

1 Introduction

I'm Technical Sergeant Felita LaRock.

Traditionally, Black History Month is observed during the month of February in the United States. At the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, we celebrate diversity in Air Force history year round. In addition to this audio tour, educational resources are available on our website, including a teacher resource guide and lesson plans, a list of books for beginner through adult readers, and other activities for children.

We hope you enjoy reading about the many significant contributions of African American members of the Air Force.

2 Eugene Jacques Bullard

Stand in front of the Eugene Jacques Bullard exhibit in the Early Years Gallery.

In August of 1917 Eugene Jacques Bullard, an American volunteer in the French army, became the first black military pilot in history and the only black pilot in World War I. After completing flight training, Bullard joined the 200 other Americans in the Lafayette Flying Corps, and he flew combat missions from August 27 to November 11, 1917. He distinguished himself in aerial combat, as he had on the ground, and was officially credited with shooting down one German aircraft. On October 13, 1961, Eugene Bullard died and was buried with full military honors in his legionnaire's uniform in the cemetery of the Federation of French War Veterans in Flushing, New York. On September 14, 1994, the secretary of the Air Force posthumously appointed him a second lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force.¹ The museum's exhibit features several of Bullard's medals and personal pins.



¹ Fact sheet, National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, "EUGENE JACQUES BULLARD."

3 Tuskegee Airmen



Stand near the Tuskegee Airmen exhibit in the World War II Gallery.

The experience of the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II showed that given equal opportunity and training, blacks could fly in, command and support combat units as well as anyone. The USAAF's black fliers, the so-called "Tuskegee Airmen," served with distinction in combat and directly contributed to the eventual integration of the U.S. armed services.

During the war, Tuskegee trained around 990 pilots and sent 350 overseas. When the war in Europe ended, the Tuskegee Airmen had shot down 112 enemy aircraft, destroyed 150 aircraft on the ground, knocked out more than 600 railroad cars, and sunk forty boats and barges. Approximately 150 Tuskegee Airmen were killed in combat or in accidents, and thirty-two became prisoners war. By any measure, the Tuskegee project proved a resounding success.

The Tuskegee experiment made it obvious to many leaders, President Harry S. Truman in particular, that segregation by race in the military -- in addition to being morally wrong -- was simply inefficient and should be ended. The USAF was the first service to erase the color line, thanks largely to the pioneering efforts and courageous legacy of the African American Airmen who showed their worth in combat in World War II.²



² Contributions of African-Americans to Air Force History-Teacher Resource Guide "Black Wings".



4 Lt. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr.

Stand near the Tuskegee Airmen exhibit in the World War II Gallery.

Benjamin O. Davis Jr., an aviation pioneer, is one of the most famous Tuskegee Airmen of World War II. Graduating from West Point in 1936, he became one of only two black line officers in the U.S. Army at the time -- the other was his father.

He received his wings in March 1942 after becoming the first black officer to solo an Army Air Corps aircraft. Flying the distinctive "Red Tail" P-51 Mustangs, Davis led the first Italy-based fighter group to escort bombers to Berlin, a distance of 1,600 miles. Approaching Berlin, they were attacked by 25 Me 262 jets, but the 332nd Fighter Group downed three of the enemy fighters. Under Davis' command, the group flew more than 15,000 sorties against the Luftwaffe, shot down 112 enemy aircraft and destroyed another 150 on the ground. Davis retired as a lieutenant general in 1970. He was advanced to general December 9, 1998 by President Bill Clinton. Davis died July 4, 2002 at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington at age 89.³

5 Gen. Daniel "Chappie" James Jr.

Stand near the Tuskegee Airmen exhibit in the World War II Gallery.

General Daniel "Chappie" James Jr. was born on February 11, 1920, in Pensacola, Florida, where he graduated from Washington High School in June 1937. He attended Tuskegee Institute at Tuskegee, Alabama, from September 1937 to March 1942, where he received a bachelor's degree in physical education and completed civilian pilot training under the government-sponsored Civilian Pilot Training Program. He remained at Tuskegee as a civilian instructor pilot in the Army Air Corps Aviation Cadet Program until January 1943, when he entered the program as a cadet and received his commission as second lieutenant in July 1943.



General James – who served in World War II, the Korean War and the Southeast Asia War – summed up his thoughts as his role as an American serviceman:

"I've fought in three wars and three more wouldn't be too many to defend my country. I love America and as she has weaknesses or ills, I'll hold her hand."

He was promoted to four-star general on September 1, 1975, becoming the first USAF African American to hold the highest Air Force rank. He retired from active service on February 1, 1978, and died later that month on February 25.⁴

³⁻⁴ Contributions of African-Americans to Air Force History-Teacher Resource Guide "Black Wings."

6 Lt. Gen. Daniel James III

Stand near the Tuskegee Airmen exhibit in the World War II Gallery.

Daniel James III is the first African American to hold the post of Director of the Air National Guard. He assumed that command in 2002 following a flying career that included more than 300 combat missions in Southeast Asia and 4,000 flying hours. He is the son of Daniel "Chappie" James Jr., who was the U.S. Air Force's first African-American four-star general.



James was commissioned in 1968 and served as a forward air controller during the Southeast Asia War. In 1969-1970 he logged more than 500 combat hours flying O-1E Bird Dog aircraft based at Cam Ranh Bay, Republic of Vietnam. Returning to Southeast Asia in 1974-75, he served as a squadron assistant flight commander at Udorn Royal Thai AFB, Thailand, flying as a fighter pilot in F-4 Phantom aircraft.

Promoted to lieutenant general in 2002, James became the 11th director of the Air National Guard that year following his nomination by President George W. Bush and U.S. Senate confirmation. As ANG director, James was responsible for more than 104,000 Airmen in 88 flying units in the United States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Virgin Islands.

Among his numerous awards are the Distinguished Service Medal, the Legion of Merit, two Distinguished Flying Crosses and seven Air Medals. James has also received several service awards for his work as a community leader. He retired from military service on May 10, 2006. ⁵



⁵ Contributions of African-Americans to Air Force History-Teacher Resource Guide "Black Wings."

7 Engineer Aviation Battalions

Stand in front of the C-46, where you'll see the Engineer Aviation Battalions diorama.

Many African-Americans served in support units during World War II, and the Engineer Aviation Battalions, or EAB, with their skilled engineers and construction workers, were one of the more significant support units. The self-contained EAB became the core of aviation engineering efforts during the war.



The original concept envisioned a small group of skilled construction and engineer troops, closely trained alongside air units, with the ability to repair bomb-damaged airfields, to camouflage airfields and if necessary, to defend airfields. These troops would also be capable of constructing light duty airfields in forward locations.

Aviation engineers employed the same basic construction techniques around the globe. After an area had been cleared of trees or other obstructions, Caterpillar tractors towing carryalls cleared the area.

Most of the black EAB units formed during World War II served in the Pacific or China-Burma-India Theaters of Operation. The first two black aviation engineer units shipped out of the United States were the 810th EAB and the 811th EAB. Between December 1941 and December 1942, the number of battalions jumped from 12 to 51, and three-quarters of them were already overseas.⁶

8 Integration of the Air Force

Stand near the exit of the WWII Gallery where you'll see the Integration display.

In April 1948 Air Force Chief of Staff General Carl Spaatz announced that the Air Force would desegregate to improve its combat effectiveness, and in May 1949 the Air Force published regulations dismantling segregation. Men and women joining the Air Force from then on were assigned according to their ability and not race.



An interesting artifact in this exhibit is the 1949 USAF Fighter Gunnery Competition Trophy. It commemorates the outstanding achievement of four Air Force units in both the 1949 and 1950 service-wide competitions. The 1949 competition included both conventional (propeller) and jet fighter aircraft units with winners for each category. The 332nd Fighter Group, a segregated African American unit stationed at Lockbourne Air Base, near Columbus, Ohio, won first place in the conventional fighter class.⁷

⁶⁻⁷ Contributions of African-Americans to Air Force History-Teacher Resource Guide "Black Wings."

Map of Podcast Locations

