

# Pioneering Black Aviators and the Tuskegee Airmen

## A History and Quest for Freedom and Flight

### The Golden Age of Aviation

The great Golden Age of Aviation took place between 1919 and 1939. Aviation interest and technology grew in leaps and bounds. This period of discovery was marked by many flying feats of daring and record setting flights. Most notably to Charles "Lucky" Lindbergh for the first Trans-Atlantic crossing and Amelia Earhart for her pioneering spirit and adventurous travels. As most pilots of the time were white men of either wealth and riches or ex-military pilots from WWI, the dream of flying like a bird was never far from a handful of African Americans. Two notable historical figures were Herbert Julian and Bessie Coleman.

These aviation pioneers led the way for African American pilots of the future. Herbert Julian was a creative and colorful character by any man's standard. In 1924 he raised enough funding to



Herbert Julian (second from the right) posing with Finnish Air Force officers in 1940 after the winter war.

attempt a Trans-Atlantic crossing in his beloved aircraft Ethiopia I. His flight ended early as he crashed his plane into the Atlantic Ocean. Although he survived, he convalesced in the hospital for three weeks. His unflinching spirit spurred him to attempt the Trans-Atlantic crossing again in 1929 for which he successfully completed and dubbed himself thereafter as "The Black Lindbergh". He performed many other feats including

barnstorming and appearances in flying circuses. He became an international personality during the 1935 Italian and Ethiopian War. His was certainly a colorful life. As World War II loomed in the not so far future. Julian rushed to become involved in the war. He even challenged Reich Marshall Herman Goering of the Luftwaffe to a dogfight over the English Channel to right the wrong that had been spoken about his race by the Nazis. In 1939 Julian was recognized as a Captain in the Finnish Air Force, but never saw combat. Herbert Julian's antics in aviation lasted into the 1950s when he stopped flying. He lived a lavish life as an international arms dealer and died at the age of 86.

Bessie Coleman was born to a segregated existence in the Southern United States, where lynching of African Americans was a common occurrence. Blacks were not allowed to use public facilities established only for whites in this Jim Crow law or rule south. Bessie moved from her birth state of Texas to live with her two brothers in Chicago. There she became interested in aviation. In 1918 there were not many women pilots must less African American women pilots. The women that were pilots of the time were white and of wealth and privilege. Yet Bessie's calling to fly could not be stopped by her social status. She was taken captive by the stories of flying that the World War I pilots told on their return from war torn Europe.

Bessie applied to many flying schools but fell into a double jeopardy situation. She was a female, and she was black, that combination would keep her out of every American flying school that she applied to. Still not to be deterred Bessie found out that women pilots were being trained in France. Bessie busily set upon learning the French language. A rich African American millionaire backed her venture to learn to fly. Her final confirmation was her brother. Her brother told that, not only were French women superior to African American women, but that they could also fly.



Bessie Coleman standing on the landing gear of a Curtiss Jenny.

On November 20, 1920, Bessie Coleman set off for France to learn to be a pilot. She was the only African American in her flying class. Bessie learned to fly in an older biplane which was accustomed to numerous failures, sometimes in mid-air. She witnessed the fatal crash of one of her classmates, which she said to be a "terrible shock" to her nerves. But as before she was not deterred by the event. In 1921 the "Fédération Aéronautique Internationale" issued Bessie Coleman an international pilot's license.

Bessie Coleman returned to America a hero in her own right. She was popularly recognized as the first African American women pilot. Many popular newspapers wrote about her as a "full-fledged Aviatrix". Bessie went on to fly as a barnstormer and in many flying circuses of the day. She used her influence of the time to fight for racial equality by refusing to perform in air shows where people of her race were not allowed. Bessie Coleman died in the year 1926 in a tragic airplane crash. As the story is told she and her airplane mechanic took off on a maintenance flight to prepare for a show the following day. One of the tools the mechanic brought along was unsecured in the cockpit area and became entangled in the controls. The aircraft went out of control. Bessie, who was not wearing a seat belt fell to her death from 3500 feet.. It was estimated

that 10,000 mourners passed by the coffin of Bessie Coleman. She was a beloved figure in the African American community. She showed a undying spirit to succeed at her dreams and inspired thousands of young African Americans to do the same.

## **The Civilian Pilot Training Program**

In the 1930s Germany and Italy set up civilian pilot training programs. A large number of pilots were trained in all levels of aviation. As it turns out these programs were a front for a military pilot build ups that prepared these countries for war in later years. In the United States Robert H. Hinckley who was the head of the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA), which was the forerunner to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), created a similar program to train civilian pilots. The program was established in 1938 and was titled the Civil Pilot Training Program (CPTP). America of the late 1930s was quickly heading to war with the Axis force of Germany, Italy, and Japan. President Franklin Roosevelt endorsed the program and pilot training for many future military pilots was underway.

The effectiveness of the CPTP was realized within each of the war years; in 1939 the Army had a total of 4502 pilots. This number of pilots included activity duty, reserves and National guardsmen. In 1939 there were 982 new Army pilots. In 1940 there were 8,000 new Army pilots and an additional 27,000 more in 1941. The Civilian Pilot Training Program operated in 1,132 colleges and 1,460 flying schools. After December 7<sup>th</sup> the name of the CPTP was changed to the War Training Service. Between 1939 and 1944 the CPTP/WTS program trained 435,165 pilots. The expanding war effort meant that there were expanding opportunities for African Americans as pilots as well.

Black aviators seeking to raise the awareness of their abilities in aviation paid off as the CPTP included not only African American in aviation opportunities but women as well. Although the training remained segregated the CPTP entered several Black colleges and universities including; West Virginia State College, Howard University, Hampton Institute, Delaware State College, and most notably Tuskegee University of Tuskegee Alabama.



Capt. Benjamin O Davis Jr. has his pilots wings of silver placed on his uniform by his father Benjamin O Davis Sr. the first African American General in the American Armed Services.

The CPTP at the Tuskegee Institute was responsible for training some 2,000 African American pilots that would later become combat pilots in the U.S. Army Air Force. Forever in history known as the Tuskegee Airman these pilots served in combat with the 99th Fighter Squadron, the first all-black aerial combat unit, and the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group. Once the units combined, they proved to be a potent and deadly force to the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica in North Africa, Italy and

Germany. The 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group claimed to be the only fighter escort group to never had lost a bomber under their escort.

Unfortunately, the women graduates of CPTP were unable to fly as military pilots in the American Armed Services and were thusly kept out of military flight training. Nonetheless many of these female graduates of CPTP went on to serve as Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), who served as ferry pilots and test pilots. The CPTP/WTS was undoubtedly one of the most successful U.S. Government programs ever implemented and certainly played its roll in support of the war effort for the United States.

## Moton Field



The control tower at Moton Airfield.

Moton Field owned and operated by the Tuskegee Institute became the nucleus by which basic flight training was taught to those men that would become members of the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group. Operations on the field began in July of 1942. The first cadets began their training there in October of the same year. The Army Air Corp detailed the 66<sup>th</sup> Army Air Corp Flight Training Detachment to Moton Field to setup operations where the first African Americans would be trained for aerial combat duties.

The Division of Aeronautics at The Tuskegee Institute undertook a great responsibility for management of the field, providing instructors and interfacing with the Army Air Corp. As cadets would pass through the ground school and basic flight training programs to more advanced flight training, they would be moved ten miles down the road to Tuskegee Army Airfield

where advanced navigation, and basic aerial combat techniques were taught.

## Tuskegee Army Airfield

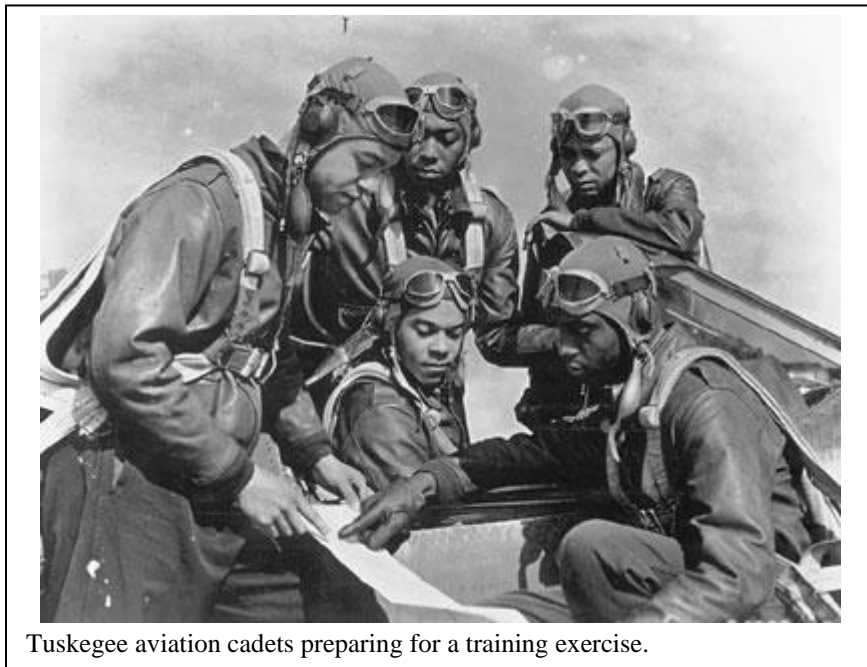
In January of 1941 the Roosevelt administration approved the Tuskegee project. Shortly thereafter the funding was appropriated to create a segregated training facility for negro combat pilots. CPTP was a key instrument in the successful development and training of these pilots. Tuskegee Army Airfield located in Macon County, Alabama was the site



Aerial photo of Tuskegee Army Airfield.

where history would be made with the graduation of the first African American combat pilots in the nation's history.

Tuskegee Army Airfield was designed by an African American architect by the name Hilyard Robinson who hailed from Washington, DC. Construction of the airfield began in July of 1941 and although the base was not completed with construction efforts, flight operations began in November of the same year. Tuskegee Army Airfield was placed under the Southeast Training Center of the Army Air Force Training Command. At the height of operations 3,414 Army Air Force support personnel serviced the base. When completed, the airfield provided four active runways for flight operations as well as 225 supporting structures within the base limits.



Tuskegee aviation cadets preparing for a training exercise.

The Tuskegee Airman aviation cadets received advanced training in preparation for deployment to the war front to include combat tactics, aerial gunnery, and ground support tactics. By late 1944 the Tuskegee project had graduated over 1000 trained negro combat pilots in both single engine fighter and multi engine bomber aircraft. The integration of all United Stated Armed Forces can be directly attributed to the success of this project and

the men who will forever be known as the Tuskegee Airman.