



477th Fighter Group
Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska
Heritage Pamphlet

The Beginning



The history of the 477th Fighter Group begins with the Tuskegee Airmen, the dedicated, determined young men who volunteered to become America's first black military airmen. They came from every section of America, with large numbers coming from New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit. Each one possessed a strong personal desire to serve the United States of America proudly and to the best of his ability as an airman, at a time when many white Americans felt that black men lacked intelligence, skill, courage and patriotism.

Those who possessed the physical and mental qualifications and were accepted for aviation cadet training were trained initially to be pilots, and later to be pilots, navigators, or bombardiers. Most were college graduates or undergraduates, while the remainder demonstrated their academic qualifications through comprehensive entrance examinations. No standards were lowered for those black pilots and other airmen trained as operations officers, meteorologists, intelligence officers, engineering officers, flight surgeons, etc. Still others were trained to be aircraft and engine mechanics, armament specialists, radio repairmen, parachute riggers, control tower operators, administrators and for every other type of skill necessary to function as an air force squadron, or ground support unit.

The black airmen who became single or multi-engine pilots trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF) in Tuskegee Alabama. The first aviation cadet class began in July 1941 and completed its training nine months later in March 1942. Thirteen started in the first class. Five successfully completed the training, including Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a West Point graduate. The other four were commissioned second lieutenants, and all five received Army Air Corps silver pilot wings. From 1942 until 1946, nine hundred and ninety-two African-Americans graduated in aviation cadet classes at TAAF, and also received commissions and pilot's wings. Black navigators, bombardiers and bomber gunnery crews trained at selected military bases elsewhere in the United States. Black Americans began training as aircraft and engine mechanics at Chanute Air Base in Rantoul, Illinois in 1941 before being assigned to Tuskegee in 1942, where subsequent mechanics were trained after facilities were in place.

Four hundred and fifty of the pilots who trained at Tuskegee served overseas in either the 99th Pursuit Squadron (later the 99th Fighter Squadron) or the 332nd Fighter Group. The 99th Fighter Squadron trained in and flew P-40 Warhawks in combat in North Africa, Sicily and Italy from April 1943 until July 1944 when they were transferred to the 332nd Fighter Group in the 15th Air Force.

The all-black, 332nd Fighter Group consisted originally of three fighter squadrons, the 100th, the 301st and the 302nd, and prepared for combat at Selfridge Air Base, Michigan from March 1943 until December 1943. Training was conducted in P-40 Warhawks and P-39 Aircobras. The Group began overseas combat operations at Capodichino Air Base, Naples, Italy in February 1944 flying P-39 Aircobras. Their mission was Naples Harbor and Mediterranean Sea air patrol in the 12th Air Force in May 1944.

In June 1944, the 332nd Fighter Group transferred to the 15th Strategic Air Force on the Adriatic Sea side of Italy and was stationed at Ramitelli Air Base, Italy. The Group became a long range heavy bomber escort unit. One month later, July 1944, the 99th Fighter Squadron was transferred to the 332nd Fighter Group, and the Group became the only four-squadron fighter group performing bomber escort missions in the 15th Air Force. This was a significant factor in the effectiveness and success of the Group as it established the incredible and unprecedented record of flying all of its bomber escort missions (200 over most of central and southern Europe), from June 1944 until April 1945, without the loss of a single bomber to enemy aircraft. The Group flew P-47 Thunderbolts in June 1944 and P-51 Mustangs thereafter.

The tenacious bomber escort cover provided by the 332nd “Red Tail” fighters often discouraged enemy fighter pilots from attacking bombers escorted by the 332nd Fighter Group. This resulted in fewer enemy fighter challenges with resultant fewer enemy aircraft destroyed or damaged by the Group, as compared with other 15th Air Force fighter escort groups. The successful escort record resulted in frequent expressions of appreciation from the 15th Air Force bomber units and crews. The outstanding record of black airmen in World War II was accomplished by men whose names were: Davis, Hall, Campbell, Tresville, Pruitt, Gleed, Peirson, Lester, Browne, Archer, McGee, (later James), and many others who will live in hallowed memory. Each one accepted the challenge, proudly displayed his skill and determination while suppressing internal rage from humiliation and indignation caused by daily experiences of racism and bigotry, at home and overseas. Those airmen fought two wars - one against a military force overseas and the other against racism at home and abroad.

After the 332nd Fighter Group departed Selfridge Field, Michigan in December 1943 to go overseas, the remainder of the black airmen personnel on the base comprised mostly of the 477th Medium Bombardment Group trained on the B-25 Medium Bomber. The 477th bounced from base to base and experienced racism that perhaps transcended all other World War II racial incidents and caused them from becoming a deployable unit.

The slights ranged from substandard facilities to exclusion from the PX and officer’s club, to the outright hostility of General Frank O.D.

Hunter, Commander of the First Air Force.

“As long as I am commander of the First Air Force, there will be no racial mixing at any post under my command,” Hunter stated in 1944.

This resulted in heated reaction from the black officers. The memory of the recent race riot in nearby Detroit, Michigan in the Spring of 1943 led to the transfer of the 477th Group from Selfridge Field to Godman Field, Kentucky. At Godman, the treatment and hostility continued and in early 1945, the group was transferred to Freeman Field in Indiana where hostilities reached a climax.



Colonel Robert Selway, who was the white commander of the 477th, helped enforce Hunter's prejudicial policies. Upon arrival at Freeman Field, Selway divided the officers' clubs along racial lines. In an effort to disguise this, he said Club No 1 was open to "trainee," how all black officers were classified at Freeman Field, and Club No 2 was open to instructors and supervisors. These educated officers were aware of the nation's burgeoning Civil Rights Movement and made plans to "integrate" Club No 2.

The incident later known as the Freeman Field Mutiny began when dozens of black officers entered the Freeman Field Base Officers' Club against direct orders for them to stay out. Selway ordered the black officers to sign a statement that they understood his orders regulating segregation of the officers' clubs. When 101 officers refused to sign, they were subsequently arrested, shipped off to Godman Field for detainment, charged with insubordination, and ordered to face court martial proceedings. The court martial charges were quickly dropped against all except three officers; two eventually had their charges dropped, and one, Lieutenant Roger Terry, was convicted.

On 8 June 1945, Davis and a cadre of 40 officers and airmen returned to the United States to rebuild the 477th Medium Bombardment Group, which would merge with the 332nd FG to become the 477th Composite Group (Colored). Change-of-command took place 24 June, Selway was relieved and Colonel Davis took over the group. For the first time, the group had black officers in responsible positions.

As white air units downsized and personnel either separated or retired from military service the Tuskegee Army Air Base remained segregated and continued to train new airmen for segregated service until 1946. Large numbers of black airmen elected to remain in the service after World War II, confined to the 477th Composite Group, and later to the all-black 332nd Fighter Wing stationed at Lockbourne Air Base, Columbus, Ohio.

Their welcome at the airfield underscored how pervasive racism was, even in Ohio. The editor of the Columbus Citizen objected to the arrival of the black airmen, insisting that "this is still a white man's country," and that it was unacceptable for America's wars to be fought by "servants". Despite the racism, a 1948 inspection report revealed Lockbourne under Davis's leadership, "could well serve as a model for bases in the Air Force."

In May 1947, the 477th Composite Group reverted to being the 332nd Fighter Group after disposing of its B-25s. Three months later, the group became the 332nd Fighter Wing, and shrank even further in size.

With segregation restrictions, opportunities for advancement and promotion were very limited and this affected morale. Nevertheless, in 1949, a select group of black fighter pilots from the 332nd took first place in the U.S. Air Force annual National Fighter



Gunnery Meet at Las Vegas Air Force Base, Nevada. Myths of black airmen incompetence, lack of skill, etc., were long forgotten or disproved. Many white units experienced frustration in needing qualified personnel, but were unable to bring into their units the experienced black airmen because of segregation. Some white air force units had initiated plans to integrate their units in 1947.

In 1948, President Harry Truman enacted Executive Order No. 9981 - directing equality of treatment and opportunity in all of the United States Armed Forces, which in time led to the end of racial segregation in the U.S. military forces. This was also the first step toward racial integration in the United States.

For many, the idea of leaving an all-black unit was daunting, but Colonel Davis was convinced that desegregation was the only way to cement the progress his units made. The experience, the record, and the behavior of black American airmen in World War II, and after, were important factors in the initiation of the historic social change to achieve racial equality in America.

On 1 October 2007, continuing the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen, the 477th Fighter Group officially activated as an F-22A Raptor unit. It is not on the same scale, but the discrimination that the Tuskegee Airmen faced of just trying to serve their country in aviation while at war fighting for their country; it is similar challenges the Reservist has to endure. Over time, the Reservist performance will speak for itself.



**Aircraft of the 477th Bomb/Fighter
Group, 302nd Fighter Squadron**



**P-39 Airocobra,
1943-1944 (302 FS)**

**P-40 Warhawk,
1943 (302 FS)**



**P-47 Thunderbolt,
1944 (302 FS)
1945-1947 (477 BG)**

**P-51 Mustang,
1944-1945 (302 FS)**



**Aircraft of the 477th Bomb/Fighter
Group, 302nd Fighter Squadron**



**B-26 Marauder,
1943 (477 BG)**

**B-25 Mitchell,
1944-1947 (477 BG)**



**SU/HU-16 Albatross,
1956-1971 (302 FS)**

**CH/HH-3 Pelican
“Jolly Green Giant”,
1971-1987 (302 FS)**



**Aircraft of the 477th Bomb/Fighter
Group, 302nd Fighter Squadron**



**F-16 Fighting Falcon,
1987-2007 (302 FS)**



**F-22 Raptor,
2007– Current (477 FG/302 FS)**

477th Commanders

Lt Col Andrew O. Lerche, 1943 (Not Pictured)

Col Robert R. Selway Jr., 21 Jan 1944 (Not Pictured)



COL BENJAMIN O. DAVIS JR.,
21 JUN 1945-1 JUL 1947



COL ERIC S. OVERTURF,
1 OCT 2007 – 4 DEC 2010



COL JOHN M. HILLYER,
5 DEC 2010—26 MAR 2011



COL BRYAN P. RADLIFF,
27 MAR 2011 – 3 NOV 2012



COL TYLER D. OTTEN
4 NOV 2012 - 19 MAR 2015



COL DAVID A. PIFFARERIO,
20 MAR 2015- 9 JUL 2016



COL CHRISTOPHER D. OGREN,
10 JUL 2016 - 5 JAN 2019



COL BRETT R. PAOLA
5 JAN 2019- PRESENT

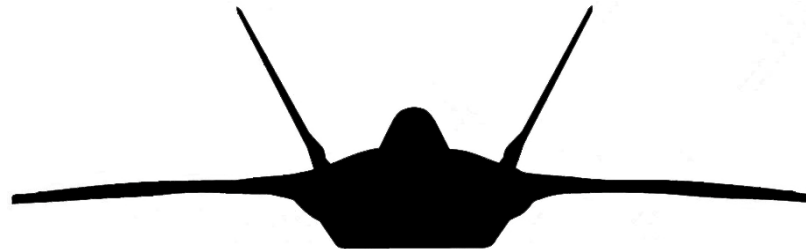
Lineage and Honors

Lineage. Established as 477th Bombardment Group (Medium) on 13 May 1943. Activated on 1 Jun 1943. Inactivated on 25 Aug 1943. Activated on 15 Jan 1944. Redesignated 477th Composite Group on 22 Jun 1945. Inactivated on 1 Jul 1947. Redesignated: 477th Special Operations Group on 31 Jul 1985; 477th Expeditionary Special Operations Group, and converted to provisional status, on 24 Jan 2005. Redesignated 477th Special Operations Group, and withdrawn from provisional status, on 11 Aug 2006. Redesignated 477th Fighter Group on 21 Sep 2007. Activated on 1 Oct 2007.

Assignments. Third Air Force, 1 Jun-25 Aug 1943. First Air Force, 15 Jan 1944; Ninth Air Force, 1 Jan-1 Jul 1947. Air Force Special Operations Command to activate or inactivate at any time after 24 Jan 2005; withdrawn from provisional status, 11 Aug 2006; Tenth Air Force, 1 Oct 2007-Present.

Operational Components. *Squadrons.* **99** Fighter: 22 Jun 1945-1 Jul 1947. **302** Fighter: 1 Oct 2007-. **616** Bombardment: 1 Jun-25 Aug 1943; 15 Jan 1944-22 Jun 1945. **617** Bombardment: 1 Jun-25 Aug 1943; 15 Apr 1944-1 Jul 1947. **618** Bombardment: 1 Jun-25 Aug 1943; 15 May 1944-8 Oct 1945. **619** Bombardment: 1 Jun-25 Aug 1943; 27 May 1944-22 Jun 1945.

Stations. MacDill Field, FL, 1 Jun-25 Aug 1943. Selfridge Field, MI, 15 Jan 1944; Godman Field, KY, 6 May 1944; Freeman Field, IN, 5 Mar 1945; Godman Field, KY, 26 Apr 1945; Lockbourne AAB, OH, 13 Mar 1946-1 Jul 1947. Elmendorf AFB, AK, 1 Oct 2007-Present.



Lineage and Honors

Operations. One of only two African-American flying groups in the Army Air Forces during World War II, and the only African-American bombardment group. The group had no African-American personnel assigned until its second period of activation, beginning in 1944. Pilots of the group during its second active period had received primary, basic, and advanced flight training at Tuskegee, Alabama, but the group itself was never stationed there. Although the 477th Bombardment Group did not deploy overseas and enter combat during World War II, like the 332d Fighter Group, it also contributed to the lifting of racial barriers within the U.S. armed forces. When the 99th Fighter Squadron transferred from the 332d Fighter Group to the 477th Bombardment Group in 1945, the group was redesignated a composite group, and Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, who had commanded both the 99th Fighter Squadron and the 332d Fighter Group, became commander of the 477th Composite Group. He went on to become the first African-American general in the U.S. Air Force. The group inactivated in 1947. After serving briefly as a provisional group, the 477th Fighter Group was activated in October 2007 in Alaska, flying F-22 aircraft.

Service Streamers. American Theater, World War II.

Campaign Streamers. None.

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers. None.

Decorations. Air Force Outstanding Unit Award: 1 Oct 2007-14 Sep 2009; Air Force Outstanding Unit Award: 1 Oct 2011-30 Sep 2013.

Lineage, Assignments, Components, Stations, Aircraft, and Honors through 31 Jan 2013.

Commanders and Operations through 25 Mar 2019.

Supersedes statement prepared on 31 Jan 2017.

Emblem. Approved on 5 Oct 2007.





Product of:

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