

# White Fighter Pilots Saved by Black Squadron

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white neighborhoods and forced to ride in the back of buses.

The Tuskegee Airmen endured all of that and much worse. While much of more prestigious jobs in the military were considered off limits to African Americans at the time, Air Force pilot jobs were even more so. Fighter pilots were considered top notch. They were the elite of the elite. Opening these positions to anyone not white was considered impossible. But the Tuskegee Airmen did not give up hope for a better future. They dug in hard and deservedly earned their wings.

Tuskegee Airmen shot down 111 enemy aircraft and destroyed another 150 on the ground during World War II. They also disabled more than 600 enemy locomotives and railroad cars, a German destroyer and 40 other boats and barges. Most importantly, they flew over 200 bomber escort missions against some of the most heavily defended targets in the Third Reich.

The all-black 332nd Fighter Group was credited with "never having lost a single bomber to enemy fighters." While some military personnel have said they may have lost a couple of planes, one thing is for certain: The Tuskegee "Red Tailed Angels" had the best escort record of any bomber escort group out



The Tuskegee Airmen were the first African-American military aviators in the United States armed forces. Formed during World War II, when the American military was racially segregated, as was much of the federal government, they faced racial discrimination, both within and outside the army.

there.

They were known by their P51 aircraft with the tails painted a bright red. When bomber pilots looked out their windows and saw those shiny red tails, they knew they would make it home safely.

When the war ended, the Tuskegee pilots came home with 150 Distinguished Crosses, a Legion of Merit, 744 Air Medals, 8

Purple Hearts, 2 Soldiers Medals, 14 Bronze Stars, a Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation and a Red Star of Yugoslavia. Not bad for a group of men who were allegedly "not capable of learning how to fly."

In my world, the Tuskegee Airmen also did something else huge. They brought my uncle home.

Even though he is a second cousin, I always called Don Bachman "Uncle

Don." Don grew up a farm boy in Iowa. Prior to his military service, he had never even seen a black man. As a young man he could never imagine that someday a group of African American pilots would save his life.

Sitting with Uncle Don in the warm glow of his north Portland living room recently, I wondered how he did it. Listening to him tell the story, I could feel the cold hair on the back of my neck standing up. Terror seemed ever-present as Don recounted his terrifying experience one day in 1944. While he had flown many missions, one in particular remains fresh in his mind nearly 70 years later.

It happened as he flew with a group of seven American B24 bombers with the 459th Bombardment Group. Because of their size, B24s were also called a "Flying Fortress." They had just flown out of Italy to drop bombs on oil factories in Vienna. But heavy winds forced the cancellation of the bombing that day and they were re-routed to Pola, a city at the tip of Yugoslavia where their target was a submarine base.

After a successful drop they ran into a hornet's nest of enemy planes. At 22,000 feet, they were under intense fire. The seven American bombers suffered approximately 60 hits from the German fighter planes that were attacking. Things did not look good.

At 19 years old, Don had already been through Basic Training and Gunnery School. Still a teenager, he had the size to pack himself into the extremely small gun turret at the bottom of one of the B-24s. The noise was overwhelming with the sound of his plane, the 50mm machine guns he was firing, and the German planes shooting at him.

Swinging around in his turret, Don had plenty of targets to shoot at as they were heavily outnumbered by enemy planes. The ball turret was

considered the worst crew position on the Flying Fortress. It was described by military veterans as requiring an agile occupant who was immune to claustrophobia and brave enough to be without a parachute close by.

As the Germans pounded the American bombers, the pilots and crew had to put fear behind them and fight against insurmountable odds. Their very lives depended upon it. In their heart of hearts, however, they had to be wondering if they would make it out of this mess.

Suddenly, another swarm of fighter planes came out of nowhere. The tails of the planes were painted red. Red was the color of the German flag. Did they now have a second squadron of enemy planes coming to insure their demise?

No, this second wave was actually the group of "Red Tailed Angels." One by one, the enemy planes were shot out of the sky by this all-black 332nd Fighter Group. These highly skilled Tuskegee Airmen in their American P51s escorted the B24 squadron safely back to their base.

I tried to imagine what it would be like in that turret, but the truth is I can't. Facing what Don did is more than I can imagine. Sitting there in the turret you were a sitting duck. The Germans knew that if they could take out the ball turret gunner they could blow the mammoth American bombers out of the sky.

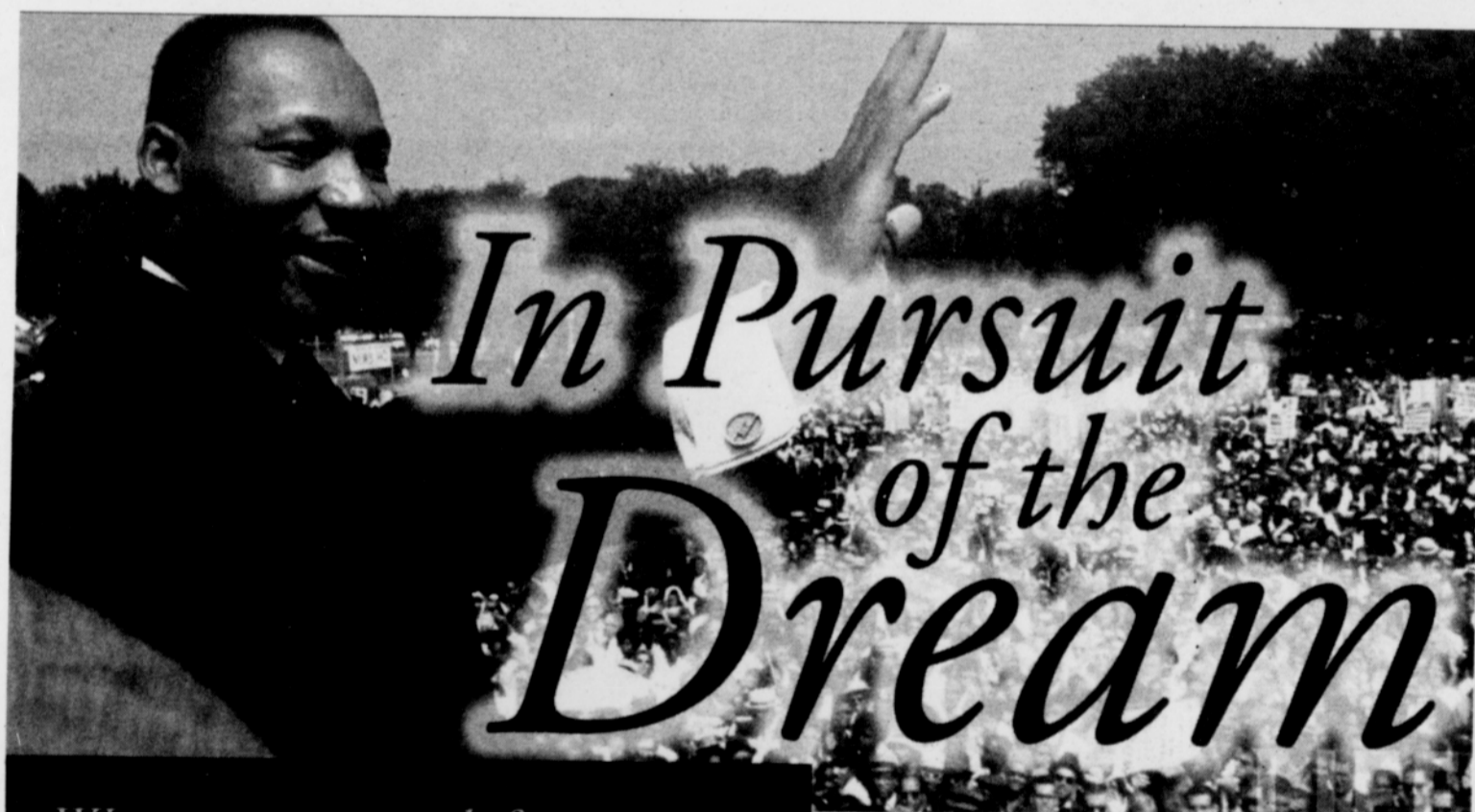
When I asked Uncle Don how on earth he could stand it, he simply looked me in the eye and said, "I had an optimistic outlook; it wasn't gonna be me."

Something else I cannot imagine is the immense relief the B24 crews must have felt to see these Red Tailed Angels come out of nowhere and blast the German fighter planes to pieces. Although racial lines were often problematic on the ground, they were not a concern up in the sky that day. Almost a half a mile straight up in the air race didn't matter. Bravery and skill were the only necessary ingredients to come out of this alive.

Today, Don and his wife, Jane are enjoying over 55 years of marriage, having lived in north Portland the entire time. They have six children, 11 grandchildren and a great grandchild. Their life is full with such a large family. All of this would not have been possible without a few black men proving to the world that African Americans could do anything a white person could.

Thank you Tuskegee Airmen for bringing my Uncle Don home. And thank you Don Bachman for your heroic service. You and the Tuskegee Airmen are part of the reason America is still the best country in the world.


Ron Weber is a Portland writer and long time contributor to the Portland Observer.



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