

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 28, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to respectfully request the issuance of a Presidential Proclamation establishing the 4th Thursday in March as National Tuskegee Airmen Commemoration Day.

The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of black pilots, aircrew, ground crew, and support personnel of the U.S. Army Air Corps who fought in World War II. As the first African American flying units in the U.S. military, their many successes paved the way for the desegregation of the U.S. military, which started in 1948 when President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981.¹

The history of the Tuskegee Airmen dates back to World War I, when African American men attempted to serve in U.S. air units but were denied entry.² Early African American aviators like Eugene Bullard, Cornelius Coffey, and James Banning had to persevere beyond the unjust race-based policies in the U.S. military and discrimination in civilian aviation.³ Unfortunately, the lack of a robust civilian aviation training apparatus available to African Americans meant access to military aviation opportunities was additionally circumscribed. By 1939, only 25 African Americans were licensed pilots in the United States.⁴ This stark inequity finally forced Congress to act. On June 27, 1939, Congress passed the Civilian Pilot Training Act, which prohibited exclusion based on race from federally funded pilot training programs.⁵ Six black colleges participated in the program: Hampton Institute, Howard University, North Carolina A&T, Delaware State College for Colored Students, Tuskegee Institute, and West Virginia State College.⁶ These necessary advancements in Black aviation laid the groundwork for the extraordinary achievements of African American aviators in World War II.

The illustrious service record of the Tuskegee Airmen began on March 19, 1941, when the United States Army Air Corps officially constituted the 99th Pursuit Squadron as the first all-Black combat squadron in the United States Armed Forces.⁷ The squadron was trained at the newly constructed Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, a few miles away from the Tuskegee Institute.⁸ By June 1943, the renamed 99th Fighter Squadron was flying combat missions over Sicily and the Mediterranean, supporting Allied bombers, naval formations, and

¹ F. Michael Higginbotham, *Soldiers for Justice: The Role of the Tuskegee Airmen in the Desegregation of the American Armed Forces*, 8 Wm. & Mary Bill Rts. J. 273 (2000)

² Francis, Charles E.; Caso, Adolph (1997). *The Tuskegee Airmen: The Men Who Changed a Nation*. Boston: Branden Books.

³ Id.

⁴ Daniel L. Haulman, "Tuskegee Airmen Chronology," Organizational History Branch, Air Force Historical Research Agency, May 11, 2016. Accessed February 8, 2023.

https://www.tuskegeeairmen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/TAI_Resources_TUSKEGEE-AIRMEN-CHRONOLOGY.pdf

⁵ Francis & Caso 1997

⁶ Haulman 2016

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

other offensives. The Tuskegee Airmen scored several aerial victories against German FW-190s, BF-109s, and ME-262s, eventually earning three Distinguished Unit Citations in combat missions over the Mediterranean and Central Europe.⁹ By World War II's end, three other all-black fighter squadrons were activated, all under the 332nd Fighter Group, as well as the 477th Bombardment Group flying B-25 medium bombers.¹⁰ Despite their successes, the Tuskegee Airmen endured extreme adversity, including notably prejudiced and unsuccessful attempts to disband the 332nd Fighter Group.¹¹ The Tuskegee Airmen would fly over 15,000 combat sorties in World War II and receiving 744 air medal, including 96 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 14 Bronze Stars, and 8 Purple Hearts.¹²¹³¹⁴

As World War II drew to a close, the Tuskegee Airmen in the 477th Bombardment Group staged a nonviolent demonstration to desegregate the officer's club at Freeman Field, Indiana.¹⁵ Their demonstration for racial equity, staged between April 5-6, 1945, would prove to be a catalyst for the eventual desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces.¹⁶ After the war, the Tuskegee Airmen won one last aerial victory in 1949 when they won the first ever U.S. Air Force Aerial Gunnery Competition (propeller), now known as "Top Gun," beating the best pilots in the U.S. Air Force.¹⁷ By July of 1949, the 332nd Fighter Group, the 477th Bombardment Group, and all other all-black aviation units of the U.S. Air Force were deactivated as the U.S. military finally moved toward full racial integration.¹⁸

The Tuskegee Airmen achieved unparalleled success, not just for their martial excellence but for their grit and determination as a trailblazing unit that would prove segregation a failed and unjust policy. Their legacy requires the kind of recognition only a Presidential Proclamation could provide. Such a proclamation should honor their accomplishments but also recognize that the work of making the U.S. Armed Forces more representative must continue.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Daniel L. Haulman, "Nine Myths About the Tuskegee Airmen," Organizational Histories Branch, Air Force Historical Research Agency, March 17, 2014. Accessed online February 8, 2023.

<https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/AFD-141119-026.pdf>

¹² Allison Keyes, "The Soaring Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 24, 2021. Accessed online February 13, 2023. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/wing-war-ii-training-aircraft-legacy-tuskegee-airmen-180977313/>

¹³ Higginbotham 2000

¹⁴ United States Air Force Academy, "USAF Celebrates Tuskegee Airmen," May 2, 2018. Accessed online February 13, 2023. <https://www.usafa.edu/usafa-celebrates-tuskegee-airmen/>

¹⁵ Michael Hankins, "Mutiny at Freeman Field: The Tuskegee Armen on Trial, Part 2," *National Air and Space Museum*, June 9, 2020. Accessed online February 13, 2023. <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/mutiny-freeman-field-tuskegee-airmen-trial-part-2>

¹⁶ Ko Lyn Cheang, "In 1945, Black officers entered a 'white only' club in Indiana, forever changing the Army," *Indianapolis Star*, March 30, 2022. Accessed online February 13, 2023.

<https://www.indystar.com/story/news/local/2022/03/30/freeman-field-mutiny-tuskegee-airmen-world-war-ii-army-segregation/7002177001/>

¹⁷ 57th Wing Public Affairs, "'Mission Accomplished' – Tuskegee Airmen Recognized for 1949 Top Gun Victory," January 13, 2022. Accessed February 8, 2023. <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2900145/mission-accomplished-tuskegee-airmen-recognized-for-1949-top-gun-victory/>

¹⁸ Haulman 2016

Sincerely,



Lisa Blunt Rochester
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



André Carson
Member of Congress




Deborah K. Ross
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Gwen S. Moore
Member of Congress



Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick
Member of Congress



Dwight Evans
Member of Congress



Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress



Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress



Shontel M. Brown
Member of Congress



Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress