Tuskegee airmen battled on two fronts

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Editor's note: This is an abridged article from the book "Makers of the United States Air Force" by John L. Frisbee.

In April 1948, three months before President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9981 directed desegregation in the armed forces, the Air Force announced its intention to integrate racially.

The landmark decision was heavily influenced by the achievements of a man of uncommon judgment and moral courage. That man was Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the first black man to graduate from the U.S. Military Academy in the twentieth century, leader of the only black combat air group during World War II, and the first black general officer in the United States Air Force.

Davis was born Dec. 18, 1912, in Washington, D.C., the son of the officer who became the first black general in the U.S. Army. His father insisted on good manners, integrity, responsibility, and punctuality — virtues that were to be especially useful in a military career. After high school, Ben Davis first attended college and then received an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Davis was the ninth black to enroll at West Point since its founding in 1802, and the fourth to graduate.

The Army he joined in 1932 was a reflection of American society of the time. If anything, it was more tightly segregated on racial lines than was society at large, and West Point was no exception to the general Army practice. From the time he entered the Academy to graduation in June 1936, Davis had no roommate. Upperclassmen directed that he be "silenced" — that no cadet speak to him — hoping to drive him from West Point. With one brief interlude at the "recognition ceremony" marking the end of Plebe, or freshman year, the silencing continued throughout his four years at the academy.

Despite this extreme social pressure, Davis graduated 35th in a class of 276. Howitzer, the Academy year book, said of him: "The courage, tenacity and intelligence with which he conquered a problem . . . more difficult than Plebe year won for him the sincere admiration of his classmates, and his single-minded determination to continue in his chosen career cannot fail to inspire respect wherever fortune may lead him."

Davis had been smitten by flying from a barnstorming ride as a boy of 14, and applied for flight training with the recommendation of Academy Superintendent Maj. Gen. William D. Conner; but the segregated Air Corps took no blacks in any capacity, service or flying. He was assigned to the infantry as commander of a black service company at Fort Benning, Ga., and in a year was enrolled as a student in the infantry school at that post.

Upon graduation from the year-long course, Davis became an ROTC instructor at the all-black Tuskegee Institute of Alabama. After nearly three years at Tuskegee, Davis was assigned to Fort Riley, Kan., as an aide to his father, Brig. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Sr., and soon thereafter to the newly formed black flying school near the town of Tuskegee. Tuskegee Army Air Field was established by the Air Corps (which became the Army Air Forces June 20, 1941) because of pressure from President Franklin D. Roosevelt who was responding to an intense campaign by the black press and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to open flying training to blacks. In December 1940, the Air Corps, at Roosevelt's order, reluctantly submitted a plan to the Secretary of War for creating a single, segregated pursuit squadron with a complement of 47 officers and 429 enlisted men. The 99th Pursuit Squadron was activated at Chanute Army Air Field, Illinois, March 22, 1941, with ground-crew training only. Tuskegee Army Air Field was officially established July 23, 1941, to train pilots.

Captain Davis, because he was a Military Academy graduate and had the physical and mental capabilities to fly, was chosen to be leader of the first class of 13 that entered flight training in August 1941. There was, however, a short delay in Davis' movement from Fort Riley to Tuskegee because word of the change in Army Air Force policy had not been broadcast widely. Before proceeding to Tuskegee, Davis was required to pass a flight physical. He appeared before the post physician at Fort Riley only to be failed for epilepsy, a disease he has never had. The matter had to be corrected by another flight physical, this time performed by a doctor who was aware that flying training had been opened to blacks.

Davis in the cockpit of a P-51.

Of the initial group of 13 that was led by Davis, the young captain and four cadets graduated as fighter pilots in the U.S. Army Air Forces on March 7 1942. The five original graduates formed the nucleus of the 99th Pursuit Squadron. In time Tuskegee Army Air Field graduated almost 1,000 black Americans. These men have been known ever since as the Tuskegee Airman.

When the 99th Pursuit Squadron completed its combat training, the Army Air Force could find no commander in a combat zone who would accept the units, but with a dignity and bearing none of his men ever will forget, Davis led the 99th through interminable training sorties waiting with a well-disguised impatience for the opportunity to fly and fight. When finally ordered to North Africa in the spring of 1943, Davis and his men carried the knowledge that upon their performance rested the future of blacks in military flying.

People must remember, Davis and his men had fought on two fronts: against the enemy abroad and against the discrimination they had suffered from birth. While the men were under Davis' command, they answered insults his way — with articulate silence and the demonstrated ability to fly and fight.

Davis set out in 1941 to help achieve integration in the military forces by disproving the core argument for segregation: the widespread belief that blacks could not perform as well as whites. He succeeded. The integrated Air Force unquestionably became more efficient than a segregated force had been.

A class of twin-engine pilots in front in flight caps and single engine pilots in rear in helmets and goggles, Dec. 1943.