

THE LEGEND OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ACE

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The Fantasy of Flight Museum in Polk City, Florida, maintains a restored P-51 Mustang painted to look like the airplane that Tuskegee Airman Lee Archer flew in combat during World War II. It appears to be an airplane of the 332nd Fighter Group, and like other Mustangs of the group, it has a distinctive red tail. It also has a row of swastikas near the canopy, to symbolize the number of enemy airplanes Lee Archer shot down during the war. There is a small problem. There are five swastikas on the airplane, but USAF Historical Study 85, which lists aerial victories of American Army Air Force pilots during World War II, lists only four aerial victory credits for Lee Archer, and five is the number for an ace. How does one explain the contradiction? Was Lee Archer the only African American ace in World War II, as the airplane suggests, or is there something wrong with the historical record that indicates he shot down four rather than five enemy airplanes?¹

A popular story that circulated among the Tuskegee Airmen after World War II is that white officers were determined to prevent any black man in the Army Air Forces from becoming an ace, and therefore reduced the aerial victory credit total of Lee Archer from five to less than five to accomplish their aim. A version of this misconception appears in the Oliver North compilation, *War Stories III* ((Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2005), p. 152, in which Lee Archer is quoted as saying “I figure somebody up the line just wasn’t ready for a black guy to be an ace.” In the same source, Archer said that one of his five victories was reduced to a half, and no one knew who got the other half.² Another version of the story is contained in an interview of Lee Archer by Dr. Lisa Bratton conducted on 13 Mar 2001 in New York, NY. Archer mentioned that he shot down five enemy airplanes, without specifying the

dates, and that one of his victories was cut in half and given to another African American Tuskegee Airman pilot named Freddie Hutchins, leaving him with 4.5. He also noted, in the same interview, that the American Fighter Aces Association honored him, implying that the association had named him an ace at last.³

In reality, according to the World War II records of the 332d Fighter Group and its squadrons, which were very carefully kept by members of the group, Lee Archer claimed a total of four aerial victories during World War II, and received credit for every claim.⁴ The records include the monthly histories of the 332d Fighter Group during World War II and the daily narrative mission reports of the group, kept by African American members of the group at the time, and Fifteenth Air Force orders that were issued to confirm the victories that were claimed as credits. Those records show also that Lt. Freddie Hutchins did not earn any half credit, with the other half credit going to Archer. In fact, Hutchins earned a full credit for shooting down an enemy aircraft on July 26, 1944. The mission report for that day, which lists all the claims from the mission, does not list Archer.⁵ The order that awarded the credit to Hutchins on July 26 was issued on August 6, 1944, and it was the same order that awarded a credit to Archer for 18 July 1944. Moreover, the American Fighter Aces Association once honored Lee Archer as a pilot, but that organization never declared him to be an ace.⁶

The misconception that Lee Archer was an ace was perpetuated in part because of an excerpt in the book *The Tuskegee Airmen* (Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1955), by Charles E. Francis. In that book, Francis notes an aerial victory for July 20, 1944, but the history of the 332d Fighter Group for July 1944, the mission report of the 332d Fighter Group for July 20, 1944, and the aerial victory credit orders issued by the Fifteenth Air Force in 1944 do not support the contention.⁷

World War II documents, including monthly histories of the 332d Fighter Group and Twelfth and Fifteenth Air Force general orders awarding aerial victory credits show that during World War II, Lee Archer claimed and was awarded a total of four aerial victory credits, one on July 18, 1944, and three on October 12, 1944. There is no evidence among these documents that, during the war, Lee Archer ever claimed any more than four enemy aircraft destroyed in the air. He was never awarded any more than four. A fifth was never taken away or downgraded to half. Moreover, there is no evidence, among the documents, that there was any effort to prevent any members of the 332d Fighter Group from becoming an ace. If someone had reduced one of his July credits to a half, or taken it away entirely, that person would have had no way of knowing that Archer would get credit for three more aircraft months later, in October, and approach ace status. When claims were made, they were recorded and evaluated by a victory credit board that decided, using witness statements and gun camera film, whether to award credits, which were confirmed by general orders of the Fifteenth Air Force. There is no evidence that the black claims were treated any differently than the white claims. If there had been such discrimination in the evaluation of claims, Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the leader of the group would have most likely complained, and there is no evidence of any such complaint. To think that someone or some group was totaling the number of aerial victory credits of each of the members of the various squadrons of the 332d Fighter Group and intervening to deny credit to anyone who might become an ace is not consistent with the aerial victory credit procedures of the day.

Table IV. Chronological Table of 332d Fighter Group Aerial Victory Credits

| Date | Name | Unit | Downed | GO # |
|-------------|------------------------|-------------|---------------|---------------------|
| 2 Jul 1943 | 1 Lt Charles B. Hall | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 32 XII ASC 7 Sep 43 |
| 27 Jan 1944 | 2 Lt Clarence W. Allen | 99 FS | 0.5 FW-190 | 66 XII AF 24 May 44 |
| | 1 Lt Willie Ashley Jr. | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 122 XII AF 7 Aug 44 |
| | 2 Lt Charles P. Bailey | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 66 XII AF 24 May 44 |
| | 1 Lt Howard Baugh | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 122 XII AF 7 Aug 44 |

| | | | | |
|-------------|------------------------------|--------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| | | | 0.5 FW-190 | 66 XII AF 24 May 44 |
| | Cpt Lemuel R. Custis | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 122 XII AF 7 Aug 44 |
| | 1 Lt Robert W. Deiz | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 66 XII AF 24 May 44 |
| | 2 Lt Wilson V. Eagleson | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 66 XII AF 24 May 44 |
| | 1 Lt Leon C. Roberts | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 122 XII AF 7 Aug 44 |
| | 2 Lt Lewis C. Smith | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 66 XII AF 24 May 44 |
| | 1 Lt Edward L. Toppins | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 81 XII AF 22 Jun 44 |
| 28 Jan 1944 | 1 Lt Robert W. Deiz | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 122 XII AF 7 Aug 44 |
| | Cpt Charles B. Hall | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 1 ME-109 | 64 XII AF 22 May 44 |
| 5 Feb 1944 | 1 Lt Elwood T. Driver | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 66 XII AF 24 May 44 |
| 7 Feb 1944 | 2 Lt Wilson V. Eagleson | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 122 XII AF 7 Aug 44 |
| | 2 Lt Leonard M. Jackson | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 66 XII AF 24 May 44 |
| | 1 Lt Clinton B. Mills | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 66 XII AF 24 May 44 |
| 9 Jun 1944 | 1 Lt Charles M. Bussy | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 1473 XV AF 30 Jun 44 |
| | 2 Lt Frederick D. Funderburg | 301 FS | 2 ME-109s | 1473 XV AF 30 Jun 44 |
| | 1 Lt Melvin T. Jackson | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 1473 XV AF 30 Jun 44 |
| | 1 Lt Wendell O. Pruitt | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 1473 XV AF 30 Jun 44 |
| 12 Jul 1944 | 1 Lt Harold E. Sawyer | 301 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2032 XV AF 23 Jul 44 |
| | 1 Lt Joseph D. Elsberry | 301 FS | 3 FW-190 | 2466 XV AF Aug 44 |
| 16 Jul 1944 | 1 Lt Alfonza W. Davis | 332 FG | 1 MA-205 | 2030 XV AF 23 Jul 44 |
| | 2 Lt William W. Green Jr | 302 FS | 1 MA-202 | 2029 XV AF 23 Jul 44 |
| 17 Jul 1944 | 1 Lt Luther H. Smith Jr. | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| | 2 Lt Robert H. Smith | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| | 1 Lt Laurence D. Wilkins | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| 18 Jul 1944 | 2 Lt Lee A. Archer | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| | 1 Lt Charles P. Bailey | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2484 XV AF 11 Aug 44 |
| | 1 Lt Weldon K. Groves | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| 18 Jul 1944 | 1 Lt Jack D. Holsclaw | 100 FS | 2 ME-109s | 2202 XV AF 31 Jul 44 |
| | 2 Lt Clarence D. Lester | 100 FS | 3 ME-109s | 2202 XV AF 31 Jul 44 |
| | 2 Lt Walter J. A. Palmer | 100 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2202 XV AF 31 Jul 44 |
| | 2 Lt Roger Romine | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| | Cpt Edward L. Toppins | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2484 XV AF 11 Aug 44* |
| | 2 Lt Hugh S. Warner | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| 20 Jul 1944 | Cpt Joseph D. Elsberry | 301 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2284 XV AF 3 Aug 44 |
| | 1 Lt Langdon E. Johnson | 100 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2202 XV AF 31 Jul 44 |
| | Cpt Armour G. McDaniel | 301 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2284 XV AF 3 Aug 44 |
| | Cpt Edward L. Toppins | 99 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2484 XV AF 11 Aug 44 |
| 25 Jul 1944 | 1 Lt Harold E. Sawyer | 301 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2284 XV AF 3 Aug 44 |
| 26 Jul 1944 | 1 Lt Freddie E. Hutchins | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| | 1 Lt Leonard M. Jackson | 99 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2484 XV AF 11 Aug 44 |
| | 2 Lt Roger Romine | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| | Cpt Edward L. Toppins | 99 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2484 XV AF 11 Aug 44 |
| 27 Jul 1944 | 1 Lt Edward C. Glead | 301 FS | 2 FW-190s | 2284 XV AF 3 Aug 44 |

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|-------------|----------------------------|--------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | 2 Lt Alfred M. Gorham | 301 FS | 2 FW-190s | 2284 XV AF 3 Aug 44 |
| | Cpt Claude B. Govan | 301 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2284 XV AF 3 Aug 44 |
| | 2 Lt Richard W. Hall | 100 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2485 XV AF 11 Aug 44 |
| | 1 Lt Leonard M. Jackson | 99 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2484 XV AF 11 Aug 44 |
| | 1 Lt Felix J. Kirkpatrick | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2350 XV AF 6 Aug 44 |
| 30 Jul 1944 | 2 Lt Carl E. Johnson | 100 FS | 1 RE-2001 | 2485 XV AF 11 Aug 44 |
| 14 Aug 1944 | 2 Lt George M. Rhodes Jr. | 100 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2831 XV AF 25 Aug 44 |
| 23 Aug 1944 | FO William L. Hill | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 3538 XV AF 21 Sep 44 |
| 24 Aug 1944 | 1 Lt John F. Briggs | 100 FS | 1 ME-109 | 3153 XV AF 6 Sep 44 |
| | 1 Lt Charles E. McGee | 302 FS | 1 FW-190 | 3174 XV AF 7 Sep 44 |
| | 1 Lt William H. Thomas | 302 FS | 1 FW-190 | 449 XV AF 31 Jan 45 |
| 12 Oct 1944 | 1 Lt Lee A. Archer | 302 FS | 3 ME-109s | 4287 XV AF 1 Nov 44 |
| | Cpt Milton R. Brooks | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 4287 XV AF 1 Nov 44 |
| | 1 Lt William W. Green Jr. | 302 FS | 1 HE-111 | 4287 XV AF 1 Nov 44 |
| | Cpt Wendell O. Pruitt | 302 FS | 1 HE-111 1 ME-109 | 4287 XV AF 1 Nov 44 |
| | 1 Lt Roger Romine | 302 FS | 1 ME-109 | 4287 XV AF 1 Nov 44 |
| | 1 Lt Luther H. Smith Jr. | 302 FS | 1 HE-111 | 4604 XV AF 21 Nov 44 |
| 16 Nov 1944 | Cpt Luke J. Weathers | 302 FS | 2 ME-109s | 4990 XV AF 13 Dec 44 |
| 16 Mar 1945 | 1 Lt William S. Price III | 301 FS | 1 ME-109 | 1734 XV AF 24 Mar 45 |
| 24 Mar 1945 | 2 Lt Charles V. Brantley | 100 FS | 1 ME-262 | 2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 1 Lt Roscoe C. Brown | 100 FS | 1 ME-262 | 2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 1 Lt Earl R. Lane | 100 FS | 1 ME-262 | 2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| 31 Mar 1945 | 2 Lt Raul W. Bell | 100 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 2 Lt Thomas P. Brasswell | 99 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2292 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 1 Lt Roscoe C. Brown | 100 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | Maj William A. Campbell | 99 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2292 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 2 Lt John W. Davis | 99 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2292 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 2 Lt James L. Hall | 99 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2292 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| 31 Mar 1945 | 1 Lt Earl R. Lane | 100 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | FO John H. Lyle | 100 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 1 Lt Daniel L. Rich | 99 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2292 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 2 Lt Hugh J. White | 99 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2292 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 1 Lt Robert W. Williams | 100 FS | 2 FW-190s | 2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 2 Lt Bertram W. Wilson Jr. | 100 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| 1 Apr 1945 | 2 Lt Carl E. Carey | 301 FS | 2 FW-190s | 2294 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 2 Lt John E. Edwards | 301 FS | 2 ME-109s | 2294 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | FO James H. Fischer | 301 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2294 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 2 Lt Walter P. Manning | 301 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2294 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 2 Lt Harold M. Morris | 301 FS | 1 FW-190 | 2294 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 1 Lt Harry T. Stewart | 301 FS | 3 FW-190s | 2294 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| | 1 Lt Charles L. White | 301 FS | 2 ME-109s | 2294 XV AF 12 Apr 45 |
| 15 Apr 1945 | 1 Lt Jimmy Lanham | 301 FS | 1 ME-109 | 3484 XV AF 29 May 45 |
| 26 Apr 1945 | 2 Lt Thomas W. Jefferson | 301 FS | 2 ME-109s | 3362 XV AF 23 May 45 |
| | 1 Lt Jimmy Lanham | 301 FS | 1 ME-109 | 3362 XV AF 23 May 45 |

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|--|------------------------|--------|----------|---------------------|
| | 2 Lt Richard A. Simons | 100 FS | 1 ME-109 | 2990 XV AF 4 May 45 |
|--|------------------------|--------|----------|---------------------|

*order says credit was 16 Jul 1944, but history says 18 Jul 1944

During World War II, the only African-American pilots in the Army Air Forces who flew in combat served in the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302nd Fighter Squadrons and the 332nd Fighter Group. None of these pilots earned more than four aerial victory credits. None of them became an ace, with at least five aerial victory credits. Were the Tuskegee Airmen who earned four aerial victory credits sent home in order to prevent a black pilot from becoming an ace?

That is very doubtful. 1st Lt. Lee Archer was deployed back to the United States the month after he scored his fourth aerial victory credit, and the same month he received his fourth aerial victory credit. Captain Edward Toppins was deployed back to the United States the second month after he scored his fourth aerial victory credit, and the month after he received credit for it. However, Captain Joseph Elsberry earned his fourth aerial victory credit in July 1944, and received credit for it early in August 1944. He did not redeploy to the United States until December 1944. If there was a policy of sending Tuskegee Airmen with four aerial victory credits home, in order to prevent a black man from becoming an ace, the case of Captain Joseph Elsberry contradicts it, because he was not sent home until four months after his fourth aerial victory credit was awarded, and five months after he scored it. It is more likely that the pilots who deployed back to the United States did so after having completed the number of missions they needed to finish their respective tours of duty.

TABLE V: TABLE OF TUSKEGEE AIRMEN WITH FOUR AERIAL VICTORIES

| Name and rank at time of fourth | Fighter Group | Fighter Squadron | Date of fourth aerial victory | Date of award of fourth aerial victory credit | Month of redeployment to the United States |
|---------------------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------------------|---|--|
|---------------------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------------------|---|--|

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|-------------------------------|-----|-----|-----------------|-------------|----------------|
| aerial victory credit | | | | | |
| 1 st Lt Lee Archer | 332 | 302 | 12 October 1944 | 1 Nov 1944 | November 1944 |
| Captain Joseph Elsberry | 332 | 301 | 20 July 1944 | 3 Aug 1944 | December 1944 |
| Captain Edward Toppins | 332 | 99 | 26 July 1944 | 11 Aug 1944 | September 1944 |

Sources: Fifteenth Air Force general orders awarding aerial victory credits; monthly histories of the 332d Fighter Group for August, September, October, November, and December 1944.

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The American Fighter Aces Association did honor Lee Archer one year, but did not in fact name him an ace. At the same meeting, Charlton Heston was honored, but he was not named an ace, either. Frank Olynyk, a historian for the American Fighter Aces Association, confirmed that the association never recognized Lee Archer as having shot down five enemy aircraft, and Olynyk's record agrees with that the Air Force Historical Research Agency: Lee Archer earned a total of four aerial victory credits.⁸

Before Lee Archer died in 2010, I had the opportunity to speak with him several times at various places. I first met him in Birmingham in February 2002 after a showing of a new film documentary about the Tuskegee Airmen, which former President George H. W. Bush also attended. I also got to see Archer at three consecutive national conventions of the Tuskegee Airmen, in Grapevine, Texas in 2007; in Philadelphia in 2008; and in Las Vegas in 2009. I also had the opportunity to meet with him when he came for the annual "Gathering of Eagles" sponsored by the Air Command and Staff College of Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base, where I work. Archer was recognized as one of the aviation heroes at no less than five of the Gathering of Eagles events, in 1995, 2002, 2003, 2006, and 2007. At the 2007 gathering, which

I attended, I heard a USAF officer describe the accomplishments of Lee Archer as a Tuskegee Airman. He said that Archer had shot down four enemy airplanes in combat, three on one day, and Archer smiled as the audience applauded. Before Lee Archer died, he was comfortable with the fact that the historical records show that he claimed and received credit for four aerial victory credits, and was not an ace after all.

¹ Fantasy of Flight website; USAF Historical Study 85 (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1978), p. 13.

² Oliver North, *War Stories III* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2005), p. 152.

³ Interview of Lee Archer by Dr. Lisa Bratton, conducted on 13 Mar 2001 in New York, NY, on file at the Air Force Historical Research Agency under call number K239.0512-2580, pp. 23-24.

⁴ Monthly histories of the 332nd Fighter Group, June 1944-April 1945; Fifteenth Air Force General Order 2350, dated 6 Aug 1944; Fifteenth Air Force General Order 4287 dated 1 Nov 1944.

⁵ 332nd Fighter Group narrative mission report 37 dated 26 July 1944.

⁶ Fifteenth Air Force General Order 2350 dated 6 Aug 1944; conversation of author with Dr. Frank Olynyk, historian of the American Fighter Aces Association.

⁷ Charles E. Francis, *The Tuskegee Airmen* (Boston: Bruce Humpries, Inc., 1955), pp. 92 and 194; 332nd Fighter Group mission report number 30, for 20 July 1944.

⁸ Interview of Lee Archer, by Dr. Lisa Bratton, conducted on 13 Mar 2001 in New York, NY, on file at the Air Force Historical Research Agency under the call number K239.0512-2580, pp. 23-24; conversations of Daniel Haulman with Frank Olynyk during several of the latter's research visits to the Air Force Historical Research Agency.