



Colonel Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr. was commander of the 332nd Fighter Group, composed entirely of Tuskegee Airmen. The character of Colonel A.J. Bullard, in the *Red Tails* film, is based on Davis.

After the Army and Air Force separated, into different branches of military service, Davis became the Air Force's first black general. In 1998, he received his fourth star.

A highly effective leader, Davis was born on December 18, 1912. When he was young, he took a ride in a barnstorming plane and was hooked. He wanted to be a pilot.

On 7 March 1942, he was the first officer to graduate from Tuskegee's aviation program. That education followed a stint at the University of Chicago, then four years at the U.S. Military Academy (West Point) where he was the only African-American. He was shunned, by his fellow cadets, the entire time. He won the respect of his classmates, however, as noted by this comment in West Point's 1936 yearbook:

*The courage, tenacity, and intelligence with which he conquered a problem incomparably more difficult than plebe year won for him the sincere admiration of his classmates, and his single-minded determination to continue in his chosen career cannot fail to inspire respect wherever fortune may lead him.*

Discrimination continued after his West Point graduation. Desiring to fly, he was rejected by the Army Air Corps because of his skin color.

One of only two black line officers in the entire Army Air Force - his father was the other - Davis was ultimately sent to Tuskegee, to teach military tactics. After the federal government allowed African-Americans to learn how to fly military planes, in the Tuskegee Experiment, Davis became a student, again, and was the first black officer to solo in a military plane.

Davis commanded the 332nd Fighter Group until the war was over. Thereafter, he assumed command of the 477th Bombardment Group - another all-black unit - which was based in Kentucky.

After President Truman desegregated the military, Davis helped to draft a plan which would implement the Executive Order in the Air Force.

Col. Davis served in Korea, during the Conflict in that country, and in various positions at the Pentagon (and overseas) for the next two decades. He retired from active duty on February 1, 1970 as a three-star general. President Clinton personally pinned-on his fourth star, nearly twenty years later - on December 9, 1998.

Later in his life, the General suffered from Alzheimer's Disease. He died, at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, on the 4th of July, 2002.

During his burial service - at Arlington National Cemetery - a red-tailed P-15 Mustang flew overhead.

Of Davis, President Clinton said:

*General Davis is here today as living proof that a person can overcome adversity and discrimination, achieve great things, turn skeptics into believers; and through example and perseverance, one person can bring truly extraordinary change.*

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Credits:

Image of Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr. online, courtesy National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institute.

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