

The Black Redtail Angels

They were called the “Schwartzte Vogelmenshen” (Black Birdmen) by the Germans. American bomber crews reverently referred to them as “The Black Redtail Angels” because of the identifying red paint on the aircraft tail assemblies and because of their reputation of never having lost a bomber to enemy fighters as they provided fighter escort on bombing missions over targets in Europe. They were the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II—Black fighter pilots, flying P-40s, P-39s, P-47s, and P-51s.

Gearing up for the war that they knew was coming, the U.S. initiated the “Tuskegee Experiment,” training Blacks to be pilots. Due to the existing segregationist policies in existence then, on January 6, 1941, General Hap Arnold told the Assistant Secretary of War for Air that Blacks could only be trained at Tuskegee, Alabama. By the end of World War II, 992 Blacks had won their wings at Tuskegee Army Air Field, the first Black pilots in the U.S. Armed Forces. About half of these fought in the European and Mediterranean wars. They formed 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302nd fighter squadrons, which in turn made up the 332nd Fighter Group [the largest fighter unit in the 15th Air Force].

They served with distinction, flying more than 15,000 sorties and destroying over 1,000 German aircraft. They received over 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses and hundreds of Air Medals. Sixty-six were killed in aerial combat, while another 32 were captured and became P.O.W.s.

The “Tuskegee Experiment” was an unqualified success. Three Tuskegee Airmen went on to become Generals, including Daniel “Chappie” James, this country’s first Black Four-Star General.

