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TITLE=EXPLORATIONS #1965 - Tuskegee Airmen

BYLINE=Vivian R. Bournazian

VOICE ONE:

This is Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:

And this is Shirley Griffith with the VOA Special English program, EXPLORATIONS. Today, we tell about the Tuskegee airmen who served in World War Two. They were the first group of African-Americans ever trained as fighter pilots.

(THEME)

VOICE ONE:

There was a little fog near the ground. But the sky was clear. The airplanes flew into the air. It was only a few minutes before the planes were flying over the Mediterranean Sea. The sea was calm, and very blue. It was July First, Nineteen-Forty-Three.

The planes were part of the United States Army Air Forces, the Ninety-Ninth Pursuit Squadron. They were responsible for guarding bomber airplanes travelling to Italy.

The pilots tested their guns. When they were satisfied that their guns were in firing condition, they flew the planes into position to guard the bombers. At the target area, the bombers began to unload their bombs. Clouds of smoke rose from the explosions.

VOICE TWO:

A group of enemy fighters immediately appeared to attack the bomber planes. The enemy airplanes flew near. The pilots of the Ninety-Ninth attacked them. In the battle that followed, the men of the Ninety-Ninth gained their first victory.

Lieutenant Charles B. Hall shot down a German airplane. He said

it was the first time he had seen the enemy close enough to shoot at. He saw two German airplanes following the bombers just after the bombs were dropped.

"I headed for the space between the fighters and bombers...I fired a long burst and saw my tracers penetrate the second aircraft. He was turning left, but suddenly fell off and headed straight into the ground."

Charles Hall won the Distinguished Flying Cross for his service that day. He and the other pilots of the Ninety-Ninth Pursuit Squadron had come a long way from Tuskegee, Alabama, to fight that battle.

((MUSIC BRIDGE))

VOICE ONE:

In Nineteen-Forty, blacks made up about one-point-five percent of the American Army and Navy. But they were not permitted to join the Army Air Forces and fly planes.

They had begun fighting for the right to be accepted into military pilot training during World War One. In Nineteen-Seventeen, blacks who requested acceptance into pilot training programs were told that colored air groups were not being formed at the time.

Civil rights leaders denounced the belief expressed by many whites that blacks could not fight. In Nineteen-Thirty-One, Walter White and Robert R. Moton requested that the War Department accept blacks in the Army Air Corps for pilot training. Mister White was an official of an important organization for blacks, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Mister Moton was president of a respected college for blacks, the Tuskegee Institute.

The War Department refused their request. It said that the Air Corps chose men with technical experience. The department also said that blacks were not that interested in flying. And, it said so many educated white men wanted to enter the Air Corps that many whites had to be refused acceptance.

VOICE TWO:

The War Department's refusal led many to feel that blacks would be guaranteed acceptance into the Air Corps only through legislation by Congress. Black leaders used the United States' preparation for and entry into World War Two to pressure Congress. They attacked the unfair treatment of blacks in the armed services.

In Nineteen-Thirty-Nine, Congress passed a bill that guaranteed blacks the right to be trained as military air pilots. It was proposed that a pilot training camp for blacks be established at Tuskegee, Alabama.

VOICE ONE:

Black leaders praised the signs of change within the military. Yet they continued to attack the military policy of racial separation. The War Department answered the criticisms by making plans to form several new black fighting groups. It also promoted a black Colonel, Benjamin O. Davis Senior, to Brigadier General. And, the department appointed a black judge, William Hastie, who was head of Howard University Law School, as Civilian Aide on Negro Affairs.

VOICE TWO:

Judge Hastie first opposed the establishment of a flying training school at Tuskegee. He wanted blacks to be trained along with whites, not separately. The Air Corps, however, said there was no room in other programs. It said establishing a school at Tuskegee would be the fastest way to start the training program. Judge Hastie withdrew his formal opposition to the plan, even though he was not satisfied with it.

Fred Patterson was president of the Tuskegee Institute then. He also objected to the separate training of black pilots at Tuskegee. He said that it was necessary to denounce forced racial separation. Mister Patterson finally accepted the program at Tuskegee. He realized blacks would be trained separately from whites any place in the United States. He saw Tuskegee as a beginning. At least blacks were now able to be military pilots.

((MUSIC BRIDGE))

VOICE ONE:

The Civilian Pilot Training Program at Tuskegee trained black pilots for difficult and dangerous flying. On March Seventh, Nineteen-Forty-Two, the first group of African-Americans ever to be trained as fighter pilots completed the program at Tuskegee. General Davis's son, Benjamin O. Davis Junior, was among the first graduates. Blacks finally had won the right to fly with the Army Air Corps, now known as the Army Air Forces.

Many of the men trained at Tuskegee served in Europe with the Ninety-Ninth Pursuit Squadron. It was organized in October of Nineteen-Forty-Two. Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin O. Davis Junior commanded it.

The Ninety-Ninth was sent to the Mediterranean area in April, Nineteen-Forty-Three. The pilots were able to gain fighting experience flying over Sicily and Italy. In June of Nineteen-Forty-Three, the fighter pilots successfully attacked the Sicilian island of Pantelleria. It was the first time "air power alone...completely destroyed all enemy resistance."

The Tuskegee airmen took part in the most famous battles in Italy. These included the battles over the Monte Cassino monastery between Rome and Naples and the invasions of Salerno and Anzio. At Anzio, in January of Nineteen-Forty-Four, the pilots of the Ninety-Ninth squadron shot down eighteen enemy airplanes. Their performance earned them two awards. And, their record led the Army Air Forces to decide to use more black pilots in the war.

#### VOICE TWO:

In September, Nineteen-Forty-Three, Colonel Davis became commander of the Three-Hundred-Thirty-Second Fighter Group. The Ninety-Ninth squadron became a part of the group. There were four-hundred-fifty pilots in the all-black group. They flew more than fifteen-thousand-five-hundred flights in southern France, Greece, the Balkans and finally in Germany.

The Tuskegee airmen guarded bomber airplanes. They destroyed more than one-hundred enemy airplanes in the air and one-hundred-fifty others on the ground. They flew more than two-hundred combat flights in Germany in Nineteen-Forty-Five. Not one allied bomber fell to enemy fighters when guarded by the Tuskegee airmen. They were considered the best at their job.

((MUSIC BRIDGE))

#### VOICE ONE:

Nine-Hundred-Ninety-Six black pilots were trained at Tuskegee Airfield before World War Two ended. For black Americans during World War Two, the Tuskegee airmen represented both honor and inequality. Eighty-five of them won the Distinguished Flying Cross during the war. Yet their separation from white troops was a powerful sign of the racial policies of the military.

History books say the Tuskegee airman proved that black men could fly modern airplanes in highly successful combat operations. And, the success of the group helped end the separate racial policies of the American military. In Nineteen-Forty-Eight, President Truman ordered the armed forces to provide equal treatment for black servicemen. The next year, the Air Force, which no longer was part of the army, announced that black and

white airmen no longer would be separated.

Back in civilian life, many of the Tuskegee airman became lawyers, doctors, judges, congressmen and mayors. Their fighting spirit had helped them survive battles and unequal treatment. At home, their continued fighting spirit helped lead the way to civil rights progress in the United States.

(THEME)

VOICE TWO:

This Special English program was written by Vivian Bournazian.  
This is Shirley Griffith.

VOICE ONE:

And this is Steve Ember. Join us again next week at this time for another EXPLORATIONS program on the Voice of America.

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