AWESOME stories

THE TUSKEGEE EXPERIMENT

0. THE TUSKEGEE EXPERIMENT - Story Preface

1. FIRST BLACK PILOTS

2. MILITARY SEGREGATION

3. THE TUSKEGEE EXPERIMENT

4. THE 99th PURSUIT SQUAD

5. RED TAIL ESCORTS

6. MEET the RED TAILS

African-Americans were not allowed to fly combat missions, for their country, until the "Tuskegee Airmen" changed history. Click on the image, of this headline, for a better view.

African-Americans who wanted to become military pilots were turned-down for most of the years between the two world wars. It wasn't just in the "Jim-Crow Era" South, where blacks faced discrimination. Even flight-training schools in the North did not readily admit black students.

Eugene Bullard - America's first black combat pilot who flew for France (in order to fly for the Allies during WWI) - could not serve as an American military pilot if he returned to the States. The color of his skin trumped his experience and ability (although the US Air Force appointed him a 2nd Lieutenant 33 years after his death).

As time passed, and the government kept denying blacks the right to fly for their country, African-Americans became civilian pilots instead. Charles Anderson, for example - America's first black transport pilot - had been a commercial flier since 1933. A man of few words, his favorite saying was:

Performance is the measure of merit.

By the time Eleanor Roosevelt took a ride in Anderson's Piper J-3 Cub, the Chief had already been at Tuskegee Institute for one year. He came to the school in 1940, at the request of Frederick Patterson (Tuskegee's president), to start Tuskegee's Civilian Pilot Training Program. (The U.S. government allowed six black colleges to join the Civilian Pilot Training Program in 1939.)

Soon the Chief had recruited four additional flight instructors: Milton P. Crenchaw (who is still alive), Charles Foxx (known as "Mr. Acrobatics"), Forrest Shelton (a white man who had helped to construct an airfield) and Richard Davis. If the federal government changed its policy - allowing black men to also train as *combat* pilots - Tuskegee was well-positioned to begin a new chapter in the school's history.

Ten days after Mrs. Roosevelt's visit, and her historic flight, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order - Number 8802 - authorizing full participation in U.S. defense programs, regardless of a person's race. This ... finally ... was the authority African-Americans needed to train as military pilots, and the Tuskegee Institute was ready to welcome them to Alabama.

White officers were sent to Tuskegee to supervise the training of pilots-in-the-making. One of those students was Captain Benjamin O. Davis (whose father was the first African-American general of the U.S. Army). One of those white officers was Noel Parrish, the commander of Tuskegee Army Air Field.

The black students greatly appreciated Parrish's fairness and encouragement.

Between 1941 and 1946, Charles Anderson was also part of the military-training team. The "Chief" worked with almost 1,000 students. It is for this reason that Anderson is called the "Father of Black Aviation."

Because he gave several interviews, which survive, we can "meet" the Chief today, even though he died (from cancer) in 1996.

With Anderson working hard as a Tuskegee instructor, the government created a new U.S. Army Air Corps Pursuit Squadron - the 99th. The first five cadets of the program - which was originally called the "Tuskegee Experiment" * but is also referred to as the "Tuskegee Experience" - graduated in 1942. They, and all those who followed - including everyone participating in flight training and maintenance - would be known as "Tuskegee Airmen."

Training to be a combat pilot - which takes place in a flight school - is one thing. *Being* a combat pilot - which takes place in a war zone - is something else.

The federal government did not authorize black combat trainees to become black combat pilots with experience until more time passed. A single Executive Order, issued by the President, could not erase a very long history of discrimination against African-Americans.

It wasn't until 1943 that the 99th flew its first combat sortie, in Europe. Let's follow the squadron's path, to see what happened.

* The "Tuskegee Experiment" for flight training and maintenance is not to be confused with the infamous "Tuskegee Experiment" for studying patients with syphilis. The former was public; the latter was hidden.

Forty years after the medical "experiment" about "Bad Blood" began, Jean Heller revealed its existence to the public. People were stunned to learn the federal government, via the U.S. Public Health Service, had authorized a program to study individuals who were ill without telling them (the truth about their conditions) or treating them (with anything that would help). Part of the "experiment" was to study the effects of untreated syphilis on the human body (including at autopsy examinations).

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-TUSKEGEE-EXPERIMENT-Red-Tails

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/THE-TUSKEGEE-EXPERIMENT-Red-Tails

Questions 2 Ponder

Is Performance the Measure of Merit?

For many decades, after the Wright Brothers invented powered flight, the U.S. federal government would not allow African-Americans to become U.S. military pilots.

Charles Anderson, known as the “Father of Black Aviation,” became a flight instructor for potential black military pilots when the government finally allowed an experimental flight-school program in Tuskegee, Alabama. He eventually worked with nearly 1,000 students.

“The Chief,” as Anderson was known - because he had so many logged hours as a pilot - said that “Performance is the measure of merit.” What does this mean to you?

Is there any situation you can envision when performance would not be the measure of merit? If so, when would that be?

What Qualifies as “Too Little, Too Late?”

The U.S. government denied Eugene Bullard the right to fly for his country during World War One. More than three decades after Bullard’s death, the U.S. government made Bullard an officer of the military when he was posthumously appointed as a 2nd Lieutenant.

By refusing Bullard’s request to fly for America, the government forced him to make other choices. He made the choice to fly for France. Do you think that was a good choice, on Bullard’s part? Why, or why not?

What was the U.S. government trying to accomplish by making Bullard an officer, via his 2nd Lieutenant appointment, thirty-three years after the pilot’s death?

Was the government action “too little, too late?” Why, or why not?

What Kind of Courage Does It Take to Be a Whistle Blower?

The U.S. federal government instituted a program, known as the “Tuskegee Experiment,” to study the effects of not treating African-Americans who had an illness called syphilis. This is a serious illness which worsens without treatment.

People conducting the program failed to tell the patients that they had the disease. They also failed to tell the patients that the program was purposefully withholding treatment so scientists could study how treatment versus non-treatment impacted the disease in human beings.

It took forty years before someone revealed the truth of the government’s actions in the “Tuskegee Experiment.”

What kind of courage would it take to “blow the whistle” on such an “experiment?”

Does it - or should it - make a difference when a potential whistle blower has uncovered what the government is up to in such an “experiment?” Why, or why not?

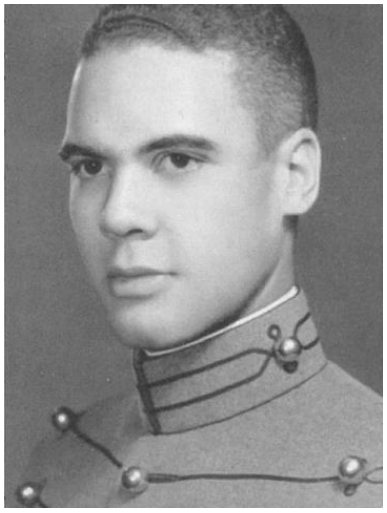
Do governments, which are entrusted with the public safety and well-being, have a heightened responsibility not to mistreat people by beginning and continuing such “experiments?” Why, or why not?

Do private companies, which produce goods and services, also have a responsibility not to conduct

“experiments” which harm anyone? Would it be easier, or not easier, to “blow the whistle” on a private company? Explain your answer.

Media Stream

Charles "Chief" Anderson
Image of Charles Anderson, online courtesy Tuskegee Institute.
View this asset at: http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Charles-Chief-Anderson



Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. - Flight Student
Image of Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., as a West Point cadet, in 1936. Online, courtesy US Army.
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Benjamin-O.-Davis-Jr.-Flight-Student

Noel Parrish - Tuskegee Air Field Commander
Photo of Colonel Noel Parrish, online courtesy Library of Congress.
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Noel-Parrish-Tuskegee-Air-Field-Commander

Racial Discrimination - Separate Restrooms
Photo of the Manchester, Georgia railroad station by John Vachon (on behalf of the Farm Security Administration). Image online, courtesy Library of Congress. LOC Reproduction Number LC-USF33-001172-M4 (8-4)
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Racial-Discrimination-Separate-Restrooms

Eugene Bullard - French Pilot's License

Image of Eugene Bullard's France-issued pilot's license and ID card. Online, courtesy Air Force Enlisted Heritage Hall, Maxwell AFB.

View this asset at:

http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Eugene-Bullard-French-Pilot-s-License

"Negro Pilots" - Tuskegee Experiment

"Negro Pilots," a war-era documentary produced on behalf of the U.S. government. Online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at:

http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/-Negro-Pilots-Tuskegee-Experiment