

Lesson Five

Decade Five: 1940-1950

The Tuskegee Airmen

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Summary of Topic:

The Tuskegee Airmen were the first African Americans to serve in the U.S. Army Air Corps, the forerunner of today's Air Force. Composed of pilots, navigators, bombardiers, air traffic controllers, maintenance men, and support staff, they were part of the "Tuskegee Experiment" to train African Americans to fly and maintain combat aircraft in World War II. Located at the renowned Tuskegee Institute in central Alabama, the Tuskegee Army Air Field graduated 993 African American pilots between 1942 and 1946.

To fully understand the historical significance of the Tuskegee Airmen, one must first understand the social climate of the time. At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Jim Crow laws, or legal discrimination, had formally existed in the southern states for nearly 60 years. Graphic indications of the Jim Crow laws included voting restrictions, separate schools, "colored" drinking fountains, segregated movie theaters and restaurants, and seating in the back of the bus.

In the early days of aviation, Jim Crow laws prevented African Americans from learning to fly in the United States. France opened its doors to aspiring African American pilots. Many African American pilots, like Eugene Bullard, served in the French Lafayette Flying Corps. In 1921, Bessie Coleman, daughter of a slave, trained in France and became the first African American woman pilot.

In 1925, at the height of the Jim Crow era, the military published a report issued by the War College, "The Use of Negro Manpower in War." This report contained numerous derogatory remarks against the character of African Americans. Although the report offered no supportive evidence, it was accepted as truth and used to block African Americans from serving in the military. Many United States military leaders believed that African Americans lacked sufficient bravery, intelligence, and discipline to fight in combat. Despite that, in World War I (1914-1918), many African American pilots had distinguished records as pilots in the French Air Force.

In 1939, Europe was on the brink of World War II. President Franklin D. Roosevelt organized the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) to prepare college students for eventual service in the U.S. Army Air Corps. This program was based in existing colleges, segregated by race reflecting the Jim Crow laws. Nearly a decade later, a CPTP was established at the famous Tuskegee Institute in central Alabama. Charles "Chief" Anderson was the chief flight instructor.

To get financial backing for this program, the president of Tuskegee Institute invited members of the Rosenwald fund of Chicago to hold its annual board meeting at the campus. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a member of the board, toured the facilities and observed the pilots. Mrs. Roosevelt persuaded "Chief" Anderson to take her for a plane ride, over the strong objections of the Secret Service. After her visit, Mrs. Roosevelt became a strong supporter, and the Rosenwald Fund loaned the college enough money to construct the Tuskegee Army Air Field.

In 1940, the United States faced a crisis, World War II, and looked toward African Americans to fill out the military ranks. The Army Air Corps submitted a plan for an "experiment" to train pilots for all African American fighter squadrons at existing CPTP institutions. Many of the top military brass, firm believers of the War Department's infamous 1925 report, expected this "experiment" to fail. Tuskegee Institute was selected to be the first Army Air Corps training field, training ground for the African American 99th Fighter Squadron. Of the 13 men in the first pilot training class, only five completed the rigorous five-week program to earn their wings. The cadets were painfully aware that this was an experiment. Individual success meant success for all African Americans. If they crashed, all African Americans went down with them.

One of the first graduates of the Tuskegee "experiment" was a West Point graduate, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Davis was selected as the Commander of the 99th Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group, and later became the U.S. Air Force's first African American General Officer. The success of the Tuskegee Airmen is in large part due to his leadership.

The 99th Fighter Squadron was known as the "lonely eagles" because they were not part of a Fighter Group, customarily composed of three Fighter Squadrons. They first saw combat in Morocco, North Africa. In 1943, the 99th became the fourth and only African American squadron of the all-white 79th Fighter Group. In this group, the Tuskegee Airmen were welcome, and treated as professional equals. This integrated fighter group worked as a team and participated in many victories in Europe.

In 1944, the 99th Squadron was reassigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, an all-African American group, originally formed in 1943 from three Fighter Squadrons -- the 100th, the 301st, and the 302nd. The men of the 99th were not entirely in favor of the transfer; some saw it as a return to segregation. Regardless, together the men of the 332nd achieved many victories. They were known as the Red Tails, because of the distinctive tail markings on their airplanes.

Throughout the war, various attempts were made to discredit African American combat pilots. However, their courage and skill eventually earned them respect from those who first questioned their ability and doubted their courage. The Red Tails became known as experts in bomber escort, and enjoyed the distinction of never losing a bomber they were escorting. No other group in the United States Armed Forces could make that claim.

Despite the impressive battle records in the service of their country, African Americans continued to endure racism at home. African Americans in the military were said to be fighting two wars, one against the enemy in Europe and another against racism. African American soldiers were treated more fairly by European soldiers, even as prisoners of war, than they were in the United States. Back home, military bases were strictly segregated according to Jim Crow practices. When African American officers in the all-African American 477th Bombardment group attempted to enter a "white" officer's club at Freedom Field, they were arrested. It was not until 1948 that President Harry S. Truman issued an executive order to desegregate the military, due in no small part to the bravery and accomplishments of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Acknowledgment:

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References

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Percy, W.A. (2003). Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee flying units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe during World War II. *The journal of military history*, 67, 773-810.

Grade Level: Middle and High School

Subject: Social Studies

Topic: Decade Five: 1940 - 1950

The Tuskegee Airmen

Standards

USA- Nat. Council for Social Studies: Nat. Standards for Social Studies Teachers

Standard A1: Thematic Standard: Culture and Cultural Diversity

Social Studies teachers should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of Culture and Cultural Diversity.

Type of Expectation: Teacher Expectations

Teachers of social studies at all school levels should provide developmentally appropriate experiences as they guide learners in the study of culture and cultural diversity. They should enable learners to analyze and explain the ways groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns;

Expectation: guide learners as they predict how data and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference;

Expectation: assist learners to apply an understanding of culture as an integrated whole that explains the functions and interactions of language, literature, the arts, traditions, beliefs and values, and behavior patterns;

Expectation: have learners interpret patterns of behavior reflecting values and attitudes that contribute or pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding;

Expectation: have learners explain and apply ideas, theories, and modes of inquiry draw from anthropology and sociology in the examination of persistent issues and social problems.

USA- Nat. Council for Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

Strand I: Culture: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

Strand II: Time, Continuity, and Change: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ways human beings view themselves in and over time.

Strand V: Individuals, Groups, & Institutions: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions.

Strand VI: Power, Authority, & Governance: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

Strand VIII: Science, Technology, & Society: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of relationships among science, technology, and society.

Strand X: Civic Ideals and Practices: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

Objective:

Students will explore how the Tuskegee Airmen helped African-Americans overcome official military obstacles to full citizenship in a democratic republic.

Essential Questions:

1. What implications did the Great Depression in the previous decade have on the lives of the future Tuskegee Airmen?
2. What would life in America be like today if the Tuskegee Airmen had never been allowed to serve their country?
3. How did the achievements of the Tuskegee Airmen impact the lives of all Americans in future decades?

Culturally Responsive Resources

<http://www.tuskegeeairmen.org>

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/tuskegee/airoverview.htm> (photographs)

http://www.acepilots.com/usaaf_tusk.html

<http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/history/prewwii/ta.htm>

<http://www.nasm.si.edu/interact/blackwings>

<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/WW2Timeline/tuskegee.html>

<http://www.africanamericans.com/ChappieJames.htm>

<http://www.double-vee.com/index.php>

McKissack, P. and McKissack F. (1995). *Red-Tail angels: The story of the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*. New York: Walker & Co.

PBS Home Video (1995). *The Tuskegee Airmen - They Fought Two Wars*

Markowitz, R. (1995). *The Tuskegee Airmen* (video)

Photographs for classroom display (end of unit)

Lesson Plan Activity

a. Summary of Activity

As a class, students play the Tuskegee Airmen Game at the end of this unit. This game gives students the opportunity to learn about the Tuskegee Airmen as they work in teams to solve authentic problems faced by these brave American soldiers.

b. Procedure

Materials Needed

Tuskegee Airmen Game (located at the end of this unit)

Time Needed

30-45 minutes. No set time required.

c. De-Briefing

How do you believe that the Tuskegee Airmen altered the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic society?

Differentiated Instruction

- Read additional information about the Tuskegee Airmen (See Resources). Create additional authentic scenarios and problems for your classmates to solve. Research and report on the post-World War II lives of individual Tuskegee Airmen.
- Give the Hint that appears after each scenario.

Assessment

Students will cite authentic examples of actions taken by and on behalf of the Tuskegee Airmen in describing how they would respond to the Performance Prompt.

Performance Prompt

A well-established, official organization has denied you full participation on the basis of your race, creed, sexual orientation, or gender. Using specific examples of actions by the Tuskegee Airmen, what would you do overcome these obstacles to full participation in American society?

Tuskegee Airmen of WW II Game

Players

One MODERATOR

Four teams of students, or FIGHTER SQUADRONS -- the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302nd -- named after the authentic Tuskegee Airmen squadrons that formed the 332nd Fighter Group, the Red Tails.

Directions

To set the stage, the MODERATOR (teacher or a student) reads the information about the Tuskegee Airmen to the class.

The MODERATOR then reads the Scenarios and the Problem. One Squadron is chosen to solve the problem. The members of the SQUADRONS work as a team.

Allow two minutes for the team members of the squadron to discuss possible answers before requesting a response. If the Squadron cannot provide a reasonable solution to the problem within one minute, give the Hint that follows each problem. If the Squadron does not provide a solution within two minutes, the next Squadron has the opportunity to solve the same problem.

Differentiated Instruction (engaging students with significant disabilities)

- The student can assume various responsibilities in the group activity (e.g., ringing a bell that indicates to the group the amount of time remaining; being a scorekeeper and keeping track of points earned by the group).
- The student is taught pre-selected (pre-taught) questions that they are prepared to share with the group.
- All students to provide the hint to the group via note card and/or switch.

Scoring

2 points: The solution mirrors the essence of the historical fact.

1 point: The solution is reasonable AND is backed by solid reasoning. You may prompt with "Why?"

0 point: No solution is attempted.

The Fighter Squadron with the most points wins the game.

Tuskegee Airmen - Scenarios, Problems, and Solutions

Scenario #1

After the Wright Brothers flew the first airplane in 1903, many dreamed of learning to fly. In the U.S., Jim Crow laws, or legalized segregation, prevented African Americans from enrolling in flight schools. In France, flying schools were open to all people who spoke French.

Problem

If you were an African American in 1920 who dreamed of flying, how could you learn to fly?

Hint: Would you try to enter segregated U.S. schools, or learn to speak French and go to schools in France?

Solution

You would learn French, and attend flying schools in France.

Eugene Bullard joined the French Foreign Legion and transferred to the French Air Service on November 15, 1916. He became a fighter pilot and flew in combat over the Western Front. He became one of the most decorated war heroes in French military history receiving the Croix de Guerre with Star. Eugene Bullard became the first African American to serve as a military pilot.

In 1921, Bessie Coleman, daughter of a slave, learned to speak French so that she could learn to fly. She became the first African American woman pilot.

Scenario #2

As a young boy, Charles Anderson, who would later become chief instructor of the Tuskegee flying program, wanted to learn to fly. By the time he was 20, he had saved enough money to take lessons, but no school would accept a black student. He had money, but no plane and no teacher. Unlike Eugene Bullard and Bessie Coleman, going to France was not an option for him.

Problem:

If you were "Chief" Anderson, how could you learn to fly in the United States?

Hint: Are formal schools the only place you can receive instruction?

Solution:

You would find a private instructor.

First, "Chief" Anderson bought his own plane and hired a private flying tutor. The first instructor willing to teach him was a former German pilot in World War I, who had emigrated to the U.S.

Scenario #3

In the 1930s, many people did not believe that African Americans possessed sufficient skills or courage to fly.

Problem:

If you were an African American pilot in the 1930s, how could you prove to the general American public that you had the skills and courage to fly?

Hint: Would you show people you could fly or give up?

Solution:

Show people you could fly.

In 1939, about 20 African American pilots formed the National Airmen's Association. They held air shows that amazed crowds with daredevil tricks. Two men flew an antique biplane, a plane with double-decked wings, from Chicago to Washington D.C.

Scenario #4

Before WW II, President Franklin Roosevelt organized the Civilian Pilot Training Program at colleges so that the U.S. would have trained pilots ready for war. In the 1930s, schools were segregated. African Americans who wanted to learn to fly could not attend these schools. The United States needed as many pilots as were willing to serve their country.

Problem:

If you were President of the United States, what would you do include African Americans in the Civilian Pilot Training Programs?

Hint: Would you try to change the rules so that African Americans could attend the same schools as white pilots, or set up a training program at a college for African Americans? Why?

Solution:

You would set up a segregated flying school.

Knowing that it would take too long to change society, Roosevelt established a separate Civilian Pilot Training Program for African American men at the Tuskegee Institute in central Alabama.

Scenario #5

In 1941, many people still believed that African Americans lacked the skill and courage to fly in combat. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Roosevelt, visited the Tuskegee Institute. She asked Charles Anderson, the head of the flying program, to take her flying.

Problem:

If you were "Chief" Anderson, what would you do?

Hint: Would you take her for a ride, or tell her that flying in an airplane was too risky for the First Lady?

Solution:

You would take her for a ride.

Against the protests of the Secret Service, Eleanor Roosevelt rode with Charles Anderson, the head of the flying program. According to legend, the secret service called President Roosevelt, who said, "Well, if she wants to do it, there's nothing we can do to stop her."

Scenario #6

The African-American military officers stationed in the U.S. faced racism often. They were treated as "trainees," not officers, on some military bases. Against Army regulations, a military commander forbid these "trainees" from entering the white officer's club on his base. There was a separate officer's club for African Americans.

Problem:

If you were a Tuskegee Airman officer stationed at this base, what would you do?

Hint: Would you try to enter the officer's club, risking arrest, or go to the segregated club for black officers? Why?

Solution:

You would demand lawful entry into the officer's club.

Fully 103 black military officers were arrested at Freeman Field, Indiana, for demanding entrance into the officer's club.

Scenario #7

During WW II, Americans were fighting the Hitler and his forces in Europe. The "V for Victory" sign was a popular WW II symbol. African American airmen were fighting two wars - Hitler in Europe, and racism at home and abroad.

Problem:

If you were an African-American, how would you change the V for Victory sign to show that you were fighting two wars?

Hint: Consider how many Vs would the airmen need to represent they are fighting two wars?

Solution:

Create a "Double V" sign.

The Pittsburg Courier established a "Double V" campaign in 1942 to show the rest of America that African-Americans were fighting two wars.

Scenario #8

In the Army Air Corps, three squadrons usually formed a Fighter Group. The first Tuskegee Airmen, the 99th Squadron, had no other African American pilots with whom to form a Fighter Group. Teamwork makes the military successful.

Problem:

If you were top military brass, would you have the 99th Squadron alone, or have them join an all-white Fighter Group?

Solution:

You would do both.

At first, the 99th Squadron fought alone in North Africa, and were known as the "Lonely Eagles." Later, they joined the all-white 79th Fighter Group.

Scenario #9

The all-white 79th Fighter Group had a full three squadrons when the Tuskegee Airmen were assigned as a fourth Squadron. The role of the Tuskegee Airmen was to fly escorts to protect the bomber pilots over Europe.

Problem:

If you were commander of the 79th Fighter Group, how could you help all members of your team work together to ensure victory over the enemy?

Hint: Would you keep the Tuskegee Airmen segregated from the other squadrons, or treat them as equal professionals?

Solution:

Treat them as equal professionals.

The Tuskegee Airmen were warmly welcomed by the white pilots of the 79th Fighter Group.

Scenario # 10

The men of the integrated 79th Fighter Group fought as a team, lived as a team, and protected each other in battle. The Tuskegee Airmen were invited to join the white officers to a dinner celebrating one year of combat together in the Mediterranean. The commander of the Mediterranean Theater of Operations forbade the African American pilots to attend.

Problem:

If you were a white officer of the 79th Fighter Group, what would you do?

Hint: Would you stand by your Fighter Group teammates, or go to the dinner without them?

Solution:

You would stick with your team.

In the words of one pilot, "We have fought together for a year, and when we celebrate we are going to do it together no matter what the top brass says." The celebration was held, and no official action was ever taken.

Scenario #11

After the war, many white military units were undermanned and needed qualified people. They were unable to enlist skillful black personnel because the military was segregated.

Problem:

If you were U.S. President Harry Truman, what would you do?

Hint: Integrate the military, or continue segregation? Why?

Solution:

You would integrate the armed services.

President Harry Truman directed that all men must receive equal treatment and opportunity in all U.S. armed forces. This was the first step toward racial integration in the United States.

Scenario #12

Thirty years after the end of WW II, the Tuskegee Airmen want to inspire young people to outstanding achievement and leadership through social and educational activities.

Problem:

If you were a Tuskegee Airman, what is one way you could provide the opportunity of higher education for high school graduates who want a career in aviation?

Solution:

Organize a Scholarship fund. Each year this scholarship fund awards \$1,500 grants to 40 or more deserving high school graduates. To apply for this scholarship, go to www.Tuskegeeairmen.org.

Tuskegee Airmen by the Numbers

[poster for class bulletin board]

1,578	missions
993	pilots trained at Tuskegee, 1942 - 1946
865	awards for bravery in combat
261	enemy aircraft destroyed
162	Tuskegee officers arrested for trying to enter the Freeman Field Officers' Club
66	killed in action
32	captured and became prisoners of war
1	German destroyer sunk (by a machine gun)
0	bombers lost under Tuskegee airmen's watch



Figure 4. Official US Army Air Force Training Command photograph of 20 Tuskegee Airmen posing in front of a plane. Robert Glass is in the middle of the 3rd row. His signature, and that of 10 other colleagues are inscribed on the photograph. <http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/tuskegee/lgimage/air28.htm>



Figure 5. "Chief" Anderson and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, March 1941, Air Force Historical Research Agency. <http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/tuskegee/lgimage/air29.htm>



Figure 6. The Double V logo designed by the Pittsburgh Courier, largest black newspaper of World War II, urged two victories for America.