FIVE AIRFIELDS OF TUSKEGEE DURING WORLD WAR II

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The Tuskegee Airmen were once obscure, but during the last decade of the twentieth century and since, they have become famous as the first black pilots in American military history. Movies, television documentaries, museum exhibits, books, magazine and newspaper articles, and commemorative events have focused the attention of the nation on the Tuskegee Airmen. Most well known are the fighter pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group and its four fighter squadrons, who between the summer of 1944 and the end of April 1945 flew red-tailed P-47 and P-51 fighters as escorts to four-engine B-17 and B-24 bombers on long-range Fifteenth Air Force missions deep into enemy territory. The Tuskegee Airmen fighter pilots are also becoming increasingly remembered also for having flown P-40 and P-39 airplanes with the Twelfth Air Force on tactical missions in support of Allied ground forces in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy, before they were reassigned to the Fifteenth Air Force. Some remember that the Tuskegee Airmen also included among their ranks bomber pilots and crews of the 477th Bombardment Group and its four squadrons, and that for every airplane in the air there were at least ten personnel on the ground supporting each pilot and crew.

What is far less known is the story of the five airfields in Macon Country Alabama where the Tuskegee Airmen learned to fly military airplanes. In this paper, I want to describe those airfields and the important historical role each played in the greater Tuskegee Airmen story. The airfields are Kennedy Field, Moton Field, Tuskegee Army Air Field, Griel Field, and Shorter Field. Only one of them is still an active airfield today, and that one is not the largest or the most important of the five.
Before describing each airfield, and the unique role each played in the training of the first black military pilots, I want to address the question: Why Tuskegee? Why were the black pilots not trained in some other part of the country, such as Chicago? There were four main reasons. One was the climate. Tuskegee was in the South, where there were more days of good flying weather than in the north. The airfields that might be constructed around Tuskegee would be less likely to be covered with snow or ice during the winter. A second reason was that real estate costs were lower, and air traffic congestion lighter, in the Tuskegee area than in places like Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, or New York. A third reason is that the War Department insisted that the black pilots be trained separately from white pilots, and be assigned to units designed especially for black pilots, and not be integrated with the white pilots training elsewhere. Tuskegee was in an environment where segregation was already entrenched. Although white residents of the town of Tuskegee and Macon County were not happy that black cadets from around the world were coming to their part of the country, at least the blacks would be in segregated units. Finally, Tuskegee Institute actively lobbied to be the institution with which the primary flight training of black military pilots would be associated. Tuskegee Institute’s President Frederick D. Patterson wanted the black military training to begin at his institution partly to further enhance the prestige of his institution, which already had a national reputation for black education. Although black history was not well known throughout white America at the time, almost everyone had heard of Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, and both of them had gained their fame at Tuskegee Institute. This increased the likelihood that the War Department would favor that institution over many others. President Patterson also knew that having the first black pilots in American military history trained around Tuskegee would also encourage the development of related courses in aviation subjects.  

1 Robert J. Jakeman, *The Divided Skies* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), pp. 208-
To be sure, there was opposition to the establishment of black military pilot training at Tuskegee. Leaders in Chicago and other northern cities, where black civilian pilots were already training, wanted the military training to be in their part of the country. For example, Cornelius Coffey and Willa Brown, both pioneer aviators themselves, had founded a school for black pilots in the Chicago area, and they wanted their pilots to move on to serve as the first black pilots in the American military. That would be more likely if the black military pilot training took place in their region. Ultimately, black flying units such as the 332nd Fighter Group and the 477th Bombardment Group would serve for a time at Selfridge Field, near Detroit, Michigan, another northern city that courted black military pilot training.

At first, many leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) opposed the idea of the training of black military pilots in the Tuskegee area, but what the organization really opposed more than the place was the fact that the training of black military pilots would be segregated, and the units for which the black pilots would be trained would also be segregated. The NAACP campaigned for the black cadets to be trained with white cadets, and not be placed in a separate category. In the end, leaders of the NAACP like Roy Wilkins, then the organization’s assistant secretary, decided to support black military pilot training in the Tuskegee area, because it was better that the pilots be trained in Alabama than that they not be trained at all.

One reason Tuskegee Institute was successful in its campaign to take part in black military flying training was the fact that it was already training black civilian pilots successfully. In late 1939, the Civil Aeronautics Administration approved Tuskegee Institute’s application to

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be a civilian pilot training institution. The first students in the Tuskegee program began flying training at the Montgomery airport, which later became the site of Gunter Field. 4

Kennedy Field was a private flying field located about four miles by air and five miles by road south of the center of Tuskegee, off Highway 29. It had been originally constructed by three white flyers for their personal use, and had to be improved before the Civil Aeronautics Authority would approve it for local civilian pilot training program. That approval was obtained in late February 1940, after President Patterson was able to secure the field for Tuskegee Institute. Even after improvements, the field was only 55 acres, and it never had any paved runways, but it was important, because it was where black pilots first trained in Macon Country. Although the sod-surfaced field was small, it contained three takeoff and landing strips, the longest one 1,900 feet. Kennedy Field also included four small hangars, the longest one being 88 feet. There were also two shops, for engine and aircraft repair. The chief of flying instruction at Kennedy Field was Charles A. Anderson, called “Chief Anderson” by those who knew him. He became the first flight instructor at Tuskegee in August 1940. Chief Anderson trained black pilots using Piper “Cub” airplanes. There were a total of seven flying instructors at Kennedy Field, three blacks (including Chief Anderson) and four whites. 5 The two other black instructors were Lewis A. Jackson and George W. Allen, and the whites included Joseph T. Camilleri, Dominick J. Guido, Frank Rosenberg, and Forrest Shelton. 6

Probably the most famous event ever to occur at Kennedy Field was a visit, on March 29, 1941, by Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. She knew that the 99th

6 Jakeman, p. 264.
Pursuit Squadron was destined to become the first black flying organization in American military history, and its pilots were to be trained at Tuskegee. Mrs. Roosevelt was taken on an airplane ride by Chief Anderson, which convinced her that the decision to train black pilots in the Army Air Forces was the correct one. The First Lady was a member of the board of the Rosenwald Fund, a charity that had funded the construction of a host of schools for black children in the South. She recommended that the board help Tuskegee Institute finance the construction of a larger airfield north of Tuskegee, where the primary pilot training could take place. That larger airfield was called Moton Field, named after Robert Russa Moton, Tuskegee Institute’s second president who had succeeded Booker T. Washington.  

Sometimes one hears a story repeated that Eleanor Roosevelt was responsible for the Tuskegee Airmen. The legend is that after Eleanor Roosevelt’s first flight at Kennedy Field with a black pilot, she became convinced that black men could fly, went back to Washington, and talked her husband the President into starting a black flying unit. The problem with the story is that the first black flying unit had already been constituted and activated before Mrs. Roosevelt’s Tuskegee flight, although the unit did not have any pilots yet, and had not yet moved to Tuskegee. The 99th Pursuit Squadron was constituted on March 19, 1941, and activated on March 22 at Chanute Field, Illinois. The first lady’s flight did not take place until March 29, more than a week later.

The wife of Chief Anderson, Gertrude Anderson, also had a connection to Kennedy Field. She served as assistant to the General Manager at Moton Field, George L. Washington.

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8 Speech by Colonel Roosevelt Lewis at Tuskegee University’s Kellogg Center in a program designed to honor three visiting Tuskegee Airmen, late 2012. The author was in the audience.
after first serving as his secretary. From her office at Moton Field, Mrs. Anderson oversaw the administration of Kennedy Field until the civilian pilot training there ended.10

On August 21, 1941, the first class of black aviation cadets entered primary flight training at Kennedy Field, because Moton Field was not yet completed. Those flying cadets were not like the civilian pilot trainees that had trained earlier at Kennedy Field, because they were in the first phase of military flight training. There were 13 of them. They and their instructors moved to Moton Field as soon as the field was ready for flying operations, in September, 1941.11

Moton Field today is the Tuskegee airport, and the location of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site. Many visitors to the site, before they read the exhibit plaques carefully, have the mistaken idea that all of the Tuskegee Airmen flying training took place at Moton Field, when actually, it was the home only of the primary flying training phase. During that phase, cadets flew PT, or primary training, aircraft, which were larger than the Piper Cubs many of them had flown in civilian pilot training. Moton Field had PT-13 and PT-17 biplanes, which were identical except for the engine manufacturer, and the PT-19 monoplane, which was used at Moton Field by mid 1944. African-Americans came from all over the country to begin their flying training at Moton Field, although some of them had already had civilian pilot training at other fields such as Tuskegee’s Kennedy Field. Chief Anderson and some of the other instructors at Kennedy Field moved to Moton Field once it was completed, and the civilian pilot training at Kennedy Field eventually ceased.12

The general manager of Moton Field was George L. Washington, who also served as Tuskegee Institute’s Division of Aeronautics. Before assuming that position, he had helped get

10 Plaque at Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama.
11 Jakeman, p. 267.
12 Randy Johnson, From Cubs to Hawks (Eastern National, 2005), p. 38; Jakeman, p. 264; discussions of author with Deanna Mitchell and Christine Biggers at the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site of the National Park Service, and display plaques at the site; 2 Jan 2013 e-mail from Leo Gray, an original Tuskegee Airman to the author.
the civilian pilot training program at Kennedy Field started. As general manager, he worked closely with Army Air Forces officers with whom Tuskegee Institute contracted to provide primary flight training. Washington also worked closely with Chief Anderson, who had been the chief instructor pilot at Kennedy Field before moving to Moton, and Chief Anderson’s wife, Gertrude, who served as his assistant. Working closely with all three of them was Lewis A. Jackson, who served as Director of Training at Tuskegee Institute’s Division of Aeronautics. In 1940, Jackson had become an instructor at the civilian pilot training program at the Coffey School of Aeronautics in Chicago. He arrived at Kennedy Field later that year to take part in the civilian training program there at Tuskegee. In 1941, he became director of Tuskegee Institute’s military and civilian flight training programs, and moved to Moton Field to work with George L. Washington.13

Tuskegee Institute hired an Iowa firm called Alexander and Repass in the summer of 1941 to construct Moton Field. The construction company had been founded by Archie A. Alexander, an African-American engineer. Tuskegee Institute craftsmen and student laborers helped the contractors with the construction of the field, and the company used some of the institute’s facilities. Working closely with general manager George L. Washington and with Archie Alexander, George A. Reed served as the plant engineer at Moton Field. He was responsible for the operation and maintenance of the physical plant. He oversaw the building of Moton Field from June to November of 1941, making certain that the facilities met the standards of the Army Air Corps for primary flight training.14

Like Kennedy Field, Moton Field had no paved runways. It consisted of 275 acres, much larger than Kennedy Field, and was located 3 miles north of the center of Tuskegee by air, 4

13 Plaque at Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama.
14 Plaque at Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama.
miles by road. There were two brick hangars, one 140 by 120 feet, and the other 130 by 100 feet, in which the airplanes could be housed and repaired. It also had two shops for engine and aircraft repair. Although owned by Tuskegee Institute, like Kennedy Field, Moton Field also had a contract with the Army Air Forces, which provided the airplanes and military officers to oversee the flying training.\(^{15}\)

Lt. Col. Noel Parrish commanded Moton Field from July 19 until December 3, 1941, when he was succeeded there by Maj. William T. Smith, a West Point graduate. Smith became commander of the 66\(^{th}\) Army Air Forces Flying Training Detachment in 1942. Other important white officers at Moton Field included Capt. Harold C. Magoon, who served as assistant supervisor of the detachment, Capt. John G. Penn, who served as Commandant of Cadets, and 1\(^{st}\) Lt. John H. McBeth, who supervised the maintenance of the Army Air Forces primary training aircraft at Moton Field, most of which were PT-17s. Captain McGoon supervised the check rides of the cadets when their flight training was complete. He was promoted in the fall of 1942 and succeeded Major Smith as the leading Army Air Forces officer at Moton Field on November 18, 1943.\(^{16}\)

There were several black flight instructors at Moton Field. One of them was Milton P. Crenshaw. He had completed his own civilian pilot training at Tuskegee Institute’s Kennedy Field, and became the first certified CPT (civilian pilot training) instructor to be trained at Tuskegee. After additional training with the Army Air Corps, Crenshaw began training aviation cadets at Moton Field, where he became commander of one of two flight instructor squadrons. Another black flight instructor at Moton Field was Claude R. Platte, a student at Tuskegee

\(^{15}\) Airport Directory, p. 49; Jakeman, p. 264; Johnson, pp. 38-40.
\(^{16}\) Tuskegee Army Flying School, yearbook, Wings Over America series, edited by Capt. Charles D. Baylis, USMC (Army and Navy Publishing Co., Inc, 1942); Plaque at Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama.
Institute who had also received his civilian pilot training at Kennedy Field. Capt. Vance H. Marchbanks, Jr., also black, served as the flight surgeon at Moton Field for a time. He made certain that the men who flew were physically qualified to do so. He had received his medical degree from Howard University, and later went on to serve with the 332nd Fighter Group in Italy.\(^{17}\)

Lt. Col. Parrish, and later, Major Smith, and still later Capt. Magoon, who led the white Army Air Forces officers at Moton Field, carefully evaluated the final primary flying training solo flights, and determined which of the black pilots would graduate to move on to another flying training field for basic and advanced and transition flying training. Those pilots who failed to advance were said to have “washed out.” The first class of black pilots in 1941 started out with 13 members, but only six graduated from the primary flying training phase at Moton Field.\(^{18}\)

The percentage of black pilots who failed to complete primary pilot training and move on to basic flying training was high, especially at first. In fact, some of the Tuskegee Airmen pilots believed that the Army Air Corps was determined to wash out most of the black pilots because the training of black military pilots was “an experiment designed to fail.” After all, the War College in 1925 had already determined in a report that black military personnel were inferior to their white counterparts, and did not qualify for certain fields such as military pilot. But there were always those black pilots who demonstrated their flying competence unquestionably, and who did graduate and move on to the next phase, and the percentage grew as time went on. Whether there was a quota for black pilots is difficult to determine, but the Air Corps unquestionably needed to assign whatever pilots did complete training to future black flying

\(^{17}\) Plaques at Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama.

\(^{18}\) Jakeman, p. 269.
organizations, and at first there was only one such squadron, the 99th Fighter Squadron. Black pilot candidates were coming from all over the country, and not all of them would be able to be assigned to the one fighter squadron available at first. Another factor to consider is that the officers who determined who would move on to the later military flying training phases wanted to make certain that the ones who completed primary flight training were qualified for the next phases, and ultimately for the combat they might one day have to face.\(^{19}\)

A flying cadet at Moton Field received 60 hours of training in the PT-17, over a course of nine weeks. Each of the next two phases of flight training, basic and advanced, also took nine weeks. For those basic and advanced phases, other kinds of aircraft were used, and Moton Field was far too small for them. Those Negro pilots who did complete primary flight training at Moton Field moved to the largest of the Tuskegee airfields, Tuskegee Army Air Field.\(^{20}\)

Tuskegee Army Air Field was revolutionary in more ways than one. Hilyard R. Robinson, a black architect from Washington, D.C., was awarded the contract to design Tuskegee Army Air Field.\(^{21}\) Not only was it the first and only major base built for the basic and advanced phases of military flying training for black pilots, but it was also the first major Army Air Forces base built by a black construction company. The firm was McKissack and McKissack, which was headquartered at Nashville, Tennessee. Calvin L. McKissack headed the firm. The War Department had never awarded a major construction contract to a black company before. Tuskegee Institute’s President Frederick Patterson persuaded Assistant Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson to choose the black construction firm to accomplish the work at the largest of the airfields in the Tuskegee area, despite the fact that the airfield would not be under

\(^{19}\) J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers* (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 19-20

\(^{20}\) Plaques at Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama.

\(^{21}\) George L. Washington, *The History of Military and Civilian Pilot Training of Negroes at Tuskegee, Alabama, 1939-1945*. Copy of manuscript sent electronically to author by Guy Franklin. The original is probably on file at the Tuskegee University Archives.
the control of Tuskegee Institute but rather under the Army Air Forces. The project cost $1.5 million dollars, a huge amount of money at the time. The War Department’s choice of a black architect and a black construction helped counter charges from certain members of the black press that the War Department was discriminating against blacks.\footnote{Jakeman, pp. 279-280.}

Neither Robinson nor McKissack chose the site of Tuskegee Army Air Field. That was done by Major Luke S. Smith of the Army Air Corps, who was based at Maxwell Field. Construction of the Tuskegee Army Air Field was a challenge, because of the terrain. Drainage was a problem that had to be overcome, and the land had to be reshaped to make way for mile-long concrete runways. McKissack subcontracted with a white contractor to accomplish the earthmoving task.\footnote{Washington manuscript.} One area was reduced in elevation by 54 feet. After excavation, the runway area was essentially flat, with a curving stream to the south. To the north, beyond the hangars along the flight line, on land that sloped upward, were the headquarters building and the barracks. The barracks were large long two-story buildings with sloping roofs, built in parallel lines. There was also a station hospital.\footnote{Tuskegee Army Flying School, yearbook, Wings Over America series, edited by Capt. Charles D. Baylis, USMC (Army and Navy Publishing Co., Inc, 1942).}

On August 6, 1941, a Tuskegee Army Flying School was activated at Tuskegee Army Air Field, and Major James A. Ellison served as its first commander, but the black aviation cadets had not yet begun their training at Kennedy or Moton Fields. On September 19, black enlisted personnel began arriving at Tuskegee Army Air Field, to join white enlisted personnel who were already there. It was not until November 8 that six of the thirteen black flying cadets who graduated from primary flight training at Moton Field arrived at Tuskegee Army Air Field, to begin the next basic phase of flight training, using BT-13 monoplanes. Two days later, the
enlisted personnel of the 99th Pursuit Squadron arrived at Tuskegee Army Air Field. It was to be the first black flying squadron, but it did not yet have any pilots.\textsuperscript{25}

The next month, December 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II, and Major Noel F. Parrish, a white officer who had been in charge of training at Moton Field moved to Tuskegee Army Air Field to be Director of Training there.\textsuperscript{26}

January 1942 was another crucial month. Five of the six black cadets who had entered basic flying training graduated to advanced flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field. For that phase, they would fly AT-6 aircraft. During the same month, Colonel Frederick V. H. Kimble (Frederick von Kimble) succeeded Major James A. Ellison as commander of the field and the flying school.\textsuperscript{27} Kimble was more a segregationist than his predecessor, and took steps to keep the races at Tuskegee Army Air Field divided. He wrote, during his command, that “any mixture of the races, particularly at the southern stations, will have not only a tremendously adverse reaction throughout this section of the country, and will undoubtedly lead toward an attempt on the part of certain colored individuals or groups to encroach on established customs within local civilian communities.” For his efforts to enforce segregation at Tuskegee Army Air Field, he was less popular than Ellison before him, and Noel Parrish, who eventually succeeded him.\textsuperscript{28}

The 99th Pursuit Squadron remained at Tuskegee Army Air Field, and it was soon joined by a second black flying squadron, the 100th Pursuit Squadron, which was activated at the same base on February 19. Neither of the future fighter squadrons had any pilots until March 7, 1942, when the first class of black military pilots graduated from advanced pilot training. Class 42C

\textsuperscript{25} Johnson, p. 43; 99th Fighter Squadron lineage and honors history at the Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA); organization record card for Tuskegee Army Flying School at AFHRA; Thole, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{26} Tuskegee Army Flying School Yearbook, AFHRA call number 289.28-100.
\textsuperscript{27} Johnson, p. 41; Jakeman, p. 277.
had only five members, but they included Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a former West Point cadet whose father was the first black general in the United States Army.\(^29\)

In April 1942, the first black pilots in the American military began training with P-40 fighter aircraft at Tuskegee Army Air Field. Later that year, both the 99\(^{th}\) and 100\(^{th}\) Fighter Squadron received enough pilots to become operational, but the squadrons did not deploy overseas for combat. They continued training at Tuskegee until October 13, when the 332\(^{nd}\) Fighter Group, the first black flying group, was activated at Tuskegee Army Air Field. The 100\(^{th}\) Fighter Squadron was assigned to the new group, as well as two new black fighter squadrons, the 301\(^{st}\) and the 302\(^{nd}\). The first black flying unit, the 99\(^{th}\) Fighter Squadron, was not assigned to the 332\(^{nd}\) Fighter Group when the organizations were at Tuskegee.\(^30\)

Eventually Tuskegee Army Air Field hosted a large number of training and operational aircraft. They included BT-13s used for basic flying training, and single-engine AT-6s for advanced training of future fighter pilots, twin engine AT-10s for advanced training for future bomber pilots, P-40s for the 99\(^{th}\) Fighter Squadron and the 332\(^{nd}\) Fighter Group (including its three fighter squadrons, the 100\(^{th}\), 301\(^{st}\), and 302\(^{nd}\)) and even eventually even a couple of B-25 bombers.\(^31\)

Tuskegee Army Air Field, unlike the white pilot training bases, was the home of basic, advanced, and transition flying training, because Tuskegee was the only place in the country where future black fighter and bomber pilots were trained in the Army Air Forces. White pilots usually trained at one base for basic flying training, another base for advanced flying training,

\(^{29}\) 100\(^{th}\) Fighter Squadron lineage and honors history at AFHRA; Jakeman, pp. 303-305.


and still another for transition flying training. By the end of 1942, Tuskegee Army Air Field was very crowded, with 3414 men assigned, including 67 white personnel. Not only did the field host all the phases of black military pilot training beyond primary, but also the 99th Fighter Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group, with its three other fighter squadrons, the 100th, 301st, and 302nd. In December 1942, Colonel Noel Parrish, who had been Director of Training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, became the commander of the field and its flying school, replacing Colonel Kimble.\textsuperscript{32}

There were many white officers at Tuskegee Army Air Field besides Colonel Parrish. They included Lt. Col. John T. Hazard, who served as Parrish’s executive officer. Lt. Col. Richard C. Cumming served as the post surgeon, and ran the Tuskegee Army Air Field post hospital. Maj. Harry W. Hecht served as the post engineer, and Capt. Robert L. Boyd was the post operations officer. Capt. John G. Cooke, Jr. served as the Commandant of Cadets. The Director of Flight Training was Maj. Donald G. McPherson. Under him served Capt. Gabe C. Hawkins, Director of Basic Flight Training, and Capt. Robert M. Long, Director of Advanced Flight Training.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{TABLE I: LEADING WHITE OFFICERS AT TUSKEGEE ARMY AIR FIELD AND MOTON FIELD IN LATE 1942}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>FIELD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LT COL</td>
<td>NOEL F. PARRISH</td>
<td>Commander, Tuskegee Army Flying School</td>
<td>Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LT COL</td>
<td>JOHN T. HAZARD</td>
<td>Executive Officer, Tuskegee Army Flying School</td>
<td>TAAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LT COL</td>
<td>RICHARD C. CUMMING</td>
<td>Post Surgeon, Tuskegee Army Air Field</td>
<td>TAAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAJ</td>
<td>HARRY W. HECHT</td>
<td>Post Engineer, Tuskegee Army Air Field</td>
<td>TAAF</td>
</tr>
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\textsuperscript{32} Jakeman, p. 277; Thole, vol. 3, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{33} Tuskegee Army Flying School, yearbook, Wings Over America series, edited by Capt. Charles D. Baylis, USMC (Army and Navy Publishing Co., Inc, 1942).
Colonel Parrish was more popular among the black cadets and units than Colonel Kimble, partly because he had been so closely involved with their training, first at Moton and then at Tuskegee Army Air Field, but also because he was less racist, despite the fact he was from the South, and Kimble had been from the North. Parrish relaxed the segregationist policies at the field, partly because of his own feeling, but partly also because he knew that relatively new army regulations required base facilities to be open to all personnel, not just whites. That included the officers’ club. While many white officers refused to attend the officers’ club, since blacks were allowed there, Parrish remained a member. Tuskegee Airmen remember Parrish as one who encouraged their success, not their failure or the failure of the program.34

Unlike most of the flight instructors in primary flight training at Moton Field, who were black, all the flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field, for basic, advanced, and transition flying training were white, until at least late 1944, when experienced black fighter pilots began

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returning from combat overseas. Those black pilot had themselves been trained by white
instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field. Many of those white instructors had volunteered to
serve at the flying school there. While some of the Tuskegee Airmen pilots who graduated from
advanced flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field remembered that the flight instructors were
more strict and serious than some of the instructors at Moton Field, they did not have a sense that
the basic and advanced flight instructors were their enemy, or attempting to “wash them out”
because they were black. In fact, black pilots who failed to continue in flight instruction were
more likely to be washed out at Moton Field, during their final check flight with a white officer,
than at Tuskegee Army Air Field. By the time black pilot candidates graduated from primary
flight training and moved to the larger airfield, most of the poorly performing cadets had already
been eliminated. Although all the flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field were white until
late 1944, by the time the base closed just after the end of World War II, most of the flight
instructors there were black.  

In March 1943, the 332nd Fighter Group and its 100th, 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons
moved from Tuskegee Army Air Field to Selfridge Field, Michigan. In April, the 99th Fighter
Squadron deployed from Tuskegee Army Air Field for overseas duty across the Atlantic Ocean
in North Africa. The departure of the four flying squadrons and the group in the spring of 1943
allowed Tuskegee Army Air Field to concentrate on flying training. It also freed up more room

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35 Samuel L. Broadnax, Blue Skies, Black Wings (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p. 72;
Charles W. Dryden, A-Train (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), p. 51; Plaques at Hangar 1 at
Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, Moton Field, Alabama; telephone conversation of the author with Col.
Charles McGee, one of the black flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field; Noel Parrish oral history interview at
the Air Force Historical Research Agency, call number K239.0512-744, p. 98.
for the training aircraft, since the P-40s of the four squadrons were no longer needed there. A small number of P-40s remained on the base for transition training.\textsuperscript{36}

By the end of 1943, Tuskegee Army Air Field had 3,186 personnel, including 1,890 enlisted men, 303 officers, 293 cadets, and 700 full-time civilian employees. Only about 80 of the personnel were white, including 13 flight instructors. The white officers did not live at Tuskegee Army Air Field but off base, most either in the white part of Tuskegee or at nearby Auburn.\textsuperscript{37}

Integration of base facilities at Tuskegee Army Air Field was controversial. On August 3, 1944, twelve black officers led by Captain Willard B. Ransom entered the west dining room of the Tuskegee Army Air Field restaurant, which had been reserved for white officers, and demanded service. When 2\textsuperscript{nd} Lt. George D Frye, Assistant Exchange Officer, asked the black officers to go to the larger east dining room reserved for them, Captain Ransom showed Frye two War Department letters that noted service at base recreational facilities would not be denied any personnel because of race. Lt. Frye agreed to let the black officers be served in the west dining room, effectively integrating the restaurant without violence. Many white officers stopped eating at the facility, preferring to bring their lunches, to get their lunches at Tuskegee, or to eat their lunches, purchased at the restaurant, in their offices. When they complained to Col. Noel F. Parrish, the base commander, he refused to restore segregation at the restaurant, and blacks continued to eat there in the same room, if not at the same tables, as whites.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{38} History of Tuskegee Army Air Field, Jul-Aug 1944, call number 289.28-5 at Air Force Historical Research Agency, pp. 13-14.
By September 1944, Tuskegee Army Air Field had approximately 144 airplanes, including about 100 BT-13 airplanes for basic flying training, 21 AT-6 aircraft for advanced single engine flight training, 15 AT-10 airplanes for twin-engine flying training, and 8 P-40s for transition flying training for future fighter pilots. There were sixteen flight instructors for the basic flying training and 14 flight instructors for the advanced single-engine flying training. Each basic flying training instructor had an average of five students each, and each advanced flying training instructor had an average of three students each. All of the flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field were white until the second half of 1944, when black flight instructors began to arrive, some of them with experience from combat overseas.\(^{39}\)

The leaders of flight training at Tuskegee Army Air Field were white pilots, and at first, all the flight instructors there were also white. Under Colonel Noel Parrish, the base and flying school commander, Lt. Col. Donald G. McPherson served as Director of Training and Operations. For most of the war, Major Gabe C. Hawkins, Jr., served as director of the basic flying training. On March 13, 1945, when Hawkins moved up to take the place of McPherson, Major Marvin A. Coleman took his place. By that time, there were 34 basic flying instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field, 14 of whom were black. Major Robert M. Long directed the advanced single engine flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field during most of World War II. The first black flying instructors in the advanced single engine phase arrived in the second half of 1944, but white instructors remained. On April 9, 1945, Captain H. Foregger, another white pilot, took Long’s place, as head of the advanced single engine pilot training. By then, there were 23 instructors under him. Captain Leonard A. Crozier directed the advanced twin engine

\(^{39}\) History of Tuskegee Army Air Field, Sep-Oct 1944, call number 289.28-6, vol. 1, at Air Force Historical Research Agency.
pilot training at Tuskegee Army Air Field. Under him 13 flight instructors worked. As more and more black pilots with combat experience returned from overseas duty with the 332\textsuperscript{nd} Fighter Group, in late 1944 and the first half of 1945, increasing numbers of flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field were black, but it is not clear whether they ever became a majority of the flight instructors there.\textsuperscript{40}

One of the famous Tuskegee Airmen of the 332\textsuperscript{nd} Fighter Group who returned to Tuskegee Army Air Field after distinguished service in combat overseas was Captain Wendell Pruitt. On April 15, 1945, Pruitt and a student were killed in an airplane crash at the field.\textsuperscript{41}

In 1945, the aircraft used at Tuskegee Army Air Field changed somewhat. Basic flight training, which had used the BT-13 airplane type during most of the war, began using AT-6 aircraft, like those that had been used in the advanced single engine flight training. Advanced twin engine flight training, which had used AT-10s, began to use B-25 medium bombers instead. For that aircraft, Tuskegee Army Air Field had to acquire an additional auxiliary field at Troy Municipal Airport on May 4, 1945. Before that date, the Troy airport had served as an auxiliary field of Maxwell Field, and it had been used for B-24 training. In March 1945, transition flight training using P-40 fighter aircraft ceased at Tuskegee, and aircraft of that type were moved to Walterboro Army Air Field in South Carolina. During 1945, Tuskegee Army Air Field, at one time or another, sheltered at least seven aircraft types: BT-13s, AT-6s, AT-10s, B-25s, P-40s, at least one AT-7, and at least one UC-78.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} Histories of Tuskegee Army Air Field and the 2143\textsuperscript{rd} Army Air Forces Base Unit, Mar-Apr 1945, vol. 1, call number 289.28-9 at the Air Force Historical Research Agency.
\textsuperscript{41} History of Tuskegee Army Air Field and the 2143\textsuperscript{rd} Army Air Forces Base Unit, Mar-Apr 1945, vol. 1, call number 289.28-9 at the Air Force Historical Research Agency.
\textsuperscript{42} History of Tuskegee Army Air Field and the 2143\textsuperscript{rd} Army Air Forces Base Unit, Mar-Apr 1945, vol. 1, and May-Jun 1945, call numbers 289.28-9 and 289.28-10 at the Air Force Historical Research Agency.
Forty four classes of pilots completed the advanced phase of the training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, but not all of them became fighter pilots after completing single-engine training. In fact, some of the pilots flew twin-engine trainers called AT-10s at Tuskegee Army Air Field. Those pilots were destined to lead crews that would include bombardiers, navigators, radio operators, and gunners, in B-25 airplanes of the type used in the famous Doolittle Raid on Tokyo. Twin-engine pilot training commenced at Tuskegee Army Air Field in September 1943, but single-engine flying training continued there. When the 332nd Fighter Group deployed from Selfridge Field, Michigan, for overseas duty in Italy, where the 99th Fighter Squadron was already serving, a black bombardment group, the 477th, was activated at Selfridge. Graduates of twin-engine pilot training at Tuskegee Army Air Field went to the 477th Bombardment Group at Selfridge, and later at Godman Field, Kentucky.43

After the 99th Fighter Squadron deployed overseas, it received replacement pilots from the 332nd Fighter Group, stationed at Selfridge or Oscoda, Michigan in 1943. After the 332nd Fighter Group and its three fighter squadrons deployed for combat overseas, at the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944, the fighter pilots graduating from advanced flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field did not deploy directly to them. They were assigned to the 553rd Fighter Squadron, which was at first based at Selfridge Field in Michigan, where the 332nd Fighter Group had been before its deployment to Italy. The unit provided replacement pilots when there were vacancies in the 332nd Fighter Group or its squadrons, those vacancies caused by accidents, enemy capture, combat casualties, or the expiration of flying tours. In May 1944, the 553rd Fighter Squadron moved from Selfridge to Walterboro, South Carolina. By then, the 332nd Fighter Group was about to begin flying heavy bomber escort missions for the Fifteenth

43 Johnson, pp. 45-46; Thole, pp. 16-17.
Air Force in Italy. Not long after that, the 99th Fighter Squadron, also in Italy, joined the 332nd Fighter Group.\textsuperscript{44}

Around the middle of 1944, an outdoor amphitheater was opened on the northern edge of Tuskegee Army Air Field, for entertainment. The first performers there were Ella Fitzgerald and the Ink Spots. Later celebrities who entertained the cadets and instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field included Louis Armstrong and Lena Horne, the latter of whom was the most popular of all.\textsuperscript{45}

The history of Tuskegee Army Air Field is documented in many sources, but one the most fascinating sets of documents is the series of issues of the base newspaper, the \textit{Hawk’s Cry}. Many of the issues are preserved and available in the Tuskegee University Archives. They note important events that happened at the large base in the years between 1941 and 1946, when the last pilot class completed its training. The pilot cadets must have had the nickname “Hawks,” perhaps referring to the P-40 Warhawks that were used at first for transitional training for the single-engine pilots. There is even a possibility that the name hawk came from the red-tailed hawks that sometimes soared over the large airfield. That would have been very fitting, given the fact that members of the 332\textsuperscript{nd} Fighter Group who had trained at Tuskegee were later to be called the “Red Tails” because the tails of their P-51 airplanes in combat had red tails.\textsuperscript{46}

In 2012, personnel at the Air Force Historical Research Agency visited the old site of the Tuskegee Army Air Field. It is fenced-in by the owners, who use it for the raising and harvesting of timber, and for a recreational camp. Very little remains of the old base with the exception of the remains of the broad and long concrete runways and taxiways. One of the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{44} Organizational record card for the 553\textsuperscript{rd} Fighter Squadron at the Air Force Historical Research Agency; Thole, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{45} Thole, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{46} Issues of \textit{The Hawk’s Cry} at the Tuskegee University Archives, and discussions of author with Dana Chandler, director of the archives.
\end{flushright}
runways is better preserved, having been used for a time after World War II as a drag strip for racing cars. Few of the World War II base buildings remain, and those that do are in ruins.

There were two auxiliary airfields affiliated with Tuskegee Army Air Field during World War II. Auxiliary field number 1 was Griel Field, consisting of 320 acres six miles west of Tuskegee Army Air Field. Griel Field was used for the training of liaison pilots for the U.S. Army, beginning on August 2, 1943. According to Colonel Parrish, commander of Tuskegee Army Air Field, fifty or more pilots trained in light aircraft to be artillery spotters for the black 92<sup>nd</sup> and 93<sup>rd</sup> Divisions. They flew L-4 light aircraft and were assigned to U.S. Army ground forces, rather than to the Army Air Forces. They did not go on to fly fighters or bombers like the other pilots at Tuskegee. Griel Field was a grassy field, with no hangars, barracks, or fuel supplies.  

Tuskegee Army Air Field auxiliary field number 2 was Shorter Field, consisting of 241 acres almost 12 miles west-southwest of its parent base. It was located about midway between Tuskegee Army Air Field and Montgomery. Like Griel Field, Shorter Field was also grassy, with no hangars or barracks, and no fuel supplies.  

Pilots in the advanced phase of flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, flying AT-6 single engine and AT-10 twin-engine aircraft, practiced formation takeoffs and landings at Shorter Field. Pilots training at the main base also used Shorter Field on their solo flights, landing there and taking off for a return flight to Tuskegee Army Air Field.

As mentioned earlier, the flight instructors of basic and advanced flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field were all white until at least the second half of 1944. Many of the new

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48 Airport Directory, pp. 69.
49 Dryden, A-Train, p. 57.
black flight instructors at the field were combat veterans from the 332nd Fighter Group who had returned to the United States but who wanted to remain in the service of the Army Air Forces. For example, on March 23, 1945, nineteen black pilots who had flown in combat with the 332nd Fighter Group overseas were assigned as basic and advanced flight instructors at the field. That number increased during the spring of 1945, and by the middle of the year, many of the flight instructors at Tuskegee Army Air Field were black.\textsuperscript{50}

The last of 44 pilot training classes graduated at Tuskegee Army Air Field on June 29, 1946. World War II was over, and the need for military pilots plummeted. Almost a thousand black pilots had trained at the field between November 1941 and June 1946, a period of about four and a half years. In June 1947, Tuskegee Army Air Field closed permanently when the last unit there was inactivated. Like hundreds of other flying training fields around the country, it closed and was never used again.\textsuperscript{51}

Colonel Noel Parrish, who had supervised the training of the black pilots at Tuskegee Army Air Field during the war, transferred on August 20, 1946 to Maxwell Field, which became the home of Air University around the time of the formation of the United States Air Force separate from the Army. Parrish became a student at Air University, and wrote a thesis urging the desegregation of the Air Force. He was happy when the Air Force, in 1949, became the first of the armed forces to implement President Harry S. Truman’s 1948 Executive Order 9981, which mandated the eventual desegregation of all the armed forces of the United States.\textsuperscript{52}

Not long after Tuskegee Army Air Field closed in 1947, many of its most important buildings were dismantled and taken away to be used at other sites. The three large double

\textsuperscript{50} Tuskegee Army Air Field Special Order 68 dated 21 March 1945, and Tuskegee Army Air Field Special Order 119 dated 18 May 1945. Copies of these orders were sent to the author by Craig Huntly; telephone conversation of the author with Col. Charles McGee, one of the black instructor pilots at Tuskegee Army Air Field in 1945.

\textsuperscript{51} Thole, p. 19; organization record card of Tuskegee Flying School.

\textsuperscript{52} Noel Parrish biography file at the Air Force Historical Research Agency.
hangars were disassembled like erector sets, and reconstructed at airports around Alabama. One was moved to Montgomery’s then new airport at Dannelly Field, since Montgomery’s old airport became Gunter Field. There it eventually became the home of Montgomery Aviation. A second hangar was moved to Clanton, where it is still one of two major hangars at the Chilton County Airport. A third such hangar stands as one of two hangars at the Troy airport. I have visited and photographed all three hangars, and they are identical in size and shape, if not in the quality of their preservation.53

The five Macon County airfields used for the initial training of black pilots in the Army Air Forces during World War II are evidence of the important role the state of Alabama played in the history of the Tuskegee Airmen and the very significant part they played in the long struggle for racial equality, not only within the American armed forces, but in American society as a whole. The flight training those first black American military pilots received in the five airfields around Tuskegee made a crucial difference in their success in combat, and their success in combat contributed to the integration of the Air Force, the other military services, and ultimately American society as a whole.

Daniel L. Haulman

(see table and notes following)

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53 Author visits to Dannelly Field (Montgomery Regional Airport); Clanton-Chilton County Airport; Troy Airport, Alabama, and author discussions with managers of those facilities, including Montgomery Aviation and the Clanton and Troy, Alabama, airports.
### TABLE II: FIVE AIRFIELDS OF TUSKEGEE DURING WORLD WAR II

Researcher: Daniel L. Haulman

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>KENNEDY FIELD</th>
<th>MOTON FIELD</th>
<th>TUSKEGEE ARMY AIR FIELD (TAAF)</th>
<th>GRIEL FIELD</th>
<th>SHORTER FIELD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Function</strong></td>
<td>Civilian pilot training; War Training Service</td>
<td>Primary pilot training</td>
<td>Basic, Advanced, and Transition pilot training</td>
<td>Liaison pilot training, auxiliary field for TAAF</td>
<td>Practice auxiliary field for Tuskegee Army Air Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Area</strong></td>
<td>55 acres</td>
<td>275 acres</td>
<td>1,681 acres</td>
<td>320 acres</td>
<td>241 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Landing Area</strong></td>
<td>Sod, 3 strips, longest one 1,900 feet</td>
<td>Sod. All-way. 4,200x3000 feet</td>
<td>Four asphalt-paved runways, three 5,000 feet long, one 4,500 feet long, all 300 feet wide</td>
<td>Turf. All-way. 5,689 x 3,368 feet</td>
<td>Turf. All-way. 3,560x3,270 feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hangars</strong></td>
<td>Four small, largest dimension: 88 feet</td>
<td>Two brick, one 140x120 feet, one 130x100 feet</td>
<td>Three large, steel and wood, each 184x120 feet, each with two 89x20 foot doors</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other facilities</strong></td>
<td>Two shops for engine and aircraft repair, gasoline and oil supply</td>
<td>Two shops for engine and aircraft repair; Gasoline and oil supply; telephone communications, bus and taxi service</td>
<td>Engine and aircraft repair shops, gasoline and oil supplies, communications, extensive lighting, accommodations for 96 officers, 1,000 enlisted; radio facilities, railroad siding, bus and taxi service</td>
<td>Wind tee and wind sock</td>
<td>Wind tee and wind sock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>5 miles SSE of Tuskegee by road, 4 miles by air</td>
<td>4 miles N of Tuskegee by road; 2.8 miles by air</td>
<td>10 miles NW of Tuskegee by road; 6.7 miles by air</td>
<td>6 miles W of Tuskegee Army Air Field</td>
<td>11.75 miles WSW of Tuskegee Army Air Field</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>