. The field also had some white flight instructors, some of whom belonged to the Air Corps, and commanded the military cadets.

Tuskegee Institute hired an African-American firm headquartered in Iowa called Alexander and Repass to construct Moton Field. George A. Reed served as the field's plant engineer, who was responsible for the operation and maintenance of the physical plant. He oversaw the building of Moton Field from June to November of 1941, making certain that the facilities met the standards of the Army Air Corps for primary flight training.

Like Kennedy Field, Moton Field had no paved runways, but it was much larger, consisting of 275 acres. It was located three to four miles north of Tuskegee, and eventually contained 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 primary flight training.

Lt. Col. Noel Parrish commanded field from July 19 until December 3, 1941, when he was succeeded there by Maj. William T. Smith, a West Point graduate. There were several other white officers serving at Moton Field, under whom the military flight cadets served. Among them were Capt. Harold C. Magoon, Capt. John G. Penn, and 1st Lt. John H. McBeth. Captain Magoon supervised the check rides of the cadets when their primary flight training was complete. Among the black flight instructors at Moton Field, besides Lewis Jackson and Chief Anderson, were 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. For those basic and advanced phases, other kinds of aircraft were used, and Moton Field was far too small for them. Those Negro pilots who did complete primary flight training at Moton Field moved to the largest of the Tuskegee airfields, Tuskegee Army Air Field.

Completed around the same time as Moton Field, Tuskegee Army Air Field was much larger, eventually covering an area of 1,681 acres. It was about seven miles northwest of Tuskegee by air (ten miles by road). It was a few miles northwest of Moton Field, toward Tallassee. Tuskegee Army Air Field eventually included four large intersecting paved runways and three large double hangars, each 184 by 120 feet. The field also contained extensive barracks and other buildings such as those that were familiar at other Army Air Forces installations. It eventually accommodated at least 369 officers and 1775 enlisted men, or at least 2144 military personnel. Unlike Kennedy and Moton Fields, Tuskegee Army Air Field was

owned by the Army Air Corps, which built and operated it directly, instead of under contract with Tuskegee Institute.

Tuskegee Army Air Field was revolutionary in more ways than one. Not only was it the first and only major base built for the basic and advanced phases of military flying training for black 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 amount of money at the time. Engineers reshaped the land to overcome terrain and drainage problems.

On August 6, 1941, a Tuskegee Army Flying School was activated at Tuskegee Army Air Field, and Major James A. Ellison served as its first commander, but the black aviation cadets had not yet begun their training at Kennedy or Moton Fields. On September 19, black enlisted personnel began arriving at Tuskegee Army Air Field, to join white enlisted personnel who were already there. It was not until November 8 that six of the thirteen black flying cadets who graduated from primary flight training at Moton Field arrived at Tuskegee Army Air Field, 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 Army Air Field. It was to be the first black flying squadron, but it did not yet have any pilots.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II on December 7, 1941. That same month, Major Noel F. Parrish, a white officer who had been in charge of training at Moton Field, moved to Tuskegee Army Air Field to be Director of Training there.

January 1942 was another crucial month. Five of the six black cadets who had entered basic flying training graduated to advanced flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field. For that

phase, they would fly AT-6 aircraft. During the same month, Colonel Frederick V. H. Kimble succeeded Major James A. Ellison as commander of the field and the flying school.

The 99th Pursuit Squadron, which had moved to Tuskegee Army Air Field in November, waited for its first pilots to complete their training. On February 19, 1942, it was joined by a second black flying squadron, the 100th Pursuit Squadron. Neither of the future fighter squadrons had any pilots until March 7, 1942, when the first class of black military pilots graduated from advanced pilot training. Class 42C had only five members, but they included Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a former West Point cadet whose father was the first black general in the United States Army.

The first black pilots who graduated from advanced flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field remained on the field to fly P-40s in the 99th and 100th Fighter Squadrons. When those units had enough pilots, they became operational, but they were not sent overseas to take part in combat immediately. They continued training at Tuskegee until October 13, when the 332nd Fighter Group, the first black flying group, was activated at Tuskegee Army Air Field. The 100th Fighter Squadron was assigned to the new group, as well as two new black fighter squadrons, the 301st and the 302nd. The first black flying unit, the 99th Fighter Squadron, was not assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group when the organizations were at Tuskegee, because it was older than the other units, and prepared to deploy before them for conflict overseas.

Eventually Tuskegee Army Air Field hosted a large number of training and operational aircraft. They included BT-13s used for basic flying training, and single-engine AT-6s for advanced training of future fighter pilots, twin engine AT-10s for advanced training for future bomber pilots, P-40s for the 99th Fighter Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group (including its

three fighter squadrons, the 100th, 301st, and 302nd) and even eventually even a couple of B-25 bombers.

In December 1942, Colonel Noel Parrish, who had been Director of Training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, became the commander of the field and its flying school, replacing Colonel 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 capacities at Tuskegee Army Air Field, but they did not live on the base with the black cadets.

Unlike at Moton Field, where black flight instructors worked from the beginning, Tuskegee Army Air Field at first had only white flight instructors in its schools for basic flying training, advanced single engine flying training, advanced twin engine flying training, and fighter transition training. The first black flight instructor at Tuskegee Army Air Field was 1st Lt. Willie Fuller, who had already gone through the Tuskegee Army Air Field flying training phases and who had already served in combat flying with the 99th Fighter Squadron in Italy. He began work as a flight instructor at Tuskegee Army Air Field in the fall of 1944. Shortly afterwards, Capt. James T. Wiley, another 99th Fighter Squadron veteran pilot, became the first black flight instructor in the twin-engine advanced flying school at the field. By the end of the year, the basic flying school included two black flight instructors, flight officers James O. Plinton, Jr. and Adolph J. Moret, Jr., both of whom had been civilian flight instructors at the primary flight school at Moton Field before moving to Tuskegee Army Air Field. Three additional black flight instructors taught at the fighter transition school by the end of 1944. They included Capt. Charles, B. Hall, who had been the first Tuskegee Airmen to shoot down an enemy aircraft, 1st Lt. William R. Melton, Jr., and 2nd Lt. Milton T. Hall. All three were combat

veterans who had returned from service in Italy. Thus by the end of 1944, there were seven black flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field out of a total of 49. That was only one in seven, but the number would grow in 1945, as more black combat pilot veterans completed their tours of duty overseas and returned to Tuskegee, and as more of the white flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field deployed for their own service overseas.¹

Flight Officers Plinton and Moret had completed a 10-week Basic Instructors' School at Tuskegee Army Air Field on November 29, 1944, along with two other black pilots, Flight Officer Charles W. Stephens, Jr., and 1st Lt. Archie F. Williams. Philips had worked as a civilian flight instructor at Moton Field, like Plinton and Moret, but at first he worked in the instrument training school at Tuskegee Army Air Field, and did not serve as a flight instructor there until 1945. Williams also did not work as a flight instructor at Tuskegee Army Air Field by the end of 1944. He served instead in the weather department until at least the beginning of 1945. Increasing numbers of black flight instructors served at Tuskegee Army Air Field as more and more veterans of the 332nd Fighter Group and its squadrons returned from overseas duty, and by the time flying training ended there, most of the flying instructors were black.

In March 1943, the 332nd Fighter Group and its 100th, 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons moved from Tuskegee Army Air Field to Selfridge Field, Michigan. In April, the 99th Fighter Squadron deployed from Tuskegee Army Air Field for overseas duty across the Atlantic Ocean in North Africa. The departure of the four flying squadrons and the group in the spring of 1943 allowed Tuskegee Army Air Field to concentrate on flying training. It also freed up more room for the training aircraft, since the P-40s of the four squadrons were no longer needed there. A small number of P-40s remained on the base for transition training.

Forty-four classes of pilots completed the advanced phase of the training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, but not all of them became fighter pilots after completing single-engine training. Twin-engine pilot training commenced at Tuskegee Army Air Field in September 1943, but single-engine flying training continued there. When the 332nd Fighter Group deployed from Selfridge Field, Michigan, for overseas duty in Italy, where the 99th Fighter Squadron was already serving, a black bombardment group, the 477th, was activated at Selfridge. Graduates of twin-engine pilot training at Tuskegee Army Air Field went to the 477th Bombardment Group.

Around the middle of 1944, an outdoor amphitheater opened on the northern edge of Tuskegee Army Air Field, for entertainment. The first performers there were Ella Fitzgerald and the Ink Spots. Later celebrities who entertained the cadets and instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field included Louis Armstrong and Lena Horne, the latter of whom was the most popular of all.

Tuskegee Army Air Field had two auxiliary airfields during World War II. Griel Field, consisting of 320 acres six miles west of Tuskegee Army Air Field, was used for the training of liaison pilots for the U.S. Army, who eventually served Army ground units as artillery spotters and observers. Griel Field was a grassy field, with no hangars, barracks, or fuel supplies.

The second auxiliary airfield was Shorter Field, consisting of 241 acres almost 12 miles west-southwest of its parent base. Like Griel, Shorter Field had only a grass surface, with no hangars or barracks, and no fuel supplies. Pilots in the advanced phase of flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field practiced takeoffs and landings at Shorter Field. Pilots training at the main base also used Shorter Field during their solo flights.

The last of 44 pilot training classes graduated at Tuskegee Army Air Field on June 29, 1946. World War II was over, and the need for military pilots plummeted. Almost a thousand black pilots had trained at the field between November 1941 and June 1946, a period of about

four and a half years. In June 1947, Tuskegee Army Air Field closed permanently when the last unit there was inactivated. Like hundreds of other flying training fields around the country, it closed and was never used again. Its most important buildings, like the three large double hangars, were dismantled and moved to serve at civilian airports in other parts of Alabama. One Tuskegee Army Air Field hangar stands today at each of three airports at Montgomery, Clanton, and Troy.

Whoever studies the combat performance of the first black pilots in American military history should also remember the five Tuskegee area airfields where they learned to fly. They were indispensable. The training the Tuskegee Airmen received at Kennedy, Moton, Tuskegee, Griel, and Shorter Fields undoubtedly influenced their later success in combat, and that success forever changed American military history.

TABLE II: FIVE AIRFIELDS OF TUSKEGEE DURING WORLD WAR II

Name	KENNEDY FIELD	MOTON FIELD	TUSKEGEE ARMY AIR FIELD (TAAF)	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 auxiliary field for Tuskegee Army Air Field
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. 4,200x3000 feet	Four asphalt-paved runways, three 5,000 feet long, one 4,500 feet long, all 300 feet wide	Turf. All-way. 5,689 x 3,368 feet	Turf. All-way. 3,560x3,270 feet
Hangars	Four small, largest dimension: 88 feet	Two brick, one 140x120 feet, one 130x100 feet	Three large, steel and wood, each 184x120 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, accommodations for 369 officers and 1775 enlisted men, for 2144 military personnel. radio facilities, railroad siding, 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 Air Field	11.75 miles WSW of Tuskegee Army Air Field

Source: U.S. Army Air Forces Airport Directory, Continental United States, volume I (Washington, DC: Aeronautical Chart Service, Army Air Forces, 1945) AFHRA call number 260.277 vol. 1 1945, pp. 49-50, 67-69.

¹ Histories of Tuskegee Army Air Field, Sep-Oct 1944 and Nov-Dec 1944, volume 1, AFHRA call numbers 289.28-6 and 289.28-7.