

WWII Saga Recounts Heroic Exploits of Famed Airmen

The Tuskegee Airmen is the nickname given the 332nd Fighter Group, the first squadron of African-American aviators ever trained by the U.S. Air Force. Formed in 1940, the historic unit had to be stationed at a base on the campus of the Tuskegee



MOVIE REVIEWS

by Kam Williams

Institute in Macon County, Alabama, since the Armed Forces were still racially segregated at the time of its creation.

Even after America entered World War II, the government initially remained reluctant to deploy these pioneering pilots overseas, out of a concern that the presence of black officers in the midst of white soldiers might have a negative effect on military morale. Consequently, the Tuskegee Airmen languished stateside for several years, seeing no action until they were finally cleared for combat in the European theater of operations.

Very Good ☆☆☆
 Rated PG-13 for violence and profanity.
 Running time: 125 minutes
 Distributor: 20th Century Fox

Upon arriving in Italy, their 2nd rate aircraft were upgraded from junky jalopies to state-of-the-art, P-51 Mustang fighter planes, thereby enabling them to escort B-17 bombers on dangerous raids behind enemy lines deep into Germany territory. The untested pilots proceeded to perform admirably on over 1,500 successful missions, demonstrating an unexpected combination of competence and valor in the process.

Red Tails is an eye-popping, special-f/x driven adventure which recreates these belatedly-appreciated veterans' daring exploits in the skies, while chronicling their simultaneous, uncompromising quest for dignity in the face of the incessant humiliation mandated by Jim Crow. The movie marks the feature film debut of Anthony

Hemingway, who is previously best known for having shot episodes of a host of TV series, including *The Wire*, *True Blood*, *Treme*, *The Closer*, and *CSI: NY*.

The picture was produced by Lucasfilm where it has been a pet project of the studio's legendary founder, George Lucas, for the past quarter-century. And it features an ensemble cast topped by Academy Award-winner Cuba "Show me the money!" Gooding (for *Jerry Maguire*) and Oscar-nominee Terrence Howard (for *Hustle & Flow*).

Aside from raising the question of the arbitrary color line, the plot reads like a typical, cliché-ridden war flick revolving around a tight-knit, motley crew of colorful characters. Each is based on a simplistically-drawn archetype, like the ill-fated pilot you know isn't long for this world the moment he's shown sitting in his cockpit gazing fondly at a picture of his fiancée right before takeoff.

Another familiar figure is the cigar-chomping Major (Gooding), a paternalistic pontificator given to delivering inspirational speeches about God, mom and apple pie. He cares about each of the men under his command, including alcoholic "Easy" Julian (Parker); daredevil "Lightning" Little (David Oyelowo); class clown "Joker" George (Elijah Kelley); and "Junior" Gannon (Tristan Wilds), a youngster who yearns to be taken seriously by his teasing colleagues.

Meanwhile, back at the Pentagon, we find exasperated Colonel A.J. Bullard (Howard) tirelessly lobbying the military brass to put an end to racial discrimination in the ranks. In the end, the film proves more memorable for its eye-popping, action sequences than for its corny dialogue which ranges from preachy ("We're on the side of God Almighty!") to trite poster-speak (Let's give those newspapers something to write about!).

Nonetheless, *Red Tails* amounts to a worthy, overdue tribute to a group of intrepid, World War II heroes who never let their second-class status diminish their patriotism even one iota.



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