



According to all reports, the men of the 332nd considered Wendell Pruitt the Fighter Group's best pilot. He was the other half - with Lt. Lee Archer - of the "Gruesome Twosome." Pruitt would fly lead; Archer would fly wingman.

The character Joe "Lightning" Little - in the film *Red Tails* - is based on Pruitt and his incredible flying abilities. Already a licensed pilot when he joined the Tuskegee Institute's aviation school, Pruitt had completed his private license at the same time as he was a university student. Civilian flying was fine, but Pruitt wanted to pilot military planes.

In October of 1944, after encountering a group of "bandits," Pruitt flew directly into the enemy-plane formation. Archer gives an extended account of Pruitt's actions on that day.

Before the war ended, Pruitt returned to the States to help train young pilots at Tuskegee. On the 20th of April, 1945 - ten days before Adolf Hitler shot himself, leading to the end of the war in Europe - a student pilot was practicing maneuvers with Pruitt aboard.

The plane crashed, near the Tuskegee field, killing both men. Investigators believed the cadet froze at a point where it was too late for Pruitt to resume control of the plane.

Pruitt was not supposed to be at Tuskegee that day. He would have been on his way to Europe had President Roosevelt not died eight days before (on the 12th of April, 1945).

This photo of Pruitt with his plane, the Alice-Jo - taken in November of 1944 - depicts the pilot giving his ring to his crew chief, Staff Sgt Samuel W. Jacobs. Pruitt reportedly did that before his flights since the ring was valuable and war flying was risky business.

To learn more about Captain Pruitt - and his ability as a pilot - watch this video from KETC, in St. Louis. It includes interviews with people who knew the skillful flier responsible for downing three enemy aircraft in the sky, taking-out eight enemy aircraft on the ground and participating in a ship attack resulting in destruction of the vessel.

Click on the image for a slightly better view.

Credits:

Photo of Captain Wendell O. Pruitt online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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Captain Wendell Pruitt

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