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The Tuskegee Airmen

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

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The Tuskegee Airmen were the first African American military pilots. They served during World War II. At the time the war began, the US military was segregated. Due to Jim Crow laws, Black and White troops served in separate platoons. Not only that, Black men generally held lower-level positions. Many officers didn't believe Black men were fit to go to war. In 1925, the Army War College released a report saying that Black soldiers lacked the bravery, character, physical prowess, and intelligence of their White peers. This report was used to justify preventing Black servicemen from advancing to higher-level roles. The Army Air Corps (the predecessor to the Air Force) was completely closed off to Black Americans, who were not allowed to train or serve as army pilots at all. After World War II began in Europe, the Air Corps decided to accept Black Americans. Black pilots would train at the Tuskegee Institute, a Black college in Alabama founded by Booker T. Washington. Tuskegee was chosen for its commitment to aeronautical engineering and education, as well as its Southern climate, which was ideal for flying year-round.

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Some thought the Tuskegee program didn't go far enough. While allowing Black men to join the Air Corps was a win, many civil rights leaders had hoped for full integration of the military, not just another segregated unit. They pointed out the hypocrisy of asking Black Americans to fight for democracy in Europe when their own country didn't treat them as equal citizens. In January 1942, 26-year-old James G. Thompson sent a letter to the editor of the Pittsburgh Courier, a widely read Black newspaper. He wrote, "Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life? Is the kind of America I know worth defending? Will America be a true and pure democracy after this war? Will colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past?" The Courier built on Thompson's letter and launched the "Double V Campaign," which called for a double victory for democracy abroad and at home.

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On March 7, 1942, the first class of cadets graduated from Tuskegee Army Air Field, becoming the nation's first Black military pilots. At this point, the Air Corps still considered the Tuskegee school more of an "experiment" than a serious military mission. They had no plans to actually deploy the Tuskegee pilots in combat. The War Department deployed the 99th Fighter Squadron, led by Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., to Tunisia. North Africa was far from the main action of the war, so the 99th rarely had a chance to interact with enemy planes. They were also given outdated equipment that didn't work properly. Because they had downed so few enemy planes, some military supervisors thought the Tuskegee Airmen were cowardly and not fit for combat. One even recommended the Airmen be sent home and demoted to lower-level positions.

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Eventually, the 99th Fighter Squadron was assigned to escort and protect bomber planes flown by White pilots across the Mediterranean. They performed so well that other White bomber pilots began to request their escorts, too. Thanks to this success, the 99th expanded and joined with three other Black squadrons, becoming part of the larger 332nd Fighter Group, which was based in Italy. Because the tails of their P-51 fighter planes were painted red, they were often referred to as the Red Tails. They became known for bravely and effectively protecting bombers from attack. In one famed mission, the Red Tails became the first American pilots to down a Nazi jetfighter (previous warplanes had been propeller-driven). For this, the Red Tails received a Distinguished Unit Citation.

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Not all Tuskegee Airmen were sent abroad. Some were assigned to the 477th Bomb Group at Selfridge Field, Michigan. The top officials at the base were not happy with the idea of African American pilots. They worked actively to create a racist environment where Black officers were not given a chance to rise in the ranks. They also did not allow Black officers to enter the base officers' club. Later, the 477th was transferred to Freeman Field, Indiana, where they again faced racism. Over 100 Black pilots planned a civil disobedience campaign to protest their discriminatory treatment and were arrested. With the attention of the NAACP and local reporters, the Mutiny at Freeman Field made its way to President Truman, and the arrested officials were released. 50 years later, they were officially exonerated.

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From 1941 to 1946, 996 Black pilots graduated from Tuskegee Army Air Field. Over 10,000 Black Americans worked to support the pilots as mechanics, supply clerks, nurses, doctors, cooks, and more. A number of the Tuskegee Airmen went on to longer careers in the military. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. became the first Black general of the new US Air Force. Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr. became the nation's first Black four-star general in 1975. In 2007, the surviving Tuskegee Airmen received the Congressional Gold Medal from President George W. Bush. In 2009, the pilots and support crew were invited to attend the inauguration of the first Black president, Barack Obama. Surpassing all of their military successes, the greatest victory of the Tuskegee Airmen was their fight against institutional racism. Through their actions on and off the field, they compelled the nation to rethink its positions on liberty and equality. Their accomplishments played a huge role in desegregating the military in the 1950s. The tactics of civil disobedience and connecting with activist organizations and the press paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement that firmly took hold 20 years after the war. They are still effective ways to create change in this country.

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