AWESOME stories

RED TAIL ESCORTS

0. RED TAIL ESCORTS - Story Preface

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Colin Parker created this painting depicting Lt. Lee Archer flying his "Red Tail" Mustang P-51C. Archer, a Tuskegee Airman, is escorting a squadron of B-17f bombers flying a mission in Europe during WWII. Prints of this work are available for purchase via Fine Art America. Copyright Colin Parker, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with Parker's work.

Knowing that his men needed to work hard and produce results, Col. Davis returned to Europe as commander of the 332nd Fighter Group. To avoid repositioning from forward combat to a rear area, his pilots needed to wrack-up impressive statistics.

One of their supporters was Lt. General Ira Eaker, senior American airman in the Mediterranean area. It was his opinion that "90 percent of the trouble with Negro troops was the fault of the whites."

Col. Davis knew, however, that whatever opinions anyone had about fault (or lack thereof), nothing counted as much as results. His pilots' own actions would decide their fate, and they had been through a *really* bad dry spell. In six months of flying nearly 1,400 sorties, during 225 missions, they hadn't downed a single German plane.

It was time for a radical change. The Tuskegee airmen needed orders to fly where German planes were lurking, then take them out. When those orders came, the pilots did not disappoint their leader, Col. Davis:

- Members of the 99th (now called a "Fighter" instead of a "Pursuit" Squadron) participated in "Operation Shingle," the attack on Anzio, Italy (before they joined the 332nd Flighter Group). Flying P-40 Warhawks, they took-out twelve enemy planes between the 27th and 28th of January, 1944. One American pilot was also lost.

- After moving to Ramitelli - located on the Adriatic side of Italy, near Termoli - the 332nd received new planes. Now flying P-51 Mustangs (in addition to P-47 Thunderbolts), they could provide up to sixty-four pilots for escort missions. It was at Ramitelli where they met Toni Frissell (the famous photographer), painted the tails of their planes red and sometimes shared the runway with local goats.

- Assigned to the 15th U.S. Army Air Force, black pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group provided escort services to seventeen Bomber Groups. Those bomb crews (usually numbering ten or eleven per plane) flew B-17s ("Flying Fortresses") and B-24s ("Liberators").

- Escorting bombers - during long-distance air raids over France, Germany, Yugoslavia, Austria, Romania and Greece - became the 332nd's primary responsibility. During two days in March of 1944, black pilots flying P-51s shot-down twenty-five German fighters.

White bomber pilots began to notice that red-tailed planes were providing effective escort help. They did not "peel away," to engage German fighters, leaving the bombers unprotected. They did not appear to be searching for individual glory. Soon bomb crews referred to the 332nd pilots as "Red-Tailed Angels."

During March of 1945, Allied bombers undertook a long and dangerous mission to Berlin. They had to fly about 1600 miles to reach the Daimler Benz tank factory near the German capital. Led by Colonel Davis himself, until his plane developed engine trouble before reaching Berlin, the Red Tails escorted the bombers on the round-trip journey.

The flight to Berlin was relatively uneventful until the bombers neared the target. Suddenly, unbelievably fast German planes approached the Americans. They were Messerschmitt 262s - jets, in other words - which could fly at least 100 miles an hour faster than their opponents.

Although speed gave an ME- 262 the advantage, it also gave it less maneuverability. The Red Tails were able to down three 262s - which were made underground, largely by slave labor from a nearby concentration camp - during the successful bomb run to Berlin.

Because of their incredible escort performance, during the long trip to Berlin, everyone in the 332nd received a Presidential Unit Citation.

By the end of the war, African-American pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group had accumulated impressive statistics:

- Exploding one Italian-Destroyer-turned-German-Torpedo ship (in the Adriatic Sea, near Trieste);
- Shooting-down 109 planes in the air (including the three ME-262 jets);
- Destroying more than 140 German and Italian planes on the ground.

In the process, the Group lost sixty-six pilots who were killed in action and more than thirty pilots who became prisoners of war (after bailing-out over enemy territory).

Who were these men who answered *TIME* magazine's question:

Is the Negro as good a soldier [or pilot] *as the white man?*

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

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/RED-TAIL-ESCORTS-Red-Tails

Questions 2 Ponder

Is It Always True that "Results Count?"

During World War II, heavy bombers needed escort planes to keep the bombers safe. Sometimes the flights were very long before the bombers could reach the target area.

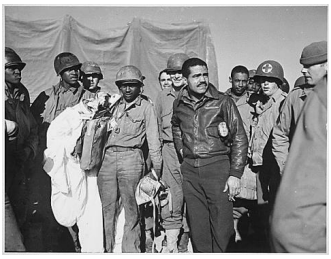
Often, during bomb-run missions, escort pilots would "peel away" to engage the enemy. If an escort pilot could destroy the enemy plane, it would increase their personal numbers, improving their personal status as a pilot.

When the Tuskegee Airmen were given escort responsibilities, they painted the tails of their planes red. Bomber crews noticed that the red-tailed escorts stayed with the bombers instead of peeling-away, leaving the bombers vulnerable. Bomb crews began to refer to their escorts as "Red-Tailed Angels."

Escorting bombers, during World War II, was a very significant job. Do you think the assignment of this responsibility to the Tuskegee Airmen was an honor? Why, or why not?

Why do you think the Red Tails stayed in position, as bomber escorts, instead of leaving their position to engage with enemy planes?

Media Stream

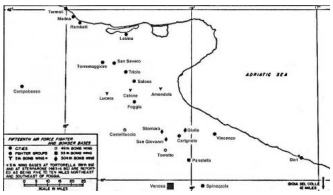


Tuskegee Airmen at Anzio
Photo of Tuskegee Airmen - from Record Group 80: General Records of the Department of the Navy - circa February 1944, online courtesy U.S. National Archives. Image: ARC Identifier 520597.
View this asset at: http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Tuskegee-Airmen-at-Anzio



Tuskegee Airmen - P-40 Warhawks

Image of P-40 Warhawks, in flight, online courtesy National Museum of the U.S. Air Force.
View this asset at: http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Tuskegee-Airmen-P-40-Warhawks



Red Tails - Ramitelli Air Base

Map location of Ramitelli Air Base, from the U.S. Air Force, online via Wikimedia Commons.
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Red Tails - Ramitelli Runway

Image of Ramitelli, from 2006, online courtesy ronald_athome's photostream at Flickr. Copyright, ronald_athome, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes.
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Toni Frissell - Photographer of the Tuskegee Airmen

Photo of Toni Frissell from the Toni Frissell Collection at the Library of Congress. Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.
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Red Tails - Ramitelli Air Base with Goats and P-51 Mustangs

Photo of Ramitelli Air Base, and P-51 Mustangs, by Toni Frissell - March, 1945. Photo online, courtesy Library of Congress.
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Red-Tails-Ramitelli-Air-Base-with-Goats-and-P-51-Mustangs



Red Tails - Pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group

Photo of 322nd Fighter Group briefing mission by Toni Frissell, March 1945, online courtesy Library of Congress.
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Red-Tails-Pilots-of-the-332nd-Fighter-Group



Red Tails - Leaving the Parachute Room

Photo from the Toni Frissell Collection at the Library of Congress. Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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Redtails and the Bomb Run to Berlin

Photo from the Toni Frissell Collection at the Library of Congres. Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

View this asset at: http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Redtails-and-the-Bomb-Run-to-Berlin



Red Tails - Messerschmitt 262 Jet

Photo of Me262A, online courtesy *Bundesarchiv - Bild* (picture) 141-2497.

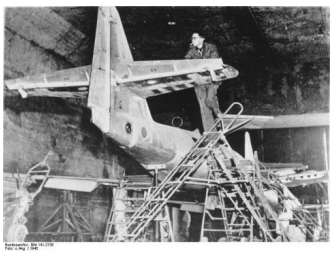
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Red Tails - Messerschmitt 262 Cockpit

Photo of Me 262 cockpit, online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

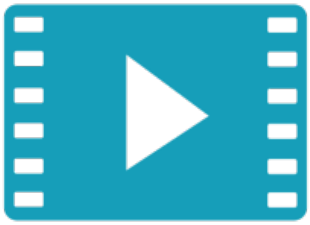
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Production of Messerschmitt 262 - Underground

Photo of Me262, being built underground, online courtesy *Bundesarchiv - Bild* (picture) 141-2738.

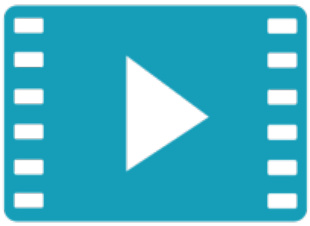
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Operation Shingle - 99th Pursuit Squad

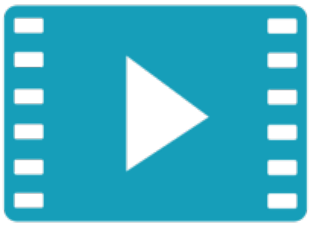
Clip of historical footage from "Operation Shingle: Beachhead Anzio," released in 1963, online via YouTube.

View this asset at: http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Operation-Shingle-99th-Pursuit-Squad



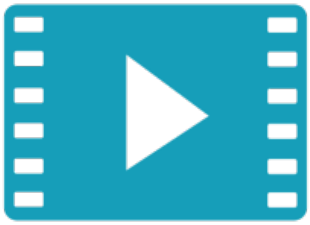
Distinguished Flying Crosses - 332nd Fighter Group

Clip online, courtesy Archive.org.
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Distinguished-Flying-Crosses-332nd-Fighter-Group



Red Tails - Escort Missions

Clip from "On Freedom's Wings: Bound for Glory," online via Principal Media (formerly Shankly Productions). Copyright, Principal Media (Shankly Productions), all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes.
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German Planes in Combat - WWII

Combat-gun footage from a BF110, online courtesy Deutsches Bundesarchiv.
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