

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides monthly, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All italicized text/block quotes in this document are taken directly from historical publications with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

Tuskegee Airmen



The Tuskegee Airmen were the first African Americans to fly planes in the U.S. military.

The members of the 332nd Fighter Group, the 99th Fighter Squadron and 477th Composite (Bomber) Group during World War II are remembered in part because they were the only African American pilots who served in combat with the Army Air Forces during World War II. Because they trained in Tuskegee, Alabama, they are sometimes called the Tuskegee Airmen.

In 1938, with Europe on the brink of another great war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced he would expand the civilian pilot training program in the United States. At the time, racial segregation remained the rule in the U.S. armed forces, as well as in much of the country.

In 1940, Congress passed the [Selective Service Act](#), which contained sections regarding discrimination.

to the discrimination question. Section 3 (a) provided that “within the limits of the quota determined . . . any person, regardless of race or color, . . . shall be afforded an opportunity to volunteer for induction. . . .” Section 4 (a) was more explicit: “In the selection and training of men under this Act, and in the interpretation and execution of the provisions of this Act, there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color.”³

Following this act, the U.S. Government created an all-black squadron and chose the prestigious Tuskegee Institute, founded by Booker T. Washington, as the airmen’s training site. After pilot cadets passed primary flight training at Tuskegee Institute’s Moton Field, they transferred to the Tuskegee Army Airfield (TAAF) to complete their training with the Army Air Corps. TAAF was a full-scale military base (albeit segregated) built by the U.S. military.

The program’s trainees, nearly all of them college graduates or undergraduates, came from all over the country, and 12 Iowa natives became part of the famed Tuskegee Airmen of World War II.

William V. Bibb (Ottumwa)
James E. Bowman (Des Moines)
Russell L. Collins (Cedar Rapids)
Maurice V. Esters (Webster City)
Joseph P. Gomer (Iowa Falls)
Robert L. Martin (Dubuque)
George R. Miller (Des Moines)
Clarence A. Oliphant (Council Bluffs)
Robert M. Parkey (Des Moines)
Luther H. Smith (Des Moines)
Thurman E. Spriggs (Des Moines)
Robert W. Williams (Ottumwa)

In all, 992 men earned pilots’ wings at the TAAF.

The pilots flew P-51 Mustangs to escort the heavy bombers of the 15th Air Force during raids deep into enemy territory. The tails of their planes were painted red for identification purposes, earning them the enduring nickname "Red Tails."

After their brave service, the Tuskegee Airmen returned home to a country where they continued to face systemic racism and prejudice. But they did represent an important step forward in preparing the nation for the racial integration of the military, which began with President Harry Truman who issued [Executive Order 9981](#) on July 26, 1948. The measure desegregated the U.S. Armed Forces and mandated equality of opportunity and treatment.

In 2002, The Iowa Tuskegee Airmen Memorial was dedicated to honor the Iowans who served in the all-black fighter groups during World War II. The memorial, a P-51D Mustang replica painted in the "Red Tail" colors, is displayed at the entrance of the 132nd Fighter Wing, Iowa Air National Guard airbase in Des Moines, Iowa.



The P-51D Mustang replica stands outside the front gate of the 132nd Wing in Des Moines, Iowa.
(U.S. Air National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. Michael J. Kelly)

In 2003, the Iowa House of Representatives also recognized the achievements of the Iowans who served as Tuskegee Airmen with [House Resolution 18](#).

From the House Journal of the 79th General Assembly in 2003

HOUSE RESOLUTION NO. ____

BY FORD, MILLER, and BERRY

A Resolution recognizing the significant achievements of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II and the involvement of Iowans in those achievements and expressing appreciation on behalf of the citizens of this state.

WHEREAS, even with the World War I record of accomplishment by the graduate black U.S. Army officers of Fort Des Moines' 17th Provisional Training Regiment, racist beliefs persisted within the military, as shown by an Army War College study in 1925 that concluded that "blacks lacked intelligence and were cowardly under combat conditions"; and

WHEREAS, in spite of the prevalence of racism in this country at the time, the first training facility for black combat pilots was implemented at Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama, from 1941=1945; and

WHEREAS, of the 992 graduate airmen who became the 99th Fighter Squadron, 332nd Fighter Group, and 477th Composite (Bomber) Group, 450 saw combat during World War II, including 200 escort missions without losing a bomber to enemy fighter planes; however, 66 airmen lost their lives in combat or accidents; and

WHEREAS, Iowa had 12 graduate airmen, including several of the most notable and a number of others who trained but were "washed out", often for unjust reasons; and

WHEREAS, Iowa's initial connection to the airmen was the design of Moton Field at Tuskegee by prominent black engineer, Archie Alexander, who was a native of Ottumwa and a graduate of the University of Iowa; and

WHEREAS, the War Department's civilian pilot training program refused to admit black pilots until licensed pilot and Howard University student Yancy Williams filed suit forcing the Army Air Corps Department to admit blacks to the pilot training program, and in spite of its location in the racially segregated deep south, Tuskegee Institute was selected as the site for the training at Moton Field; and

WHEREAS, in April 1943, when the 99th Fighter Squadron deployed to North Africa where allied troops were battling German and Italian forces in the desert and assumed the Red Tail as their unit color designation, Iowans Maurice Esters, Joseph Gomer, and Luther Smith were part of the first deployment and the "Red Tail Angels" quickly earned a reputation for ferocity in air combat; and

WHEREAS, between 1943 and 1945, the Tuskegee Airmen flew 15,533 sorties over North Africa, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Germany, and in addition to the 200 flawless bomber escort missions, the airmen destroyed or damaged 409 enemy aircraft and ground targets and sank a German destroyer, and the six Iowans who experienced combat flew over 400 combat missions and won numerous decorations; and

WHEREAS, although a half-century has passed, little recognition has been made of the Tuskegee Airmen's perseverance and sacrifice through an incredibly difficult period in American history, and of how these individuals have continued to contribute to the growth of the nation in careers as physicians, engineers, educators, and a variety of other distinguished professions; NOW THEREFORE,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, That the House of Representatives recognizes the extraordinary achievements of the Iowans who served as Tuskegee Airmen, as representative of all who served as Tuskegee Airmen, and expresses the grateful appreciation of the citizens of this state for that service; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That the Chief Clerk of the House of Representatives shall provide an official copy of this resolution to the Iowans who brought distinction to themselves and to this state by serving as Tuskegee Airmen.

In 2006, the 12 Iowa Tuskegee Airmen were inducted into the Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame in Greenfield, Iowa, and in 2007, all the Tuskegee airmen were honored with the Congressional Gold Medal by President George W. Bush. While in their 80s, five Iowa Tuskegee Airmen attended the ceremony in Washington, D.C. – James Bowman, Luther Smith, Joseph Gomer, Robert Martin, and Thurman Spriggs. As of 2018, all of the Iowa Tuskegee Airmen are deceased.



From left, Maurice V. Esters (Webster City), Joseph P. Gomer (Iowa Falls), Luther H. Smith (Des Moines), and an unknown airman.



From left, Russell L Collins (Cedar Rapids), William V. Bibb (Ottumwa), and Thurman E. Spriggs (Des Moines).



James Bowman, Robert Martin, Joseph Gomer and George Miller sit during the George Washington Carver Medal ceremony at Simpson College on Feb. 23, 2010. The event honored the Iowa-born Tuskegee Airmen.

Photo By Michael Rolands, MICHAEL ROLANDS/RECORD-HERALD