

# B-25s Recall Struggle of African-American Airmen

By Thom Wilborn

**A**s the DAV-sponsored B-25 bombers Panchito and Special Delivery soar the skies above our nation, they celebrate the spirit and courage of the thousands of men who made aviation history during World War II. Among them were the Tuskegee Airmen who flew bombers, not fighters, and took a defiant stand to end segregation in the military.

“The DAV is dedicated to ensuring the service and sacrifice of all veterans are remembered by a grateful public,” said Washington Headquarters Executive Director David W. Gorman. “As we salute African-American History Month in February, we pay tribute to the men and women who not only fought for freedom, but also for respect and equality.”

During World War II, the famed training field at Tuskegee, Ala., turned out more pilots than it had planes. Of 992 pilots who graduated, 450 served overseas in four

fighter squadrons. Many of the remaining pilots were assigned to the 477th Medium Bombardment Group, which was later made into the 477th Composite Group which included, P-47 Thunderbolt fighters, complimented by B-25 Mitchell bombers. Activated on Jan. 15, 1944, at Selfridge Army Air Field in Michigan, those in the unit had high hopes, but were given little in the way of training or support.

Howard Baugh, a member of DAV Chapter 17 in Richmond, Va., flew combat missions in Italy and returned home to train bomber crews at Tuskegee. “I had an opportunity to expand my experience by getting checked out in a two-engine airplane—the B-25—so I took advantage of that,” he said. “Then I became a B-25 cadet instructor, and later the director of that training program. I enjoyed it.

The B-25 was a great airplane. It didn’t have the speed and altitude of the P-51 I had flown, but it had the comfort of two engines.”

Baugh said the B-25s he flew would cruise at about 200 miles per hour. “You could trim it up and fly it without a whole lot of pressure,” he said. “It didn’t have an autopilot, so it was a hands-on airplane.

It was an easy airplane to fly, once you knew how to fly it.”

William Broadwater, a member of Chapter 17 in Camp Springs, Md., was trained to fly B-25s. He first flew the PT-17 Stearman, AT-6 Texan and finally the B-25. Others flew the two-engine AT-10 Wichita trainers, which cadets called the “Bamboo Bomber” because it was made of wood covered with neoprene, a synthetic rubber. He graduated to the B-25J models, the same as Panchito and Special Delivery. “The B-25J was a pretty neat aircraft,” he said. “It had 14 guns on it.

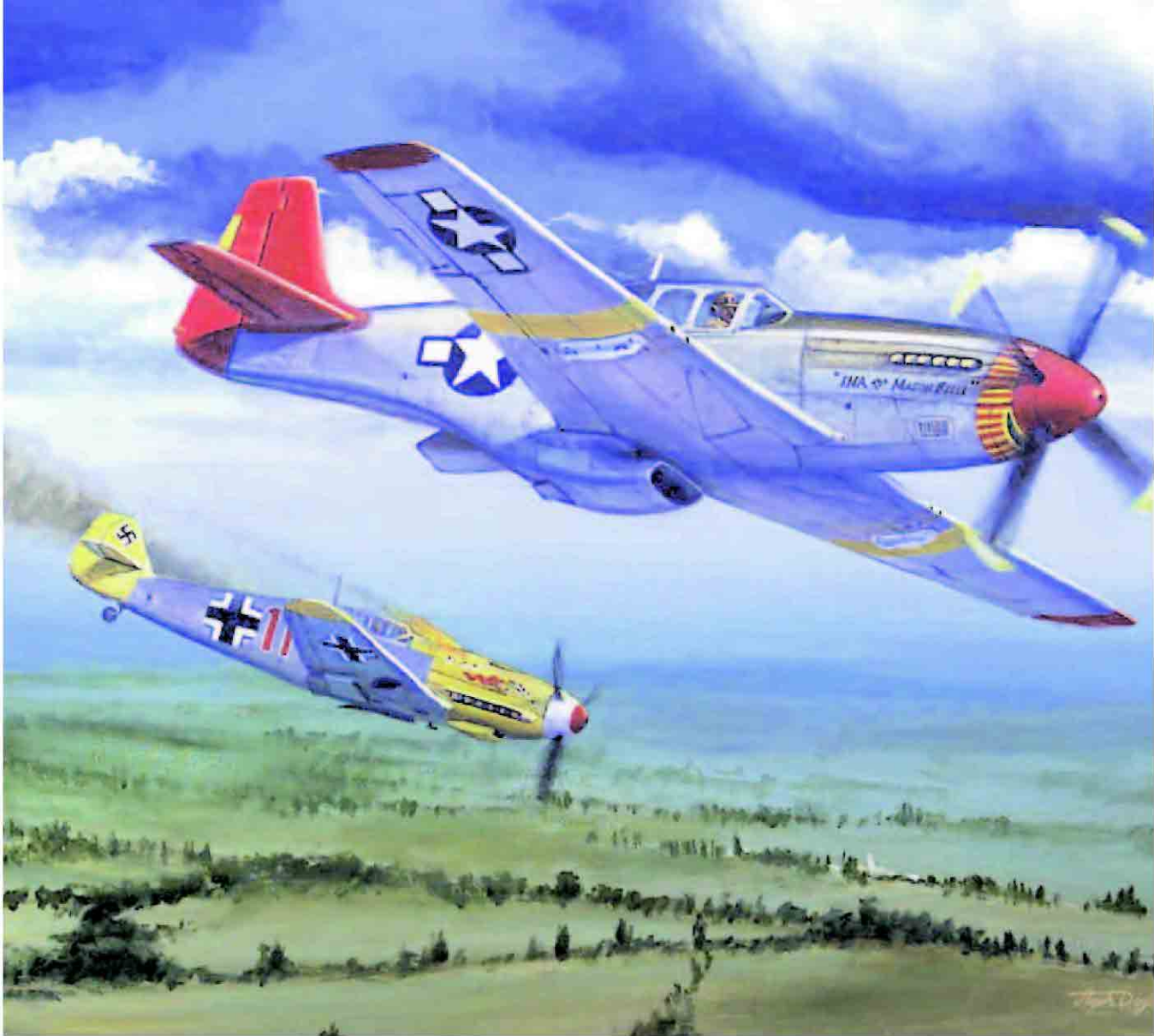


*Broadwater*



*Above, William Broadwater as a Tuskegee Airman. Left, a vintage B-25J Mitchell bomber flown by William Broadwater during the last days of World War II.*





“We flew the AT-6 in basic, and then went to the B-25,” Broadwater said. “It’s pretty hard to make the switch from an AT-6 to a B-25. The AT-10 was pretty junky and was fairly flimsy.

“I was totally disappointed that I was flying a bomber instead of a fighter. I voiced my objections loudly. I wanted to be a fighter pilot.”

When Broadwater joined the 477th squadron in August 1945, only a few days before the war ended, he was surprised to find B-25D models, less of a plane than he had trained on. “The squadron wasn’t very effective in the beginning because it wasn’t doing much training,” he said. “Then the Army decided to get

the squadron ready for combat in the Pacific. Much changed in the last few months of World War II.

“I had just turned 19 when I joined the squadron, and I just wanted to fly,” said Broadwater. “As soon as the war was over, there was a considerable cut in flying activity. We couldn’t get in our hours.

“We were a low-altitude attack group,” he said. “We flew at tree-top level, firing guns. But the squadron was short of ammunition, so we got little training with live firing. My greatest thrill in a B-25 was trying to barrel roll it. I never quite got it completely over. The guy who did roll one popped all the riv-

ets. The B-25 was an agile airplane, but you didn’t want to roll it.”

One of the early problems of the 477th Bombardment Group was that the Army Air Corps had trained many African-American pilots but failed to offer necessary navigation and bombardment training to man a B-25 bomber. While pilots were in great supply, navigators and bombardiers were nearly nonexistent until well into the war. When the squadron was formed in January 1944, it was authorized 128 navigators and bombardiers, yet nine months later, it had just 23, and only half of the 176 pilots authorized.



Prejudice also played a role in the slow development of the bomber crews. In the wake of the June 1943 race riots in Detroit, the Army Air Corps moved the 477th to totally inadequate Godman Field, Ky. At Godman, the black officers were able to enjoy full use of the officers' club, but their white supervisors used the facilities at the segregated Fort Knox.

Between October 1944 and January 1945, 84 new navigator-bombardiers and 60 new pilots joined the squadron, but the unit remained undermanned and only partly trained. The 477th was moved in March 1945 to Freeman Army Air Field near Seymour, Ind., only to be ordered back to Godman in April.

At Freeman Field there were two separate officers' clubs—one for white supervisors and trainers, and one for black trainees. On April 3, 1945, dissatisfied officers from the 477th Bombardment Group—including future Detroit Mayor Coleman Young—were arrested when they attempted to enter the white officers' club. After the dust had settled, 103 African-American officers had been arrested, charged with insubordination and ordered to face court martial proceedings. The court martial charges were quickly dropped against 100 officers. Charges against two of the three remaining officers were subsequently dropped, but one officer was convicted.

In late May 1945, General Henry "Hap" Arnold, the Commander of the Army Air Corps, ordered all white officers in the 477th replaced with African-Americans and put Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. in command. Plans were written to send the unit, now a composite Group of B-25s and fighters, to the Pacific to fight in the war against Japan. The 477th never had the opportunity to prove itself in combat. When Japan surrendered, the



U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. John E. Lasky

*At Balad Airbase, Iraq, Capt. Mark Ferstl (left) explains an unmanned aerial vehicle's ground control station to Tuskegee Airman retired Lt. Col. Lee Archer (sitting), retired Lt. Col. Robert Ashby (back right) and retired Col. Dick Toliver (leaning on the chair). The Tuskegee Airmen are here to meet deployed 332nd Expeditionary Operations Group Airmen and observe operations. The Army created the Tuskegee Airmen unit in 1941.*

group was still at Godman Field.

As the Army Air Corps shifted to a peacetime footing, many of the Tuskegee Airmen and veterans of 477th began leaving the service. The 477th was to be the last segregated bomber squadron in what became the Air Force in 1946. It was transferred to Lockbourne Army Air Base near Columbus, Ohio, on March 13, 1946, and later designated the 332 Fighter Wing.

In 1948, President Truman signed Executive Order No. 9981, directing equality of treatment and opportunity in all of the United States Armed Forces. As African-American officers were transferred to desegregate white Air Force squadrons, the 477th faded into nonexistence.

But the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen of the 477th Bombardment Group lives today wherever Panchito and Special Delivery fly.

For Broadwater, Baugh and all the other bomber crews who served with honor and fought against discrimination, the climb to equality was a long, tough one.

After World War II, Broadwater

left the service and immediately bought an Army surplus PT-23 Fairchild training aircraft for his own use. He worked for the Federal Aviation Administration until his retirement, and always kept flying.

Baugh remained in the Air Force, retiring on June 30, 1967, as a Lieutenant Colonel. During his military career, he flew more bombers, including the jet-powered B-57 Canberra and B-66 Destroyer. "The jets made all the difference in the world," said Baugh. He added an F-15 Eagle to his resume in 1977 and an FA-18 Hornet of the Blue Angles in 1998.

In 1995, at the urging of Congress, the Air Force notified 15 of the 103 officers charged in the 1945 Freeman Field incident that their personnel records were purged of the charges. The lone officer convicted had the decision reversed and his record cleared.

"It took 50 years for justice and equality to catch up to the men of the 477th Bombardment Group," said Gorman. "In that time, they continued to serve our nation with courage and integrity."

