

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

The Tuskegee Airmen

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Benjamin Davis Thurgood Marshall

Theodore Lumpkin, Jr., was born on December 30, 1919, in Los Angeles, California. He attended LA City College, completing an associate degree in mathematics in 1940. He moved over to UCLA in order to finish his degree. He was drafted into the Army, attended OCS, graduated as a 2Lt., and assigned to the all-black 100th Fighter Squadron at Tuskegee, Alabama, the famed "Tuskegee Airmen."

Recall that, at this time, the U.S. armed services was segregated by race, and most blacks were assigned to non-combat support roles. The Airmen were an exception, and the 100th would soon excel in the ETO. More on that in a moment.

2Lt. Lumpkin had poor eyesight for flying, and served instead as an intelligence officer, briefing pilots prior to missions. The 100th was based in Italy as part of the 332 Fighter Group. Lumpkin did a fine job, and was promoted regularly, leaving active service in early 1946 as a Captain. He returned to school, USC, and earned a Masters Degree in Sociology, after which he started a real estate agency. He served in the Air Force Reserves until 1979, and was active in the post-War Tuskegee Airmen Inc. in several roles, including serving on the TA's national board of directors and as president of the TA's Los Angeles chapter. He was also a board member for the Tuskegee Airmen Scholarship Foundation. Quite a busy guy!

On December 26, 2020, 4 days before his 101st birthday, Captain Lumpkin passed away from complications from the COVID-19 virus.

Lumpkin and his colleagues in the 100th had put up with a LOT of discrimination before, during, and after the War. Rather than be bitter, the Airmen took progressive, positive action, serving as mentors and role models for other service people of color, and working to ensure educational opportunities were available for those that might otherwise miss out. What an awful was to wind up a life so-well lived. Damn this virus.

Charles McGee

After I retired, it took us several months to wind up affairs in the DC area and prepare to move back home to Colorado. One of the last times I visited NASM in person was when I got an invitation from the Docent Corps, which I managed in my final NASM billet, to come in for a special event opportunity just for the Docents. It was an honor to see them all again.

The event in question was a visit by Brigadier General Charles McGee, a truly-amazing member of the 322 Fighter Group. He gave a very inspiring account of his career to our group, and then he got the very best tour of the Udvar-Hazy Center that we could collectively provide. If I had a dollar for every time one of us thought “what a guy” during that time, I could have retired! Oh, wait....

BGen McGee was also born in 1919, on December 7, no less, in Cleveland. He was successful in both school and in Scouting, earning Eagle rank in 1940. He studied for two years at the University of Illinois, got married as a sophomore, and immediately enlisted. He, too, would become part of the Tuskegee Airmen.

McGee ended up flying 137 combat missions in WWII, with one victory to his credit, before he returned to the ZI in late 1944, to become an instructor for B-25 medium bombers for another TA unit.

After the War, McGee, now a Captain, continued his AAF career. He served as a fighter pilot, flying the P-80 Shooting Star and F-89 Scorpion. When the Korean Conflict broke out, he flew 100 missions in the P-51 Mustang, ending the Conflict as a Major.

During the Vietnam War, Major McGee flew yet another 172 combat missions, this time in an RF-4 Phantom II photo-reconnaissance jet. He commanded the 16th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron. These guys often pulled tough, tough duty.

Let’s do some arithmetic. Colonel McGee ended up flying **409** combat missions in three different wars, and had a grand total of over 6300 flight hours in service. He retired in early 1973.

After the War, he finally was able to finish his degree for the Fighting Illini, served as the director of the Kansas City airport, and working extensively with both the Boy Scouts and with the Tuskegee Airmen organization. He was the TA’s National President from 1983-85, and he was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame in 2011.

BGen McGee served as a consultant for the George Lucas film, *Red Tails*, about the Tuskegee Airmen (whose planes sported a very distinctive, and feared, red tail), released in 2012. He was taken aloft for his 99th birthday, giving him a chance to handle the controls of an airplane again (it had been 37 years). On his 100th, he was taken aloft again. He made many goodwill visits, and presented the coin for the start of Super Bowl LIV. He was even showcased in the 2020 State of the Union speech.

And he is still going strong today, at 101. What a guy!

Benjamin O. Davis

Brave men like Captain Lumpkin and BGen McGee were essential for the success of the Tuskegee fighter and bomber units. But solid, resolute leadership was also a critically-important factor, and the Airmen had that, and then some, in the person of General Benjamin Oliver Davis, Junior.

His record is, if anything, even more remarkable than that of Lumpkin and McGee. His father was the first black General in the U.S. Army, and Junior ended up as the first black General in the U.S. Air Force. In WWII, he commanded the Tuskegee Airmen 332nd Fighter Group.

Young Davis' interest in aviation was sparked by a barnstorming flight at Bolling Field, in D.C., where his dad was stationed. He was hooked, and knew then he wanted to be a pilot.

U.S. Representative Oscar De Priest of Chicago, the only black member of Congress at the time, sponsored young Ben to matriculate at West Point, in 1932. The Point was extremely segregated at that time, and Ben had to endure many slights and slurs. He ate his meals alone, got the silent treatment, and nobody would room with him. His determination in the face of adversity finally won over some of the other cadets, who appreciated his "courage, tenacity, and intelligence."

He graduated 35th (of 276) in the Class of 1936, and became a newly-minted 2Lt. At that time, there were only two black officers in the entire U.S. Army, Ben Davis Sr. and Ben Davis Jr.! Junior was only the fourth black Academy graduate.

2Lt. Davis had applied for the Army Air Corps in 1934, but was rejected because of race. He was assigned to the old Buffalo Soldiers unit (24th Infantry Regiment) at Ft. Benning. He was not allowed normal officer privileges there. He attended the Army Infantry School while at Ft. Benning and was assigned to teach at the Tuskegee Institute.

Before Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt wanted to have greater black participation in the U.S. military as war clouds loomed. Davis, now a Captain, was assigned to the first pilot training class at Tuskegee, and became one of five black officers to graduate and earn his wings. He would soon be promoted to LtCol, and named to command the 99th Fighter Squadron.

The 99th was equipped with P-40s and sent to the ETO to support operations in North Africa. They flew cover for bombing operations against the mid-Med islands of Pantelleria and Sicily in 1943.

LtCol Davis came back to the ZI to command the 332nd Fighter Group, but he had to fight more racism before he could face the Germans in the air again. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall was being pressured to remove blacks from aerial combat, on the vague and untrue grounds they were underperforming. Such lying was a big mistake. Davis defended his men with great honor and vigor, and the 99th was allowed to continue flying combat while Marshall "investigated." The 99th came through with flying colors, but it was rendered a moot point by the 99th's performance over the beachhead at Anzio, where they knocked down a dozen planes over two days of spirited defense of our invasion forces.

Davis and the 332nd FG arrived in Italy soon after the Anzio beachhead was secure. Comprising four squadrons, the Red Tails flew bomber escort missions with great distinction, first in P-40s then in P-47s. As the war in Europe ended, Col Davis assumed the command of the TA bomber unit, the 477th Bombardment Group.

Colonel Davis led dozens of combat missions in WWII, earning a DFC and a Silver Star in the process. He also led a particularly successful escort mission on March 24, 1944. Red Tail P-51s

escorted a long B-17 bombing strike against an important tank factory in Berlin. The factory was vital to the Reich, and they defended it vigorously with AAA and interceptor attacks, including the use of the very dangerous (to its pilot and handlers) [Me-163](#) Komet [rocket plane](#). Also present were [FW-190s](#) and the most deadly of the three, the new [Me-262](#) jet [fighters](#), flown by Luftwaffe veterans. Davis' men, at a speed disadvantage of 100 MPH, [still shot down three](#) Me-262s in this action, including two ace pilots, earning the Airmen a Distinguished Unit Citation.

The Tuskegee Airmen collectively flew over 15,000 combat sorties during the War, and were credited with 112 aerial victories with another 273 over aircraft on the ground. They lost very few of the bombers under their protection.

On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed [Executive Order 9981](#), abolishing any discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin in any of the U.S. Armed Forces. There was, however, significant bigotry yet to overcome. One thing that helped on that front came in 1949, before service integration was complete. The prestigious U.S. Continental Gunnery Meet, held in Las Vegas, had a competition category for "conventional fighters," with events in aerial gunnery, ground gunnery, and bomb dropping. The team from the 332nd Fighter Wing won going away, with even a perfect score in the bombing event. Nobody could ever say the Airmen "underperformed" again!

After Korea, Colonel Davis held a series of increasingly-important posts in the U.S. Air Force, becoming a BGen in 1960. He became Chief of Staff for the United Nations Command and U.S. Forces in Korea (with a promotion to LtGen) in 1965, and then he assumed command of the Thirteenth Air Force (Clark AFB) in August, 1967. His final billet was Deputy Commander of the U.S. Strike Command, in late 1968.

General Davis retired from active duty on February 1, 1970. He received his final promotion, his fourth star on December 9, 1970, from the hand of President Clinton. General Davis passed away on July 4, 2002, at age 89. A P-51 in full Red Tail colors flew in the funeral formation overflight.

The Tuskegee Airmen Today

Many of those who served in TA-related combat squadrons, and their supporting units, went on to success in civilian life; three, apart from General Davis, also made flag rank. Another, Coleman Young, would become the first black mayor of Detroit.

Accolades have fallen like rain on the Airmen in recent years. Collectively the Airmen received the Congressional Gold Medal on 29 March 2007.

The 99th Fighter Squadron is still flying as a training unit, equipped with the T-1A Jayhawk. The "Gate Guardian" aircraft at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville is a F-16B Fighting Falcon. Care to guess what color their tails sport?

Almost all of the WWII combat flyers in the Tuskegee Airmen have passed now, but the organization continues its mission to commemorate the accomplishments of the WWII-era Tuskegee Airmen, promote equality in the military, and to provide educational and professional

growth opportunities to the next generation. The Tuskegee Airmen Inc. has chapters all over the USA that have programs to accomplish those goals. I know from personal experience, because I had the pleasure of working with several members of the East Coast Chapter in several of NASM's Family Day events.

References

Theodore Lumpkin

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<https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2021/01/08/theodore-ted-lumpkin-jr-tuskegee-airman-dies-100-covid-19>

Charles McGee

National Aviation Hall of Fame: <https://www.nationalaviation.org/our-enshrinees/mcgee-charles-edward>

HistoryNet Interview: <https://www.historynet.com/aviation-history-interview-with-tuskegee-airman-charles-mcgee-2.htm>

McGee 2020 Interview with Astronaut Alvin Drew: <https://www.space.com/nasa-honors-tuskegee-airman-charles-mcgee.html>

Tuskegee Airmen

Tuskegee Airmen Inc.: <https://tuskegeearmen.org>

Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site: <https://www.nps.gov/tuai/index.htm>

NASM had an alcove in the Pioneers of Flight gallery about the Tuskegee Airmen. That gallery is gone, but the alcove's supporting website is: <https://airandspace.si.edu/explore-and-learn/topics/blackwings>.

The Tuskegee Airmen, the 1995 movie: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114745>

Red Tails, the 2012 movie: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0485985/?ref=vp_back

CODA: Didja Know?

Thurgood Marshall and the Tuskegee Airmen

The Tuskegee Airmen's bomber unit, the 477th Bombardment Group, was established in 1944. In Indiana soon thereafter, 101 of the black officers of the 477th dared to enter the segregated Officers' Club. They were turned away, with only one minor scuffle. The base commander wanted to put the TA in its place, and required them to read the regulation excluding them, and to sign a document that they had read and understood it. Not one of the 101 signed. They were arrested in an incident that would become known as the "Freeman Field Mutiny." The charges were ridiculous, and pressure from both outside and inside the Army resulted in an

order from Chief of Staff Marshall to release the 101. The three involved in the scuffle, however, faced general court martial for that offense.

The Mutiny had become a political issue, and many felt that the three officers still in hack were innocent of a crime. A crack legal team came to their defense, directed by the future victor in the Brown v. Board of Education case and future Supreme Court Justice, **Thurgood Marshall**.

Two of the airmen were acquitted outright. The third, who had actually done some shoving in the scuffle, was fined, demoted, and given a dishonorable discharge.

For more on the Freeman Field Mutiny, see:

<http://www.freemanarmyairfieldmuseum.org/freeman-field-mutiny.html>

<https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/pattern-resistance-tuskegee-airmen-trial-part-1>

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