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the Tuskegee Airmen

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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Comments (Optional): Kristen's paper was very well
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FORGOTTEN BUT NOT GONE:
THE STORY OF THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

KRISTEN MOLT

SENIOR HONORS THESIS

From 1939 to 1945, the sounds of war reverberated through all corners of the world. The world was embroiled in the World War II, a conflict so vast that it defies characterization. How does one explain “what happened in World War II?” It was a period of destruction on a massive scale. Cities were leveled, countries left in ruins; in some places, such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the very earth was changed forever. The human cost of the war was immense. Hitler’s campaign to erase an entire ethnic group was horribly successful. Civilian populations were decimated by air raids and fire bombings. Due to “improvements” in technology, armies were able to destroy each other with ever-increasing efficiency. Yet even in the face of this destruction, the war years witnessed much progress. The improvements in technology were also used for more beneficial purposes, such as medicine. The war led to the creation of a “New World Order” headed by the United Nations, and many nations were released from the bonds of colonialism. Finally, the experience of the war years directly influenced the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. Formerly excluded segments of society were drawn into the war effort. Women emulated “Rosie the Riveter” in factories, Native Americans served as code-breakers, and African Americans proved to the world that they could fly airplanes. The singular experience of wartime gave these disenfranchised groups a taste of the liberty and equality that they had been denied.

The Tuskegee Airmen were one such disenfranchised group. Having denied the ability of African Americans to serve as pilots for many years, the Army Air Force finally allowed the formation of an all-black pursuit squadron. The men of the 99th Pursuit Squadron and later, the 332nd Fighter Group, sought to triumph over enemies abroad and racism and prejudice at home.

They became a highly praised and respected unit during the war, and continued the fight for equality after the war's end. Despite their notable achievements, the Airmen were nearly forgotten by history. Their story deserves to be told.

The period between the two World Wars witnessed a surge of racial prejudice and discrimination. The War Department, apparently forgetting that African Americans had served the country in every war in its history, issued a study in 1925 entitled "The Use of Negro Manpower in War."¹ The study concluded that African Americans were best suited for "menial, closely supervised jobs" because as a whole they were "cowards and poor technicians and fighters, lacking initiative and resourcefulness."² The War Department used this study as justification for excluding African Americans from leadership positions and for gradually reducing the number of units open to African Americans.³ Even as the prospect of a second World War began to seem inevitable and the demand for enlisted men increased, the armed forces maintained their exclusionary policies.

While still maintaining neutrality, the United States began to prepare for the impending global conflict. In 1939 Congress passed the Civilian Pilot Training Program, which set up pilot training at colleges and universities, including six black institutions.⁴ By 1940 those six colleges were providing advanced CPTP flight training, although graduates from these programs continued to be rejected from the Army Air Corps due to their race.⁵ As a matter of fact, the Army Air Corps had an extreme shortage of officers, needing over 2,000 candidates; however, despite this need the Corps admitted only white candidates into its ranks.⁶ Things began to change, albeit slowly, with Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. William Hastie, the African American Dean of Howard University Law School, was appointed as an advisor to Secretary of War Henry Stimson.⁷ Hastie pushed for an integrated military with more rights and protections

for African American soldiers; unfortunately Hastie's position as an "advisor" had no real clout, and the War Department routinely ignored his suggestions and did not consult him.⁸ Even so, the wheels of change had been set in motion, and on January 16, 1941, the War Department announced the formation of an "all-Negro pursuit squadron," set to begin training in Tuskegee, Alabama.

The immediate response from the African American community was less than enthusiastic. The segregated, "all-Negro" nature of the unit was the source of most of their discontent. The *Chicago Defender* dubbed the newly formed squadron the "Jim Crow Air Unit," and noted that Chicago's Council of Negro Organizations was in opposition to its formation.⁹ A number of other groups, including the NAACP, as well as a large percentage of the African American population, were similarly opposed. The choice of Tuskegee as the training base, in the heart of the segregated, Jim Crow South, was also unpopular. Despite the shortcomings of the War Department's "experiment," most African American pilots welcomed the opportunity to serve their country in ways not previously available to them. Competition for this newly formed squadron was extremely fierce and the selection process was rigorous; eventually an elite group of thirteen flying cadets was chosen as the first members of the 99th Pursuit Squadron. Training began in Tuskegee in July of 1941.¹⁰

The eyes of the nation were on the new cadets at Tuskegee. These pioneering pilots, nicknamed the "Lonely Eagles" by the press,¹¹ had a very lofty mission. Like other members of the military, they sought victory over foreign enemies overseas. However, the African American community had pinned their hopes of another, different victory onto these and other black soldiers: victory over racism and discrimination at home. Thus, the African American soldier pursued a "Double V," and those who supported this pursuit included Eleanor Roosevelt,

Wendell Willke, Thomas E. Dewey, and many others.¹² In addition to promoting the “Double V,” Eleanor Roosevelt helped the 99th immeasurably when she visited Tuskegee and took a flight with Charles “Chief” Anderson, a flight instructor. The lingering beliefs that African Americans could not pilot airplanes all but disappeared after the First Lady’s flight.¹³

Despite high-profile visits and national scrutiny, the Tuskegee cadets had to remain focused on their rigorous training. This focus paid off—by August of 1942 the 99th was trained and ready to fight overseas.¹⁴ The men waited eagerly for assignment, and they continued to wait through the end of 1942 and the beginning of the next year. The problem, as Herbert Carter recalls, was that:

No commander from Burma to England wanted this all-black fighter squadron. They said we would create problems, that the officers, socially, would want to be equal . . . with the white officers, and some of them said that none of the white enlisted personnel would take an order from a Negro officer.¹⁵

Finally in April 1943, the 99th received their assignment and headed to Morocco. Interestingly, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin O. Davis of the 99th Pursuit Squadron was appointed executive officer of the troop ship, with command over both black and white soldiers.¹⁶ By all accounts, the voyage was peaceful and the anticipated problems with an African American officer never occurred.

Stationed in North Africa after the bulk of the fighting in that region had occurred, it was a while before the 99th saw heavy combat. Most of their missions involved escorting and protecting attack bombers and transport convoys, and strafing enemy territory. In July 1943 the 99th relocated to the southern coast of Sicily, where they continued flying the same type of missions. Around this time, certain officials began to make unsatisfactory reports about the performance of the 99th Pursuit Squadron. The 99th was attached to the 33rd Fighter Group, commanded by Colonel William Momyer. He reported that the pilots of the 99th were lazy and

cowardly, and determined that the squadron was “not of the fighting caliber of any squadron in this group. They have failed to display any aggressiveness and desire for combat that are necessary to a first class fighting organization.”¹⁷ Needless to say, Momyer’s report was extremely damaging considering the intense scrutiny the 99th was under, both from the Army Air Corps and the military in general and from the American people. Some people believed that the allegedly poor performance of the all-black 99th Pursuit Squadron proved the findings of the War Department’s 1925 report. *Time* magazine featured an article on African Americans in the military, concluding with the question, “Is the Negro as good a soldier as the white man?”¹⁸

Fortunately for the men of the 99th and for all African American soldiers, many powerful people doubted the accuracy of Momyer’s report, among them General Eisenhower.¹⁹ Chief of Staff George Marshall also refused to take Momyer’s allegations at face value and began an in-depth study of the performance of the 99th. The study concluded that the 99th “performed on a par with other P-40 Squadrons in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations.”²⁰ The 99th, no longer in danger of being de-activated or relegated to a rear defense area, was attached late in 1943 to the 79th Fighter Group stationed at Foggia, in eastern Italy.

The 79th Fighter Group, like the 33rd, was an integrated unit. However, the commanding officer of the 79th, Colonel Earl E. Bates, did not maintain segregationist policies within the unit as Colonel Momyer had, creating racially mixed squadrons for missions and giving the men identical duties.²¹ Thus, the 79th Fighter Group was an oasis of equality within the military. In *A Wind is Rising*, war correspondent Walter White described the unit:

This was democracy in action, and seemed more nearly achieved in these moments than it had ever been before, though it is tragic that a war of such proportions and destructiveness had apparently been necessary to cause Americans in isolated instances such as these to forgo racial prejudice . . .²²

The 99th flourished under this positive leadership; as they gained confidence and experience, their victory tally increased substantially. In January of 1944, the 79th fought in the invasion of Anzio. The 99th had great success against the Germans, bringing down at least twelve aircraft and damaging four more within a two-day span.²³ In an article on the Anzio invasion, *Time* magazine seemed to answer the hypothetical question it had earlier posed, reporting “The Air Corps regards its experiment proven, and is taking all qualified Negro cadets it can get.”²⁴

Unfortunately, the integrated utopia of the 79th Fighter Group was short-lived. While the 99th Pursuit Squadron had been gaining combat experience in Africa and Italy, additional all-black units had been training in the United States. On July 3, 1944, the 99th joined these other units in Ramitelli, Italy, to form the all-African American 332nd Fighter Group.²⁵ The men of the 99th were not content with their new assignment; this new, segregated unit seemed like a step backward from the progress they had made. In addition, the other units making up the 332nd did not have combat experience. Eventually the resentment lessened and the 332nd became a unified and effective Fighter Group, due in large part to the leadership of Colonel Benjamin Davis.²⁶ Throughout the summer and fall of 1944, the 332nd served as escorts for bombers and flew strafing missions, covering territory in Southern France, Italy, Germany, Austria, and even Greece and Czechoslovakia. They developed a reputation among bombing divisions of being excellent bomber escorts, having never lost a bomber to enemy aircraft attack.²⁷ Many of these bomber crews dubbed the 332nd the “Red-tail Angels,” due to their unfailing coverage and the tails of their P-51 aircraft, which had been painted red.²⁸ According to Herbert Carter, those red tails told bomber crews, “Your escort is the 332nd. You will be protected.”²⁹

From the beginning of 1945 through the end of the war, the 332nd continued to distinguish itself in strafing missions and as bomber escorts. At the war’s end, the combined records of the

332nd Fighter Group and the 99th Fighter Squadron were very impressive. All told, the units had flown over 1,500 missions and caused considerable damage to the enemy forces. Besides the damage done with the strafing missions, the units had also destroyed over 260 aircraft (111 in the air), one destroyer escort at sea, and fifty-seven locomotives.³⁰ The men of the 332nd received many awards for their accomplishments including Distinguished Flying Crosses, Legions of Merit, Silver Stars, Purple Hearts, the Croix de Guerre, and the Red Star of Yugoslavia.³¹ First as “Lonely Eagles,” then as “Red-tail Angels,” these men had helped achieve victory over foreign enemies, had invalidated the War Department’s 1925 study, and had answered the question, “Is the Negro as good a soldier as the white man?” with a resounding “yes.” After these impressive victories, would the Double V over racism at home follow?

Returning from victory overseas, African American soldiers discovered that America had not changed; segregation and discrimination were still the norm. No ticker-tape parades celebrated the victorious 332nd Fighter Group or the 99th Pursuit Squadron; the men were just sent on their “merry way,” as Herbert Carter recalls, in “Colored” train cars or in the backs of buses.³² The contradiction in the United States’ professed goals (victory over fascism) and actual attitudes was especially glaring in terms of the military bases. The German and Italian prisoners of war held on these bases were able to attend USO shows and dances, eat at local restaurants, and have their laundry done by local businesses. African American soldiers who had defended their country overseas were prohibited from all of these activities.³³ Far from being vanquished, racism after the war was rampant, and sometimes manifested itself in violence. African American war veterans, like all African American citizens at the time, were victims of lynching, police brutality, and mob violence.³⁴ For those whose goal was the Double V, the post-war situation in America was especially disheartening.

Although the achievements of African American soldiers did not immediately translate to victory over racism, eventually things did begin to change. Three years after the war's end, segregation in the military was abolished. Influenced greatly by the success of the 99th and the 332nd, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948.³⁵ Although it would take American society longer to change, abolishing segregation in the military was an important step towards integration of society as a whole.

Somehow the remarkable gains on the battlefield and in society made by the men known as the Tuskegee Airmen slipped out of this nation's collective memory. Until the recent release of an HBO film on the Airmen, the subject had been largely neglected both by popular culture and by scholars. For example, even today a search for "Tuskegee Airmen" at a research library will turn up surprisingly few titles. And in the recent surge of renewed interest in World War II, the story of the Tuskegee Airmen and of African American participation in the war in general is one that has been overlooked. How did the "Lonely Eagles," the subjects of so many debates, magazine articles, and national interest in their time, become one of the seldom-told, barely remembered stories of World War II?

Many factors account for the Tuskegee Airmen's drift into relative obscurity. The nature of history itself is crucial. Contrary to popular perception, history is not the report of every event that ever happened, unbiased and equally representing all involved. History involves constructing a coherent story from the available information, an enormous quantity of primary and secondary sources and previous scholarship on the subject. History also involves choosing which events are examined and the tone with which they are portrayed, and the personal bias of a scholar often plays a significant role in this process. Within an event as vast as World War II, an

infinite number of choices exists. This aspect of history is, in effect, responsible for determining which stories become part of the “memory” of society and which are forgotten.

In an article in the *American Historical Review*, Omer Bartov introduced the concept of “regimes of memory.” A regime of memory is the way in which a society views a historical event, including the “official state perception” and society’s dominant attitudes towards the event or story.³⁶ As is true with political regimes, regimes of memory can be overthrown and replaced by new ones. The first regime of memory established after an event is usually unstable; the event is too recent to view objectively, many consequences of the event have not yet occurred, and official documents may not yet be available. As new material and information on the event surface and public perceptions change, new regimes replace the initial one. This concept is important because it shows how history is subject to constant change and revision. Stories that are all but forgotten by one regime may find a place in another.

The ideology and general atmosphere at the time influence the construction of these so-called regimes of memory. In the Second World War, the Office of War Information’s propaganda contributed a great deal to this general atmosphere. Government propaganda portrayed the war as a conflict between democracy and fascism, freedom and oppression; in the simplest terms, it was a battle between good and evil. Americans were fighting the “good fight,” championing the rights of people everywhere. This flattering ideology manifested itself in all areas of popular culture, from Hollywood films to literature to comic books.³⁷ Thus, propaganda during the war inevitably influenced the way an entire generation would view the war. In a forum on World War II scholarship, Ronald H. Spector noted that for the first three decades following the war, the bulk of the writing about the war had a celebratory tone.³⁸

One consequence of the predominantly celebratory tone of writing about the war was that it focused on the good, heroic deeds of the war. Aspects of the war that did not fit into this “good fight” mentality were avoided by historians, scholars, and the architects of popular culture. Although the deeds of the Tuskegee Airmen were by any definition heroic, an account of these deeds would touch upon subjects that were uncomfortable and controversial, decidedly not of a celebratory tone. One big issue was the contradiction between America’s lofty ideals about the war and the actual treatment of its citizens. As previously noted, Americans believed they were fighting against tyranny and oppression overseas, while at the same time their homeland was a hotbed of racism and government-supported segregation. The treatment of African American war veterans, who were subject to discrimination and even violence, was a particularly inglorious aspect that did not have a place within the celebratory ideology of the post-war years. In addition, many Americans, including many scholars, still believed that African Americans were inferior and did not deserve recognition for their efforts.

Because society’s attitude towards an event is so crucial in determining how the history of that event is recorded, it is not surprising that the achievements of the Tuskegee Airmen were ignored for so long. Other, more concrete factors also contributed to the Airmen’s virtual exclusion from the history of World War II. In 1949, after the integration of the military, the Air Force held the first annual Fighter Gunnery Meet in Las Vegas. The all-black 332nd Fighter Group won the meet. However, for many years the winner of the 1949 meet was listed in the *Air Force Almanac* as unknown.³⁹ Omissions like these, whether accidental or deliberate, affect how history is remembered and recorded.

The concept of “regimes of memory” and the example of the Tuskegee Airmen prove a very significant point—history is constantly changing. History does not merely seek to record

the events of the past; the goal of history is an understanding of the past. The initial historical accounts give way to revisionist accounts, which are discussed and critiqued, and in turn contribute to a new, more complete understanding of the past. Spector uses the example of General MacArthur's reputation to illustrate this point. MacArthur was viewed as a hero, the savior of the Pacific, immediately following the war; this positive reputation steadily eroded as scholars re-examined the facts. The historical understanding will continue to evolve; Spector notes, "There is probably some graduate student out there right now who is writing a kind of revisionist view of MacArthur to show that in fact he was the great commander of the Pacific war and that all these recent writers . . . are wrong."⁴⁰

The reason that history and historical understanding continues to evolve is that each generation views a historical event differently; each generation constructs its own regime of memory. In the forum on World War II scholarship, Michael Howard observes that the number of questions about an historical event is infinite since "each upcoming generation asks a different set of questions from the same body of material."⁴¹ Thus, the first generation to study World War II was influenced by government propaganda and the celebratory tone of the post-war years; this is reflected in the questions asked and the subjects memorialized. This positive propaganda did not affect the next generation of World War II scholars as much. Thirty years after the war ended, scholars were more interested in examining the destruction and human cost of the war rather than victory. The tone shifted from celebratory to somber.⁴² In addition, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the resulting increase in scholars of different ethnicity and gender influenced which questions were asked about the war. Stories that did not have a place within the first regime of memory resurfaced with this new generation of scholars. Women's role in the

war, the role of other minorities and ethnic groups, and of course, the story of the Tuskegee Airmen all gained a more visible spot in the collective memory.

A 15th Century Italian Humanist, Leonardo Bruni d'Arezzo, declared in his *De Studiis et Litteris* that "History is an easy subject: there is nothing in its study subtle or complex. It consists in the narration of the simplest matters of fact which, once grasped, are readily retained in the memory."⁴³ However, with all due respect to d'Arezzo, this is obviously an incorrect assessment of the nature of history. As previously detailed, history is a discipline filled with subtleties, and any understanding of an historical event must be open to revision and evolution. Furthermore, the collective memory of history does not always "readily retain" all of the facts; some stories are forgotten and ignored, such as that of the Tuskegee Airmen. Fortunately even stories that are forgotten, whether deliberately or inadvertently, can be rediscovered as the collective memory changes and new regimes of memory replace the old. Half a century after the war, the Tuskegee Airmen are beginning to receive the recognition they deserve. The building of the Tuskegee Airmen National Center in Tuskegee, Alabama, which was begun this year, ensures that we will never again forget the story of these remarkable men.

¹ Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly, *Black Knights: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, Inc. 2001), 16.

² Ibid., 16-7.

³ "Tuskegee Airmen: Special Resource Study," (Atlanta, Georgia: National Park Service Southeast Regional Office, 1997), 3.

⁴ Homan and Reilly, 19.

⁵ Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, Sr., *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1992), 125.

⁶ Ibid., 82.

⁷ Homan and Reilly, 22.

⁸ Scott and Womack, 157.

⁹ Homan and Reilly, 37.

¹⁰ Scott and Womack, 153.

¹¹ Ibid., 153.

¹² Ibid., 167.

¹³ Ibid., 154.

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- ¹⁴ Homan and Reilly, 70.
- ¹⁵ Herbert E. Carter, Interview, August 8, 2002.
- ¹⁶ Robert A. Rose, *Lonely Eagles: The Story of America's Black Air Force in World War II* (Los Angeles: Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., 1976).
- ¹⁷ Scott and Womack, 187.
- ¹⁸ Homan and Reilly 103.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 103.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 104.
- ²¹ Rose, 63.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Homan and Reilly 111.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 111.
- ²⁵ Scott and Womack, 215.
- ²⁶ Homan and Reilly, 130.
- ²⁷ Scott and Womack, 217.
- ²⁸ Special Resource Study, 5.
- ²⁹ Herbert E. Carter, "The Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen: Undaunted Patriots and Warriors," *National Forum* 75, no. 4 (Fall 1995).
- ³⁰ Homan and Reilly 176.
- ³¹ Special Resource Study, 2.
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- ³⁴ Scott and Womack 271-2.
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- ³⁶ Samuel Moyn, "Two Regimes of Memory," *The American Historical Review* 103, issue 4 (October 1998): 1182.
- ³⁷ David Lundberg, "The American Literature of War: The Civil War, World War I, and World War II," *American Quarterly* 36, issue 3 (1983): 384.
- ³⁸ Ronald H. Spector, "The Scholarship on World War II: Its Present Condition and Future Possibilities," in a discussion moderated by Richard H. Kohn, *The Journal of Military History* 55, issue 3 (July 1991), 369.
- ³⁹ Homan and Reilly, 236.
- ⁴⁰ Spector, "Scholarship," 370.
- ⁴¹ Michael Howard, "The Scholarship on World War II," 375.
- ⁴² Spector, "Scholarship," 369.
- ⁴³ D'Arrezo, 129.

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Interview: Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Carter and Mildred Carter
August 8, 2002
Tuskegee, Alabama

Part One: Mrs. Mildred Carter

Kristen (K): We're talking today with Mrs. Carter. Mrs. Carter, how did you become interested in flying?

Mildred Carter (M): Well, I wish I had one of those nice stories that I hear so many people say: when I was a little girl I saw this plane flying and I really wanted to fly it. Not true. I had no thoughts of flying until I was a junior in college and the Civilian Pilot Training Program came to Tuskegee Institute, where I was a student. I was working in the office of the project director for the Civilian Pilot Training Program, and as we were processing applications of the students applying, my fellow classmates and friends, I just said, "Well, I think I could do that!" And so I put my application in. Up until then I had never even met a pilot. I certainly didn't know any female pilots. So, that's how I started.

K: And so they accepted women into the Civilian Pilot Training Program?

M: Well, in my case, you had to be 18, and it was two weeks before my 18th birthday. But I put my application in, and it came back marked "This applicant is two weeks too young." So that was a big disappointment [for me] but a sigh of relief in the office because they weren't encouraging women, they were trying to get the men interested. So, persistence pays off. The next year I reapplied, by then of course I was old enough, and I was accepted.

K: And so, what did you plan on doing by learning how to fly? Did you have any big, long-term plans?

M: I didn't, actually. I had heard of Amelia Airhart, and perhaps way in the back of my mind I thought I could become a famous pilot. But I wasn't thinking so far ahead, it was just what I wanted to do at that time.

K: Now, someone told me that you trained with the people that were going to become the Tuskegee Airmen. What did you do with that?

M: Well, actually, those people who became Tuskegee Airmen were just like me, students in various colleges, black colleges that had the Civilian Pilot Training Program. Tuskegee had the advanced training program, and young men from the other five colleges would come here for the advanced [training]. Many of them were contemporaries of mine, and we learned to fly together. I was not allowed to go into the advanced; they took no females in the advanced program. So I just flew when I could, more or less as a hobby. In later years, after I finished college, I thought that I would try to join the WASPs, the Women Air Service Pilots, but they took no blacks. So, my gender was against me, my race was against me, and my flying career almost ended then. But I married a fighter pilot (*laughs*).

K: Did you encounter a lot of prejudiced attitudes and racism, being both African American and a female pilot?

M: Well, you know, Tuskegee is a rather unique place, and I was brought up here rather removed from prejudice—the in-your-face kind. It was there, throughout the South, and other places as well, but in Tuskegee I didn't encounter it; I didn't have any contact with anything that would promote it. Except when I was in the flying program, as a student you had to do a cross-country solo. My cross-country flight was from Tuskegee to Columbus, Georgia; from Columbus, Georgia, to Auburn, and back to Tuskegee. At each airport you had to land and get your logbook signed. My instructor told me, "Do not get out of the plane in Auburn. They do

not want you there. The airport manager will come out to the plane and sign your log-book.” So there was that kind of thing, yes. Isn’t that strange?

K: It is. During the war, did you still fly? What kinds of things did you do during the war?

M: I have never given up flying. I flew until I was seventy; I’m eighty now. I had a friend, Chief Anderson, Charles Alfred Anderson, I don’t know if you’ve heard of him? He was a famous, well, famous with us, pilot, and my good friend. He wouldn’t allow me not to fly. When I was a student, he insisted I join the Civil Air Patrol. He joined the Civil Air Patrol as well. But there again the bias and prejudice comes in. We were never called to participate in any Civil Air Patrol activities. We went down to Maxwell [Air Force Base], we passed whatever test or physical, had to be finger-printed and get in a picture, and I have the license showing that I was a member, but I never participated in any Civil Air Patrol. That was just so that I could continue to get flying time, because a pilot, that’s what a pilot wants to do. More and more flying time, all the time. So around here, whenever he [Chief Anderson] had a trip, you know, he was going to Mobile or he was going to Pensacola; he’d call up. “Millie, you want to fly today?”

“Yes!”

“Well, I’ll be by, I’ll pick you up.” He’d come by, we’d go to the airport, get in his plane, and we would fly. So that’s the way I got the little flying in that I did.

K: What was the atmosphere during the war like in Tuskegee?

M: It was exciting, oh yes. I suppose wartime is exciting anyway, but Tuskegee was such a quiet college town until all of the soldiers moved in here. There were I don’t know how many men to every girl.

K: A good ratio, though?

M: *(laughs)* Yes. And that was exciting. The town suddenly became quite active. Of course there were the sad times, when someone had to go away to war. When we married, we were married for seven months before he went overseas.

K: So, did you meet at Tuskegee?

M: Yes. My husband was a student here also, and he was in the Civilian Pilot Training Program before he went into the Cadet Corps. He had done the primary and the advanced in the Civilian Pilot Training Program before he became—before he was *allowed* to become an Aviation Cadet. When he was a Cadet, I worked at—by this time we had Moton Field, which was the primary field, and they had built the field at Tuskegee Army Air Field, which is some few miles beyond Moton Field, because there was no training for blacks at Maxwell or at any other field. So they built a field just for the training of black people. And he became a cadet. And when he was a Cadet, by this time I had started to work at the—oh, my major in college was Business, so I was a secretary—and I got a job at Tuskegee Army Air Field. He was in the Cadet Corps, so we couldn't see each other. He couldn't come off the base, I could only see him marching by or something like that, or across the room. It was very difficult. On weekends he would call me and say, "Are you going to fly today?" And I'd say, "Yes, I think so," and I'd go out to the field, and he'd get an airplane and say, "I'll meet you over at Martin Lake." So he'd fly, and I would get in this little Piper Cub, that's all I flew, and we would meet at a certain point. Well, what could we do? "Hi," wave, rock the plane, do that kind of thing. Then he would fly up under me and do a slow-roll or something, showing off. He thinks it's really funny, he'd look back and my plane would be like that (*rocking motion*) in the front-wash of his airplane. So that was a date.

K: Now, did you get married before he was shipped overseas?

M: Yes. We were married at the Tuskegee Army Airfield chapel, and seven months later he was sent overseas. During that time I still worked at the base, I worked all of the time he was gone, and when he returned.

K: What do you think is the most untold story about the Tuskegee Airmen? What do you want people to remember?

M: Do you know what I think is the most untold story? It's the camaraderie, the esprit de corps that existed among the men. The great admiration they had for Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Not only did the men have great admiration for him; the women did too (*laughs*). We were together for those seven months before they went overseas. There were not too many married cadets—well, they were second lieutenants by then. Not too many of them were married, but the wives were very close, and we were a family. I have wonderful memories of those years. People like to dwell on the unpleasant side. It was there, I'm sure, but I felt very insulated from it because we had this warm group of people together, and we loved and enjoyed each other.

K: Thank you very much.

Part Two: Lieutenant Colonel Carter

K: Now we are talking with Lieutenant Colonel Carter. Mr. Carter, sir, how did you become interested in flying?

Herbert Carter (H): Well, I was a student at Tuskegee when it was announced that the private pilot's program was going to operate here as an extra-curricular activity and that any student that could pass the physical and had at least two years of college could enter the program and get his or her private pilot's license. I was a major in Agriculture. My ambition was to—I was in Animal Husbandry, and I was going to finish that and go up to Cornell or one of the northern

schools and take veterinary medicine. Of course, in those years there was no opportunity to go to the school of veterinary medicine at Auburn as an Alabama person, a student. I thought if I were able to get my private pilot's license and become a veterinarian then I could combine the two and maybe go out to Texas and, as a veterinarian, fly from ranch to ranch and practice my profession. And that was what, initially, I was thinking when I became interested in the flying program. But, shortly thereafter, being past eighteen years of age, nineteen as a matter of fact, the draft board was also making inquiries as to my deferment, and things that made you a little nervous because they were drafting a lot of young men. And certainly, I did not want to be in the Army, I did not want to be a private in the rear ranks as some of my friends and others had been, and therefore I thought if I could get into the Army Air Corps, the Pilot Training Program, it would be an opportunity for me to get, not only wings, but to get a commission. When it was announced that they were going to offer flying training to Negroes, I applied for the program. Fortunately, I was accepted in January of 1942, and having been in the Civilian Pilot Training Program, I did not have to go through what was called Pre-flight Primary. I was taken directly into the basic program at Tuskegee Army Air Field; I didn't go to Moton Field at all. And five months later, I was a Second Lieutenant with wings.

K: And so when were you sent over to North Africa?

H: We finished what was called tactical training, and we thought we were ready for overseas in September, '42. But there was some delay, and we were still here in the States at Christmas of '42. The problem was no commander from Burma to England wanted this all-black fighter squadron. They said we would create problems, that the officers, socially, would want to be equal, on par with the white officers, and some of them said that none of the white enlisted personnel would take an order from a Negro officer. It was Easter Sunday morning, 1943, nearly

ten months later, after the activation of the 99th in July, that we arrived in Casablanca, North Africa in combat.

K: Did you encounter a lot of prejudice, within the military or within the community, or any at all?

H: Well, here in Tuskegee, it was rather a little oasis within itself, in a predominantly black community, and having grown up here I didn't encounter any particular prejudice, no different from the normal morays and taboos that existed in America at the time. And certainly my training as an Aviation Cadet, I have no memories of any prejudices that we encountered. Certainly there were individuals who had their problems and found it difficult to accept the fact that a Negro was an officer. Some didn't believe that there were Negro pilots; the wings that you were wearing, they thought that you had not earned them, that you were imitating a pilot or something. And even overseas there were some Americans who still carried that bias, that prejudice with them, especially when it came to social activities. But it was never to a degree that it created a particular problem in my career as an officer.

K: What was your most memorable mission?

H: *(laughs)* Well, I flew seventy-seven combat missions, and I guess all of them had something or another that, if I think of them on an individual basis, there was something exciting about them, but I guess you remember that mission when you first encounter an enemy air-craft in air-to-air combat. Now this came rather late, I guess we had been in combat seven, eight, or nine months before I had the experience of air-to-air combat. All before then we had been flying what was called "close tactical support" for the army. Our mission was finding motor transports on the high-ways, locomotives on the railways, trusses, bridges, fuel dumps, ammunition dumps; anything that was in support of the German army we were to dive-bomb, strafe and destroy them.

So our greatest enemy—hazard—was anti-aircraft fire, and all of our losses up to then had been due to the German anti-aircraft fire. All of those missions would put gray hair on you, and many of the planes would come back pretty well shot-up with anti-aircraft fire. But it really dawns on you that you are in serious combat when, suddenly, there's another aircraft up there with you, and you can see the traces from his guns going by your wing or over the top of your canopy, and you realize that that's not friendly and somebody's trying to take you out. It simply calls for your most evasive ability to fly, to avoid being shot down, and trying to put yourself in position, if you can, of trying to shoot him down. And those got to be the flights that you remember more than the ground type of missions.

K: Outside of the combat episodes, what were your most memorable experiences about the war, or about being overseas, or anything really?

H: Well, I guess it was the experience of Africa, and Sicily, and Italy: a new country, new land, people and their cultures, and the scenery, things of that nature. I made the Air Force a career, and I was in for some twenty-five years. My career didn't end when the war ended; I had many more memorable experiences from 1945 'til '69, when I retired, than I did from '42 up until '49.

K: So, why did you decide to make military your career instead of going on to vet school?

H: Well, by the time the war ended, I had become pretty hooked, so to speak, on flying, and of course at that time there was no opportunity in commercial aviation; none of the major airlines were accepting blacks for pilot positions. Therefore the only place you could get flying experience was in the military. I was just so excited about the technological advancements and developments in aviation that were happening almost daily in the Air Force by now, that I saw no better career, no more exciting career than being with the aircraft and flying the different

types. I flew from the J-3 Cub at 90 miles an hour, and my last aircraft was the F-106 mach-2, twice the speed of sound. That, to me, is the technological advancement that took place over the period of some twenty-five years. I also always wore two hats; I was always the aircraft maintenance officer, and I had the responsibility of maintaining the aircraft of the squadron, or group, or wing that I was assigned to. I also was a flight test maintenance officer; and that was sort of on the cutting edge of excitement because it was a little more than just a normal, routine flight when you were doing a test flight. It was again that unknown sphere where it was exciting. And therefore, I just wanted to stay with the aircraft until finally, they said I had to go on (*laughs*).

K: After the war, I know some people have said that after serving as equals during the war and then to come back home and find that they were still treated as second class citizens, it took some adjusting. Did you encounter any of that, any renewed prejudice after the war?

H: Yes, yes, and disappointment too, because when we were overseas we always talked about the "double V," victory against Nazism and fascism there in Europe, and victory against racism in America. And we thought that by the war's end there would be some change in attitudes here in America, but when we returned we found that there were no changes. You were still a second class citizen; you were still separate, in the back of the bus; you had no voting rights in particular; your public education was still restricted. When we came back, we didn't have a ticker-tape parade or the recognition that some units got; we were just back in America, and they sent us on our merry way until we were reassembled up in Kentucky and reactivated. So, there wasn't much change, really, for the war years. But it did do one thing. By 1948, the general officers evaluated the performance of the 332nd, and in their evaluation, they concluded that separatism and the system was ineffective and inefficient, and therefore, they recommended

to President Harry S Truman that segregation should be ended in the military. And he signed Executive Order 9981 in 1948 that ended segregation in the military. And we think that the performance of the 332nd had a lot to do with that decision. Of course later, it included the gender gap, and now race and gender have nothing to do with one's ability to progress in the military. We just wish that had been true in the corporate world and the world in America; had that happened, we wouldn't have had all the trials and tribulations that we had in the sixties, about voting rights, and Martin Luther King and his programs. So, that was some spin-off from the 332nd's participation.

K: And then finally, what do you think is the most untold story, or what is the thing you want people to remember about the Tuskegee Airmen? What do you want people to go away with?

H: Well, I guess it's that they demonstrated, as a group, that one's race, religion, or gender has nothing to do with his or her ability in whatever their chosen field is; it's an individual thing. And that America, for so long, judged people in group stereotyping, on race, religion, et cetera. In America, it has come to be realized that it's an individual thing now, with people. And, therefore, whatever opportunities there are, they should be offered to everyone, regardless of their race, creed, color, or sex, and let them, individually, demonstrate whether they can or cannot measure up to whatever the standards are.

K: Well, thank you very much.