

The Tuskegee Airmen and the Establishment of an African-American Air Corps Squadron

Annie Schamaun
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Tuskegee Airmen

Picture courtesy of <http://www.nps.gov/tuai/index.htm>

Logic for the Teaching of this Unit

The writing and recording of history has a tendency of being retold in ways that omit negative or unfavorable events that may have transpired on behalf of the victor's side. World War II has, in recent years, been molded into a glamorous era of sorts. Students are taught only the stories and accounts that paint the actions of the United States in a favorable light. What they rarely learn about are the Japanese detention camps, the Allied knowledge of Jewish extermination, concentration, and death camp locations years before liberation took place, and the rampant racism that encompassed all aspects of the Armed Forces.

Rather, students are bombarded with war stories of heroic feats that they can take home with them to paint an idealized picture of the Greatest Generation. Indeed, the men and women who fought and died during World War II are a class separate from the typical citizen. There are not enough medals, words, monuments, or expressions of thanks that can be bestowed on them as a thank you for all they have given up for later generations. In order to garner a true appreciation for the sacrifices made by the Greatest Generation, it is crucial for students to have a fundamental understanding of the realities that made up day to day life during those years.

Purpose for the Unit and When to Teach It

The purpose of this unit is to educate high school students about segregation in the Armed Forces through learning about the creation of the Tuskegee Airmen program, which yielded the first ever African-American fighting squadron in the previous all white Air Corps. This unit will not, however, focus on the war time missions conducted by the Tuskegee Airmen. Rather, the point of this section is to aid in educating students on the many diverse and varied forms racism and segregation have taken over the years. Depending on the structure of the instructor's course plan for the year, this unit is

recommended to be included during the teaching of the events of World War II or during a specialized series during Black History Month.

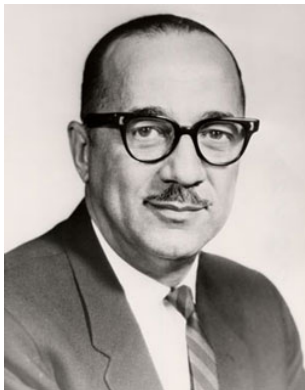
Instructor's Overview

Curiously, even in the face of extreme racism, bigotry, and segregation, African-American servicemen and women have fought for the right to enlist and defend American liberties since the Revolutionary War (Hasday 9). One might think that, after enduring slavery and centuries of horrendous treatment, African-Americans would shy away from risking life and limb for a country that subjected them to numerous humiliations. On the contrary, African-Americans have held a distinguished and vital role in the preservation of American ideals. On the eve of the United States involvement in World War II, African-Americans were continuing a long history of fighting for an equal chance to enlist in the Armed Forces. Following the example of mainstream society, the Armed Forces during this time still maintained segregated fighting units. This segregation extended to the Air Corps (later renamed the Air Force) where African-Americans were not segregated but excluded and prohibited from service altogether.

In 1939, relenting to pressures from a growing and increasingly influential African-American populous, the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) was created. One of the most influential backers behind this bill was Missouri Senator Harry Truman, who, becoming President after World War II, would later bring about the integration of the Armed Forces (Hasday 34-35), (Sandler 151-154). The CPTP was an attempt by Congress to shift African-Americans into the Air Corps. Also known as Public Law 18, this measure mandated that the Air Corps establish flight schools to prepare a fighting force should the United States enter war. One caveat of this program was the order to include African-American colleges and universities in the venture. Established by funds from the Committee on Military Appropriations, African-American eligible colleges and universities included Howard University, Hampton Institute, Coffey School of

Aeronautics, and Tuskegee Institute (Gropman 6-7), (Hardesty 63), and (Hasday 37). Organizations such as the NAACP, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and everyday African-American citizens hoped that the inclusion of African-American colleges and universities in the CPTP would help to break the all white barriers of the Air Corps. However, the Air Corps did not accept African American flight graduates from these schools. The excuse of the Air Corps was that, since there were no established segregated units for African-American pilots, then they could not enlist them. It was not until the intervention of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the matter did the Air Corps establish an African-American flying unit (History Channel DVD).

The intervention by President Roosevelt, however, was not due to the President's full support of civil rights. Rather, the year 1940 consisted of an election year where the President was seeking his third term in office against an outspoken civil rights sympathizer, Republican Wendell Wilkie, who took the administration to task for its poor support of African-American equal rights (Sandler 14, 65). In order to gain the African-American vote, Roosevelt needed to take action in appeasing some of the demands for African-American inclusion in the Air Corps. One step Roosevelt took was to appoint Judge William H. Hastie, Dean of Howard University, as civilian aid on Negro affairs to the secretary of war.



Judge William H. Hastie

Picture courtesy of <http://filipsagnoli.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/william-hastie.jpg>

Hastie was a vocal opponent of segregation and the exclusion of African-Americans from the Air Corps (Homan and Reilly 22, 27-28). During a time of increased need for enlisted men, African-American men were being turned down for service. Indeed, African-Americans were only allowed to enlist in numbers that were representative of their percentage in the American population (Sandler 9). Additionally, while there were African-American infantry and naval fighters, there were no African-American pilots. Sadly, it was widely believed that African-Americans did not have the mental capacity to handle war time flying (Francis 27). Hastie would continue to make many more waves, particularly the creation of the Tuskegee Airmen unit, than the Roosevelt Administration anticipated.

In addition to pressure for African-American votes, one of the influential factors in Roosevelt's decision to move for the creation of an African-American flying unit was the support for an African-American squadron by his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt. Visiting Tuskegee once it received its CPTP certification, Eleanor Roosevelt was taken on a plane ride over Tuskegee with Charles Alfred Anderson, a flight instructor at Tuskegee in early 1941. After her experience at Tuskegee she returned to the White House to advocate for the introduction of African-Americans in the Air Corps (Homan and Reilly 34-35).



Eleanor Roosevelt with "Chief" Anderson, 1941
Picture courtesy of http://www.nps.gov/archive/elro/images/afhra_tuskegeeairanderson.jpg

The activation of a segregated African-American unit in the Air Corps therefore occurred at Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama on March 21, 1941, establishing the 99th Fighter Squadron. Colonel Benjamin O. Davis Jr., a West Point graduate, was appointed to lead the 99th. (Francis 59)



Benjamin O. Davis Jr.
Courtesy of <http://www.nasm.si.edu/blackwings/hdetail/detailbw.cfm?bwID=BW0052>

While believing it was conceding to calls for the inclusion of African-Americans, the Armed Forces were not interested in changing its segregation practices. Instead, the army followed the motto: “Segregation is required, discrimination is prohibited” (Gropman 4). An official statement from the War Department further reads: “The policy of the War Department is not to intermingle colored and white personnel in the same regimental organizations. This policy has proven satisfactory over a long period of years and to make changes would produce situations destructive to morale and detrimental to the preparation for national defense” (Gropman 5).

Judge Hastie was a loud voice in the opposition of a segregated squadron. Hastie identified the ridiculousness of such a squadron by pointing out issues and concerns a segregated unit would create. Firstly, millions of tax dollars would need to be spent to

build separate facilities (training, lodging, etc.) for African-Americans at Tuskegee Institute. This effort would delay the creation of the new squadron by six months. Also, would this now mean that all Air Corps facilities would need separate facilities, not just Tuskegee? An example Hastie used included this scenario, “What would happen when a black detachment flew into an airfield in the Deep South and required fuel and services that were its due as a regular component of the U.S. Army Air Corps?” (Sandler 20). Thirdly, segregation limited the availability of which aircraft African-American pilots could fly, and hence, limited the degree to which they could assist in the war. African-American pilots would only be allowed to fly pursuit planes, because those did not require passengers. Bombers and transport planes would be out of the question as it would potentially put African-American pilots in the position of giving commands to whites. Finally, why station the training center at Tuskegee, in the heart of the racially tense Deep South? It angered Hastie that Air Corps officials choose Tuskegee due to their comfort by what they viewed to be the “accommodationist” stance of Tuskegee, thanks in part to the legacy left by its founder, Booker T. Washington. (Sandler 19-21).

In conclusion, the establishment of the squadron that would come to be termed the Tuskegee Airmen was quite a feat. The creation of this African-American unit helped to pave the way for the Armed Forces integration that occurred in 1948. As mentioned earlier, modern society tends to romanticize the World War II era. A civilization may not positively move toward the future without understanding the events of the past. It is important for students to have a thorough grasp of the true extent racism and segregation can reach. Hence, the teaching of the creation of the Tuskegee Airmen squadron will hopefully help in sparking an interest in students that will help them remember this history lesson and how it relates to the larger issue of racism and segregation that the United States has been grappling with.

Activities

1. In-depth class project

- Students retain information at a better rate when they are themselves teaching the material to other students. With this project, the class will partner with a fifth or sixth grade class. My suggestion is to build an alliance with a class in a school that already partners with your high school in foreign language instruction (it is common for foreign language students to visit an elementary classroom once per week to teach elementary foreign language skills such as the alphabet, days of the week, colors, etc.).
- Grade school students will be broken up into groups with five students per group. There will be two high school students assigned to each grade school group.
- Groups will be assigned one of the following books (please see the bibliography for complete detail):
 - The Tuskegee Airmen Story. By Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly.
 - The Tuskegee Airmen. By Linda and Charles George
 - The Fighting Red Rails: America's First Black Airmen. By Warren Halliburton.
 - The Tuskegee Airmen. By Philip Brooks.
- The high school students will read the book with the grade school students and discuss segregation in American society and broach the topic of the importance of diversity.
- Each group will be responsible for creating a book report on what they have read. With the help of the high school mentors, they will also be

assigned to creating a class presentation to teach what they learned in the book. Some ideas include posters, play/skits, puppet shows, etc.

2. Film

- The class will watch the film, **America's Black Warriors: Two Wars to Win** (please see the bibliography for complete details).
- A class discussion will be held for students have a chance to reflect on how the film impacted them and also to give students a chance to ask follow-up questions to the instructor.
- Develop questions that will help lead to discussions for your students such as, *"How would you feel to be sent overseas to fight for your country when you weren't allowed equal rights back home?"*

3. What if? Writing a personal essay.

- It is hard to study history and truly grasp what the occurrences of many years past would have felt like to a person of the times. To garner an appreciation of the importance of the Tuskegee Airmen, students will write a personal essay.
- In this essay, students will detail an area in life that they are passionate about. This may be a club they are involved with, a religious affiliation, or the idea of what they want to be when they grow up.
- With this, students will imagine what it would be like if they were barred and excluded from one of these areas based on their skin color. They will relay in their essay how that impacts them, and relate it directly back to what it would have felt like to be African-American and excluded from their passion.

- To wrap-up the essay, students will demonstrate why the Tuskegee Airmen were so important in helping to bring about integration in the Armed Forces.

4. Research reports

- Through the in-depth class projects, and also via information learned through the two films, students will be exposed to the names of many individuals that either contributed too or sought to prevent integration in the Armed Forces.
- Students will pick from the list of selected names below and write a report on how the selected person contributed, or failed to contribute, to the integration of the Armed Forces.
 1. Judge William H. Hastie
 2. General Arnold
 3. Colonel Momyer
 4. Secretary of War Stimson
 5. President Franklin Roosevelt
 6. Eleanor Roosevelt
 7. Colonel Parrish
 8. Benjamin O. Davis Jr.
 9. Assistant Secretary of War McCloy

5. Textbook curriculum project

- Have your students open their current social studies textbook and search for a chapter or section on the Tuskegee Airmen. It is very doubtful that they will find one.
- Hold a class discussion talking about the cautions to be taken for this example. Ask questions such as, “*Why is it important to understand*

history is written from the white perspective? Why would a textbook leave out such an event?"

- Further investigate in the textbook to see if any mention is made of the segregation of the Armed Forces.
- Have students meet in groups of five. Their assignment will be to write a section on the importance the creation the Tuskegee Airmen unit had on the integration in the Armed Forces.
- Chapters will be presented to the class. All students will receive a copy of each other group's chapter and discuss aspects that are highlights of the section and question areas that have been left out.

6. Film

- The class will watch the HBO movie **The Tuskegee Airmen**. This exercise will build upon the lessons they learned through the textbook curriculum project by analyzing the factual versus the fictional elements of the film.
- Have students keep track of the abnormalities they notice in the film. *Is the information in the film correctly portrayed? Are there areas that are ambiguous or vague? What events are depicted that seem to be fiction and what facts are completely omitted?*
- After the film, hold a class discussion on the film. Discuss and analyze the areas reported as fact and those reported as fiction. Ask the questions: *What does this teach you about the representation of history in current society? Is this good or bad? What have you learned now, that the unit has ended, about segregation that you were previously unaware of?*

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