

FEATURE ARTICLES

General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Biography, Part 1

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Every Airman today owes a debt of gratitude to General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.. Before the Air Force became a separate service and before the Air Force Academy established what were to become the Air Force Core Values—Integrity First, Service Before Self, Excellence in All We Do—Gen Davis was living them, often in the face of great adversity. As a combat Airman, Gen Davis was respected for his leadership and courage under fire, his exacting standards and discipline, his tenacity and commitment, and his ability to innovate and find a way forward. Gen Davis broke barriers and built bridges that established him as one of our great American leaders.

He was born on December 18, 1912 in Washington, D.C., the son of Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. and Elnora Dickerson Davis. His father, a renowned military officer, became the first Black General Officer in the United States Army. Sadly, young B.O. Davis' mother died from complications in childbirth in 1916 when the young man was only four years old. His father later remarried Sadie Overton, a professor of English at Wilberforce University, who was very influential in the young man's development (Davis, 1991).

The elder Davis was a strong role model for his son. Once in 1924, while he was assigned as the Professor of Military Science at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, the infamous Ku Klux Klan staged a parade through Tuskegee Institute one night to challenge the construction of a veteran's hospital that would employ Black doctors and nurses. Leading his family onto the porch, he stood silently in his white dress uniform while his family sat quietly under the porch light in silent protest as the Klansman marched by with their torches and hoods. Young B.O. Davis, Jr. learned an important lesson in courage and resilience from his father that night (Davis, 1991).

Author Note

The following article is the first half of a two-part extended biographical essay. The essay will soon appear as an Air University Press publication, and we acknowledge their kind permission in allowing us to publish the work here. Of note, the author originally prepared this piece in preparation for the naming ceremony of the USAF Academy Airfield, home to the 306th Flying Training Group and now named the General Benjamin O. Davis Airfield.

The next year, young Davis attended a barnstorming exhibition at Bolling Field in Washington, D.C. (now Bolling Air Force Base) where an exhibition pilot offered him an opportunity to ride in his airplane with him. Davis jumped at the chance and so enjoyed the flight that he vowed to become an Airman one day and pilot an airplane himself (Gropman, 1990).

His father's military duties took the family to Ohio, and the younger Davis attended Central High School in Cleveland, graduating in 1929. He enrolled in Western Reserve University from 1929-1930, and later entered the University of Chicago from 1930-1932. All the while, he dreamed of being a military pilot and decided to contact Oscar De Priest, the only African American Member of Congress at that time. De Priest sponsored the young man for an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York (Davis, 1991).

Shortly after arriving at the U.S. Military Academy, Cadet Davis was isolated by his own classmates and effectively "silenced" during his four years there. Although he described the silent treatment as something reserved for cadets who had "violated the honor code but refused to resign," Davis endured four years of this treatment because of his race. His classmates only spoke to him on official business. He lived alone, ate alone, and sat on the bus to football games alone (Davis, 1991, p. 27). Although this treatment was not sanctioned by the Honor Committee, neither did it do

anything to stop it. He faced hostile and often relentless challenges and obstacles during his time as a cadet (Gropman, 1990).

Such treatment only served to stoke Davis' grit and determination to graduate. He committed himself to proving to everyone at West Point the measure of the man with whom they were dealing. He graduated 35th out of 276 in the Class of 1936. When retired General of the Armies John J. Pershing presented him with the gold bars of an Army second lieutenant, his classmates broke their silence and applauded.

"The courage, tenacity, and intelligence with which [Davis] conquered a problem incomparably more difficult than plebe year won for him the sincere admiration of his classmates, and his single-minded determination to continue in his chosen career cannot fail to inspire respect wherever fortune may lead him." (Howitzer, 1936)

After graduation, 2Lt Davis married the love of his life, Agatha Scott, whom he had courted while attending the U.S. Military Academy (Davis, 1991). Cadets like Davis who graduated with a high standing in their class normally had their choice of assignments, and 2Lt Davis expected that he, too, would at last achieve his dream of becoming an Airman. He applied for flight training in the Air Corps but was denied. The segregated Army did not have an African American squadron or training

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facility. Further, a racist 1925 study by the Army War College that governed the thinking of many Army leaders opined that Blacks were a “mentally inferior subspecies of the human race [sic],” whose brains were smaller and weighed 10 ounces less than whites, making them unsuitable for the highly technical branches of the Army like aviation. This hidebound study would continue to be used to justify racist segregation by the military well into World War II (Gropman, 1990, p. 49-51; Davis, 1991; Moye, 2010).

As a result, 2Lt Davis was assigned to the segregated all-Black 24th Infantry Regiment at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he attended the U.S. Army Infantry School but could not enter the all-white officers’ club. His next assignment was to serve as a military tactics course instructor at Tuskegee Institute, and he was promoted to First Lieutenant in 1939 (Davis, 1991). That year, strong political pressure from both black and white political leaders urged Congress and the President to alter Air Corps policies and establish a flying program for African Americans. The Civilian Pilot Training Act established a reserve civilian pilot training program across the nation, including six Black colleges of which Tuskegee Institute was one. In addition, the Roosevelt Administration ordered the War Department to create an African American Air Corps unit (Davis, 1991; Moye, 2010).

Promoted once again, now Captain Davis was assigned to begin training in the first class of 13 African American Airmen at Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF), Class 42-C. As the senior officer and with his West Point education, Capt Davis was the obvious choice to lead his class, and he and his father were the only two Black officers in the Army! Life for the new student pilots was extremely challenging at first in the segregationist South. Tents with dirt floors served as their living quarters and the student mess hall was a

wooden building with a dirt floor, all of which turned into a sea of mud whenever it rained. White service members dined in a finished mess hall with tablecloths and uniformed African American waitresses. Even after buildings were finished, segregation remained the rule at Tuskegee Army Airfield (Bucholtz, 2007). Davis described the early base as, “a prison camp” (1991, pp. 75-82).

This did not dampen the spirits of Class 42-C, who commenced their flight training with enthusiasm and determination. Lt Col Noel Parrish, then the base Director of Training, immediately recognized Capt Davis’ exemplary leadership skills. Parrish had a breadth of flight training experience in the pre-war Army, and noted that as a group Military Academy graduates had “a surprisingly high elimination rate” from pilot training compared to their non-West Point counterparts. In a later interview, Parrish stated that the attributes they learned that made them superb infantry officers were a hindrance to their learning to fly (Moye, 2010, pp. 59-60). Airmanship required a certain mental agility to think, execute, and lead spatially in the third dimension, conceptually thinking fluidly and far ahead of the aircraft—then accomplishing the required maneuvers.

In this regard, Davis was no exception to his West Point peers and he was not a natural pilot. Parrish, who later became the stellar commander of Tuskegee Army Airfield who de-segregated facilities and helped transform a program Army brass deemed an “experiment” into an “experience” for its personnel, took a personal interest in Davis’ success, applying his vast instructional experience to teach the young officer what it is to be an Airman. The transformation was efficacious and Capt Davis became the first black officer to solo in an Air Corps aircraft. He steadily advanced through the courses of instruction that included the

PT-17 Stearman, the Vultee BT-13, and finally the T-6 Texan. He and four of his remaining classmates of Class 42-C graduated on 7 March 1942 (Bucholtz, 2007; Moye, 2010).

These men were the nucleus of pilots of what would eventually become the 99th Fighter Squadron, whose ground crews were training in non-segregated classes at Chanute Field, Illinois. However, the squadron required a complement of 33 pilots, nearly twice that number of administrative, support, and medical officers, and nearly 500 ground support enlisted personnel. Until the full complement of pilots and support personnel was achieved, it would be months before the squadron could be fully manned and ready for combat. As more classes of pilots arrived at TAAF and graduated, the base received some frontline, though war-weary, combat aircraft—P-39 Airacobras and P-40 Warhawks. Now Lt Col Davis and his pilots were building their flight time in the types of warplanes they would fly in combat overseas (Davis, 1991; Moye, 2010).

Lt Col Davis used this training time to mold his Airmen into a fighting squadron with a clear sense of mission and purpose. As Davis later said, “...everyone in the 99th understood...their performance would create the future environment for Blacks.” They were fighting a two-front war—a war against Nazi racism overseas and a war against racism at home—the so-called “Double V for Victory” (Gropman, 1990, p. 76). At last, on April 1, 1943, the squadron received its overseas orders. After a long train ride to Camp Shanks, New York, the squadron embarked on the troop ship *Mariposa* on April 15, 1943, zig-zagging across the Atlantic Ocean for over a week to avoid Nazi U-boats. The *Mariposa* docked in Casablanca, Morocco on April 24, and the squadron moved to a former *Luftwaffe* air base at Oued N’Ja. There,

they received 27 brand new Curtis P-40L Warhawks powered by the famous British Merlin engine. Lt Col Davis immediately began a training regimen. Twelfth Air Force leadership voiced concern to Washington that all new P-40 units lacked critical combat training when they arrived overseas, and Maj Gen John Cannon set up a northwest Africa training command to address the shortfalls. Also, Davis himself expressed concern that although he and his flight commanders had the rank and authority as squadron leaders, they lacked the flight hours and Airmanship experience of their peers in other P-40 squadrons (Davis, 1991; Hasdorff, 1975).

Col Philip Cochran, an experienced P-40 combat commander who took over training the new units, recommended to Cannon that Davis and his flight leaders be temporarily integrated into an experienced unit and paired with their counterparts in that squadron to gain that experience, but his reasonable suggestion of integration was denied. Instead, Cochran was dispatched to Oued N’Ja, along with two experienced Warhawk pilots, to begin training in the combat zone. Cochran enjoyed his time with the fun-loving 99th FS, finding that Lt Col Davis set exacting standards and his Airmen responded in kind; the pilots flew beautiful and precise formation, which gave them a firm foundation for learning how to dive bomb and strafe in the P-40. Cochran praised the group their natural abilities at dive bombing. Cochran also taught the 99th FS aerial tactics and how to best engage Axis fighters. With its four 50-caliber machine guns and rugged design, the Warhawk had firepower and was well suited for the grueling desert climate. It could out-turn most Axis fighters and in the hands of a skilled pilot, the P-40 was a lethal machine (Broadnax, 2007; Bucholtz, 2007; Davis, 1991; Hasdorff, 1975). However, its greatest strength was when pilots flew as a team. Time and again, from China to New Guinea to North Africa, P-40 pilots learned that when they

fought together, they emerged from battle victorious. The African American pilots of the 99th FS embraced this Airmanship concept of teamwork wholeheartedly, and Lt Col Davis employed it to the utmost (Bergerud, 2001).

Soon, the 99th was ready for combat and moved to a new base on Cape Bon, Tunisia, where they began flying dive bombing and strafing missions against the Axis fortress island of Pantelleria, which had to be reduced before the Allies could invade Sicily. For this operation, the 99th FS was attached to the 33rd Fighter Group under Col William Momyer, who gave his new charges minimal guidance or assistance. Momyer made his contempt for the 99th FS known from the outset. When Lt Col Davis and his operations officer, Maj George “Spanky” Roberts reported to the 33rd FG headquarters, Momyer failed to return their salutes. He deliberately changed briefing times to insure the pilots of the 99th arrived late. Once again, Lt Col Davis was forced to overcome unnecessary obstacles in order to prove the mettle of his squadron. His secret was to display an upbeat commitment to the mission at hand—an enthusiasm that was contagious (Bucholtz, 2007; Davis, 1991; Francis, 2008; Gropman, 1990).

The 99th flew its first combat mission on the morning of June 2, 1943, dive-bombing the heavily defend installations as enemy anti-aircraft fire surrounded them. For seven straight days, the 99th FS attacked the Axis fortress without spotting a hostile fighter. On June 9, they put Cochran’s training to the test when a patrol of six P-40s from the 99th was escorting a flight of A-20 Havoc attack bombers over Pantelleria. Suddenly, four Nazi fighters dived on them from above and the rear, but they had failed to achieve surprise. The vigilant African American Airmen spotted the oncoming attack and turned to meet it head on. In the ensuing, inconclusive engagement, the Warhawk pilots

damaged at least one Nazi fighter and left it smoking while only receiving minimal damage themselves. Most importantly, they had protected the bombers with which they were entrusted, though another squadron escorted the bombers home (Bucholtz, 2007; Dryden, 1997).

Lt Col Davis was somewhat concerned with how his squadron reacted on these early bomber escort missions. Like most squadrons, the pilots of the 99th were eager for a “kill” and hastily broke ranks to engage the enemy, leaving the bombers momentarily exposed. Davis instilled tighter flight discipline, directing that only elements or flights would be dispatched to meet the attack, while the bulk of the squadron maintained “top cover” over the bombers. In this way, Lt Col Davis defeated any decoy attacks and frustrated the enemy’s plans. Additionally, the engaging fighters typically dropped their external auxiliary fuel tanks in order to be more maneuverable for the ensuing battle, which meant they also now had less fuel to continue the escort after the engagement. Davis directed that since those fighters had to return to base after the battle anyway, they should pair up with damaged bombers—“wounded birds”—so that the bombers had safe escort home (Gropman, 1990). His Airmanship skills were growing.

Momyer, however, reported this enthusiasm and eagerness as “panicky” and “undisciplined” in his official communiques to the XII Fighter Command Headquarters. Momyer cited this battle as an example of the lack of discipline for leaving the bombers to engage the enemy, concluding, “it is my opinion that they are not of the fighting caliber of any squadron in the group.” Lt Col Davis was not told of the allegations in theater (Broadnax, 2007, p. 129; Bucholtz, 2007; Davis, 1991; Gropman, 1990; Moye, 2010).

Meanwhile, Davis continued to lead the 99th FS on missions against Pantelleria Island, averaging two missions daily. While some missions targeted enemy gun sites, other missions flew bomber escort for B-25 and A-20 aircraft. On 11 June 1943, their efforts bore fruit: Pantelleria surrendered to become the first territory ever captured by the use of air power alone.

Now the Allies prepared for the campaign against Sicily. While escorting B-25 bombers attacking Castelvetro Airfield in southwestern Sicily, a formation of the 99th FS came under attack from above. In the ensuing battle, 1st Lt Charles “Seabuster” Hall became the first Tuskegee Airman credited with an aerial victory when he shot down a Nazi FW-190. Lt W. I. Lawson claimed a probable. However, both 1st Lt Sherman White and 2nd Lt James McCullin became the first Tuskegee Airmen lost in combat. They were most likely shot down in the diving attack by the Axis fighters. Designed as a ground attack aircraft, the P-40 lacked the high altitude capability needed by escort aircraft and the pilots of the 99th FS remained vulnerable to attacks from on high (Bucholtz, 2007; Davis, 1991; Haulman-Combat Deaths, n.d.).

For the next several months, Davis’ Airmen continued providing excellent air support—flying bomber escort, providing “top cover” for the landing of Allied troops in Sicily, and flying dive bombing and strafing missions. In September 1943, Lt Col Davis was recalled stateside to take command of the all-Black 332nd Fighter Group, consisting of the 100th, 301st, and 302nd Fighter Squadrons. However, Momyer’s inflammatory letter had gotten traction. Endorsed along his chain of command all the way to the Chief of Staff, Gen Henry H. Arnold, he recommended that the Tuskegee Airmen either be disbanded or relegated to benign coastal patrol missions. Further, *Time*

magazine ran an article entitled “Experiment Proved?” that released excerpts from the report, including classified information (Bucholtz, 2007; Davis, 1991; Moye, 2010).

Davis was incensed, but he was on the threshold of one of his greatest triumphs. Called to testify before the War Department’s Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies (the McCloy Committee), Davis remained poised and composed during his testimony. He was accustomed to maintaining his cool in the face of overt racism. Using data and fact, Davis was able to show that the 99th FS compared favorably with other P-40 squadrons, and that one of the main issues of Momyer’s argument, that the 99th had not achieved many aerial victories, was irrelevant since its main mission was to support troops on the ground—a mission the squadron had done superbly. Davis also highlighted the fact that the 99th was undermanned compared to white P-40 squadrons, since the sole pipeline-training source of TAAF was inadequate to supply replacement pilots as well as build the 332nd FG and the newly formed 477th Bombardment Group. This was a poignant jab at segregation’s detrimental impact on the war effort (Davis, 1991; Gropman, 1990; Moye, 2010). It was also a compelling argument, and Lt Col Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. carried the day.

Meanwhile, the 99th FS in Italy began to thrive when they were attached to the 79th FG under Col Earl Bates, Jr., who treated his new squadron like the rest of his command. They were equals integrated into his battle formations—Black pilots even led white pilots into battle and vice-versa. While supporting the landings of Allied troops at Anzio beachhead on January 27, the 99th FS intercepted a formation of 15 FW-190s that were attacking Allied ships. The 99th FS destroyed 10 enemy aircraft and the next

day, when Nazi aircraft threatened American ground forces at Anzio, the 99th destroyed three more enemy aircraft—totaling 13 victories in two days! At last, the Tuskegee Airmen stood vindicated against their detractors. Davis' former command became one of the premier dive-bombing squadrons in the theater and earned the respect of their peers. The pilots of the 99th enjoyed their time as members of the 79th FG and were saddened when they were reassigned—to the African American 332nd Fighter Group (Aviation History, 1999; Bucholtz, 2007).

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