

COVID-19 Response

Following guidance from the White House, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and state and local public health authorities, we are increasing access and services in a phased approach across all units of the National Park System. Before visiting a park, please check the [park website](#) to determine its operating status. Updates about the overall NPS response to COVID-19, including safety information, are posted on www.nps.gov/coronavirus.

National Park Service

LESSON PLAN

Who Are the Tuskegee Airmen?

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE



Essential Question

Who are the Tuskegee Airmen?

Objective

OVERALL RATING

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GRADE LEVEL: Middle School: Sixth Grade through Eighth Grade

SUBJECT: Social Studies

- Identify the purpose of the Tuskegee Experiment (military)?
- Explain the difference between the Tuskegee Experiment (medical) and the Tuskegee Experiment (military)?
- Define the term, "Tuskegee Airmen."
- List some of the specific job responsibilities of Negro pilots and support personnel.

LESSON DURATION: 60 Minutes

STATE STANDARDS: ALCOS: 9.2, 6th Grade: Describe the changing role of African Americans in the society of the United States during World War II

Background

Two famous Tuskegee Experiments were conducted in the small town of Tuskegee, Alabama between 1932 and 1972. One conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service (Public Health) beginning in 1932, later called the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. The other conducted by the U.S. Army Air Corps (Air Corps) beginning in 1941, the participants of which were later dubbed "Tuskegee Airmen"

The purpose of the experiment conducted by Public Health was to observe the progression of a number of diseases, particularly syphilis, untreated in black males. The official name of the study was the, "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male." This study involved 660 men who agreed to participate in exchange for meals, transportation, health care, and burial payments to their widows. At the beginning of the study no effective treatment was available for syphilis patients. By 1947 penicillin was readily available, but this treatment option was not made available to the unknowing participants. The travesty was that although treatment was then available, Public Health withheld this information from them and continued the program in the same vein. The study ended abruptly and inconclusively in 1972 when the Associated Press broke the news of the unethical experiment in New York and in Washington, D.C..

In 1972 a class action lawsuit was filed against Public Health in behalf of the men, their wives, children, and family members, which ended in a \$9 million settlement for the victims.

In 1941, the Air Corps began a military "experiment" to see if Negroes could be trained as combat pilots and support personnel. This experiment served to test out the findings of a 1925 War Department study that asserted that "the Negro is fundamentally inferior" to whites. The study further claimed that Negroes lacked the intelligence, courage, and physical ability to operate complicated military equipment, such as combat aircraft.

The first to be trained as participants in this experiment were the Mechanics who began their training in March 1941 at Chanute Field, near Rantoul, Illinois.

On July 19, 1941, twelve aviation cadets and one student officer, Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., reported to Tuskegee Institute (Tuskegee University) to begin primary flight training as the first Negro pilot candidates in the United States Army. By November, four cadets and the student officer had demonstrated the necessary skills, completed the rigors of training, and were transferred to Tuskegee Army Air Field for basic and advanced training courses.

On March 7, 1942, the first class of cadets graduated from Tuskegee Army Air Field to become the nation's first African American military pilots. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. retained his rank as Captain, and four others graduated with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant.

The significance of this event should not be minimized after years of struggle by African-Americans for opportunities to serve in non-subservient roles in the U.S. military. As the pilot training program expanded it would eventually include participants from 29 states, foreign countries, 7 historically black colleges, and the Coffey School of Aeronautics. The majority of those accepted into the program had completed the Civilian Pilot Training Program authorized by the U.S. Congress in 1938, administered through the Civil Aeronautics Administration.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, HI in December 1941, the United States entered World War II. At that time no plans were made or thought given to using the Negro pilots in combat. At the insistence of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the War Department gave them an assignment in North Africa, where they would have no contact with soldiers of the Axis Powers. Because they had no contact with the enemy, the War Department concluded that they were ineffective and decided to return the Negro units to America.

After testimony before Congress by Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., they were given an opportunity to provide escort cover for white bomber crews to and from their targets. They performed exceedingly well, to the point that they began to be requested as bomber escorts by white bomber pilots. Of the more than 400 pilots who saw combat, 66 of their number died during combat and 33 were taken as prisoners of war.

Other Tuskegee trained pilots fought another war, not in a foreign land, but on US soil. These were part of the 477th Bombardment Group who, in 1945, successfully staged a non-violent sit-in to integrate the "White Only" officers' club at Freeman Field, Indiana. In the process they overturned an illegal Base Order designed to keep the "status quo" of segregation although military regulations prohibited this practice. Through it all, they proudly served their country, both on American and foreign soil, not as Negroes, but as American citizens.

Some of the challenges they faced included: the program being located in the racially segregated South; the prevalence of Jim Crow laws designed to keep them "in their place"; the intense opposition from the majority white citizens of the City of Tuskegee; threats of arrest for venturing to walk down the city streets of Tuskegee; racially biased Air Corps personnel who reflected the same racial attitudes as the local white community; the ease of which a cadet could be "washed" out of the program by a supposed infraction, whether real or imaginary; the pressure to perform well, oftentimes, with used or dilapidated aircraft; the concern of whether the Air Corps was really committed to providing training equal to those of their white counterparts; whether their credentials would be recognized throughout the military community; and, whether America would recognize their sacrifices and performance and embrace them as full citizens entitled to equal and civil rights under the U.S. Constitution.

On June 8, 1946, the last class of aviation cadets graduated from Tuskegee Army Air Field. At the time they completed their requirements 2,483 persons had entered the Tuskegee pilot training program, of which, 994 completed the rigors and earned their pilot wings. Altogether, the participants in the Tuskegee military experiment (later called Tuskegee Airmen) numbered between 15,000 – 19,000 including pilots, mechanics, cooks, doctors, nurses, parachute riggers, gate guards, flight instructors, firemen, radio operators, etc. Their unit formations consisted of the 99th, 100th, 301st, and, 302nd Fighter Squadrons, the combined 332nd Fighter Group, and 477th Bombardment Group, along with their service units.

Preparation

Gather materials and media for students to research and learn about the lesson topic and related topics.

Procedure

Activity 1

Activity 1 - Quadrant Cards Vocabulary Activity

Objective: Students will define key vocabulary terms as a pre-activity assignment using information provided by the teacher

Supplies needed: Writing utensil, paper, and vocabulary list

Steps:

1. Divide a sheet of paper into four parts
2. List the word to be learned in the top left quadrant
3. Write the definition in the top right quadrant
4. Write associations for the word in the bottom left quadrant
5. Draw an illustration in the bottom right corner

Activity 2

Activity 2 – Historical Figures

Objective: Students will learn significant contributions of some of the men and women who were Tuskegee Airmen

Supplies needed: Paper, writing utensil, biographical information, classroom notes

Steps:

1. Select and review information on a key figure associated with the Tuskegee Airmen
2. Review information on how this person contributed to the success of the Experiment
3. Teacher will provide a handout that will allow students to match the role or individual with the correct description

Vocabulary

Travesty	Axis Forces	Decommissioned
Discrimination	Coined	Persistence
Tuskegee Airmen	Jim Crow Laws	Integrate

Assessment Materials

Discussion questions—Teacher can divide students into groups for a short period of discussion. Each group will be graded for participation.

- 1 .Explain the difference between the two Tuskegee Experiments
2. When did the Tuskegee Airmen training program begin?
3. Identify some obstacles faced by the program participants
- 4 .How did the Tuskegee Airmen support the cause for racial integration of the U.S. military?

Enrichment Activities

The Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site was the primary flight training facility for Negro military pilots in Tuskegee during World War II. Support personnel, such as mechanics, parachute riggers, fire personnel, military officers, fabric stretchers, clerks, technicians, etc. were stationed here. Aircraft was housed and maintained here. This is where cadets took their first solo flight as military pilots. Original buildings and other historic structures still exist on site. The first aircraft hangar/base operations building constructed on site in 1941 serves as the park museum/staff office space. The museum exhibits are designed to enable visitors to take a "walk back in time" to the 1940's period of significance.

1. Students will receive a blank outline map of the United States. They will be asked to use classroom resources to show which states Negro pilots were chosen from.
2. To further help the students to understand the concept of support personnel. The students will be divided into groups based on job assignment. They will be required to communicate with one another through group representatives to illustrate how important it was for every individual to perform their responsibility, which contributed to the overall success of the group.

Additional Resources

- www.tuskegee.edu/aboutus/legacyoffame/tuskegeearmen
- <http://puzzlemaker.school.discovery.com/>

Contact Information

Email us about this lesson plan

LESSON PLANS

"Create a National Park" National Parks: 4-6 Grade

"Designs Of My World" Native People: 4-6 Grade

"I Wish I Had Blubber" Habitat Video: Florida Bay

Last updated: March 7, 2019