

PROFILE IN LEADERSHIP

Profile in Leadership: General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.

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Editor's note: We published the first half of this biographical piece in our Spring 2022 issue (Volume 9: Number 1) at URL: <https://jclcdusafa.org/index.php/jcld/issue/view/1>. The author highlights several themes that emerge from Davis's experience as a leader, including turning challenges into opportunities, focusing on unit morale and culture, and winning over detractors through humility and demonstrating competence. The story picks up with his elevation to command of the 332nd Fighter Group.

The 332nd FG embarked for Europe in January 1944. Lt Col Davis had become the first Black fighter group commander when he assumed command of the 332nd Fighter Group at Selfridge Field, Michigan, on October 8, 1943. Davis discovered that unlike his former unit, the 99th FS, the pilots and ground crew of the 332nd lacked unit cohesion, purpose, and identity as a result of the segregationist policies of its last commander, Col Robert Selway, Jr. Lt Col Davis now faced one of the most challenging problems of his command, since he had to mold his Airmen into a cohesive combat unit ready to deploy to Europe. Having only a few months to prepare what he termed a “gaggle” for combat, Lt Col Davis called upon all of his leadership and airmanship expertise to bond his Airmen into a proud, disciplined, and effective fighting force (Davis, 1991).

In early February 1944, the 332nd Fighter Group disembarked in Italy at last and by the third of the month had arrived at their first operational overseas bases. The group was assigned to fly coastal patrol missions in worn out P-39 Airacobra aircraft, a mission Davis considered “a slap in the face” (Davis, 1991, pp. 77–78). Still, he kept his feelings to himself and embraced the new mission with enthusiasm and commitment to build the morale of his unit. He also

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used this time to create cohesion and esprit de corps. Although a relatively stable gun platform, the P-39 had unreliable flight characteristics and the rundown aircraft proved to be more lethal to the unit than enemy aircraft. Several pilots died in crashes. Once again, Davis' leadership and airmanship skills were tested, but his reputation attracted the attention of the commander of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, Lt Gen Ira C. Eaker (Bergerud, 2001; Bucholtz, 2007; Gropman, 1990).

In early March, Lt Col Davis met with Eaker at the latter's headquarters at Caserta. Eaker had a problem that spring of 1944: his 15th Air Force that led his strategic bombing effort against Nazi Germany had just 21 bombardment groups with only six fighter groups to protect them, unlike his previous command the "Mighty Eighth" Air Force flying out of Britain that at its peak had 40 bombardment groups and 15 fighter groups to provide protection. Eaker had lost 114 heavy bombers carrying 1,140 Airmen in February. He was facing even greater losses as the 15th Air Force intensified its attacks against the Nazi's "Fortress Europe" in the coming months. Eaker wanted to complement the 332nd FG with the 99th FS so that he could add a "heavy" fighter group of four squadrons to his escorts; at the time, most fighter groups consisted of only three squadrons (Davis, 1991; Gropman, 1990). Was Davis interested?

Davis jumped at the chance and in May the 332nd moved for the last time to a new air base at Ramitelli, where they received hand-me-down P-47 fighter aircraft. These aircraft had belonged to a group that used a checker tail paint scheme for identification, and the 332nd painted over that design with a distinctive, solid red paint scheme forever identifying themselves as the "Red Tails." In addition, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. was promoted to colonel. For the time being, the 99th FS remained with Twelfth Air Force supporting a critical offensive—Operation Strangle (Bucholtz, 2007; Gropman, 1990).

Col Davis led the 332nd FG on its first 15th Air Force mission on June 7, 1944 in a fighter sweep of the Ferrara-Bologna area. The next day he led the group on its first bomber escort mission, protecting the B-17s of the 5th Bombardment Wing and beginning the group's storied history of shepherding bombers. Unlike other fighter groups that departed from escort duties over the target area in favor of seeking their own targets of opportunity, Davis' innovation to group tactics was simple: stay with the bombers as "top cover" through the target area; stay with them on the way home. He also continued to dispatch flights or elements to stay close to the "wounded birds" that were stripped away from the bomber stream due to battle damage (Bucholtz, 2007; Haulman-Escorts n.d.a).

Col Davis earned the Distinguished Flying Cross for skillfully leading the group's first mission to Germany on June 9, when the 332nd helped escort B-24 and B-17 aircraft of the 5th, 47th, 49th, 55th, and 304th bombardment wings on a difficult mission to Munich. Despite the lack of enough fighter escorts, which resulted in the loss of two B-24s of the 459th Bombardment Group, the first bombers lost under the protection of the 332nd FG, the Red Tails downed five enemy aircraft (Bucholtz, 2007).

On 4 July 1944, the 332nd FG flew its first mission in the P-51 Mustang. Although its first mounts were "hand-me-downs" like the P-47 that they were replacing, the "Mustang" allowed the Red Tail pilots to soar above the high-flying B-17 bombers and provide a proper top cover while flying escort. It proved to be one of the best piston-engine fighters of the war and allowed the Red Tails to increase their number of aerial victories. The 99th FS joined the group on July 6. While other fighter groups boasted of the number of aerial victories they achieved, the 332nd celebrated the number of bombers they protected. During operations with 15th Air Force, the Red Tails flew 179 escort missions and suffered bomber losses on only seven of those missions—a

total of 27 bombers shot down by enemy aircraft compared with the average of other fighter groups of 15th Air Force of 46. The Red Tails accounted for 112 confirmed aerial victories over Axis aircraft during the war, including three Messerschmitt Me-262 jet fighters on the March 24, 1945 mission to Berlin—the longest 15th Air Force mission of the war. Besides bomber escort, they also escorted reconnaissance and transport aircraft, flew fighter sweeps as well as strafing missions and ground attack missions. Many a locomotive and Axis airfield found themselves under the guns of the 332nd FG (Broadnax, 2007; Davis, 1991; Haulman, 2011; Jablonski, 1965).

Because of the inability of the training pipeline to provide adequate numbers of replacement pilots, Red Tail pilots often flew 75 missions before rotating stateside whereas their white counterparts rotated after 50 missions. Despite the added burden of the personnel system and the addition of a fourth squadron to the group, Col Davis rose to meet each challenge. When 20 B-24s were forced to divert to Ramitelli because of bad weather in December 1944, Col Davis used the occasion as an opportunity to bridge the racial divide. The 332nd welcomed some 200 white aircrew who lived with the Red Tails for 5 days and afforded them warm hospitality. It was the first time many of the bomber crews learned that their “Red Tail angels” were Black, and although a few still retained racial bigotry, most were very grateful and came away with a new perspective (Davis, 1991; Gropman, 1990).

On June 8, 1945, Col Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. was presented the Silver Star for gallantry in action. Other Red Tails received five Distinguished Flying Crosses, five Air Medals, and one Bronze Star in an impressive ceremony. The group paraded in review to say farewell to Col Davis, who was returning to the United States to assume command of the 477th Composite Group at Godman Field, Kentucky (Bucholtz, 2007; Davis, 1991).

It seemed that with each return to the United States to assume command of a combat group, Col Davis found an even more precipitous obstacle to overcome. Such was the case with the 477th Bombardment Group at Godman Field, Kentucky. Firstly, Godman Field lacked the space to adequately train and prepare the bombardment squadrons for combat. Secondly, the unit lacked cohesion, in part because it had moved around to various airfields disrupting training. Ground personnel as well as aircrews were also switched, which prevented cohesiveness. Other causes included inadequate gunnery training and a lack of navigators and bombardiers. In addition, the group was changing from a bombardment group of four squadrons with B-25Js to a composite group of two bomb squadrons and one fighter squadron, the old 99th FS that was being rotated back to the United States in preparation for the Pacific War. Finally, the unit’s morale was at a low ebb. Davis later described the situation as “just disgraceful.” (Gropman, 1990, p. 158).

In April of 1945, Black officers at Freeman Field, Indiana, where the 477th was then assigned attempted to again non-violently desegregate the white officers’ club, challenging the segregationist policies of Col Selway and his predecessors, which contradicted War Department regulations. This so-called “Freeman Field Mutiny” saw the mass arrest of Black officers and brought unfavorable, national attention on the Army Air Forces as well as foreshadowed the mass protests of the 1950s and 1960s. Eventually, the War Department ordered the release of most of the 120 African American officers who had been arrested. Training had been curtailed. Segregation consumed the entire unit (Moye, 2010).

This was the situation Col Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. walked into when he assumed command of the group from Selway on June 21, 1945. The next day, the group was redesignated as the 477th Composite Group with two bombardment squadrons and one fighter squadron.

Davis had 3 months before the unit was supposed to deploy to Okinawa, so he got to work re-motivating and preparing the unit for war in his measured, disciplined fashion. Fortunately, he also brought 30 personnel from the 332nd FG in Italy with him to assist him in this task. On July 1, Col Davis became the first Black officer to command a major air base when he assumed command of Godman Field and shortly thereafter the 99th FS began receiving brand new long-range P-47N fighters (Davis, 1991). The following month, the Empire of Japan announced its intention to surrender, which it did on September 2, 1945 aboard the battleship USS *Missouri*, ending World War II.

One might argue that Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. made his biggest impact on the Air Force in the second half of his career after World War II. In March 1946, the 477th Composite Group moved to Lockbourne Army Air Base, outside of Columbus, Ohio. Although local residents were initially distressed at the arrival of this African American unit on their back porch, Col Davis used the opportunity to again bridge the racial divide and cultivate warm relations between the base and the local community. Many of the white employees on the base, such as firefighters, were also in fear of losing their jobs. Davis put them at ease and assured them that they could stay as long as they did their jobs. He won “very great allies” with the local community (Davis, 1991; Gropman, 1990, pp. 164–167).

Col Davis insisted upon doing the things that base commanders in the military traditionally did with the local community. In preparation for the 1948 Olympics, Lockbourne was designated as a reception base for the eastern US. One of the 477th CG’s Airmen won a gold medal, putting Columbus on the sports pages across the nation and earning the esteem of the local community. Local dignitaries came out for Armed Forces Day ceremonies, proud to be invited to “their base.” Davis promised to make the base the best in the Air Force, and a 1948 Tactical Air Command inspection report called it a model

for other Air Force bases. In addition, esteemed WWII generals such as Emmet “Rosie” O’Donnell and Elwood “Pete” Quesada added their plaudits to Col Davis and his team at Lockbourne (Davis, 1991; Gropman, 1990).

Changes were in store for the group. In July 1947, the 477th Composite Group was inactivated and the 332nd Fighter Group was reactivated at Lockbourne, with the 99th, 100th, and 301st fighter squadrons comprising the unit. On July 28, Col Davis became the commander of the 332nd Fighter Wing, the first Black commander of a wing, although his tenure was short (Bucholtz, 2007).

The Air Force was seriously investigating integration, in part due to Col Noel Parrish’s paper describing segregation as “inefficient” and “expensive.” Col Davis was invited to serve as an advisor to the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel at the Pentagon, who was conducting a study on USAF racial policies and practices. Col Davis was also invited to work with the Fahy Committee to establish the formal Air Force integration policy and in that role reported to the Assistance Secretary of the Air Force. His work in this regard was vital to the Air Force, which became the first branch of the Armed Forces to integrate—even before President Harry Truman’s famous Executive Order 9,981 went into effect. Both white and African American pilots were soon training together at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona (Davis, 1991; Moye, 2010).

In recognition of Col Davis’ great leadership potential, Air Force leaders selected him to be the first Black officer to attend Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, in 1949. He found the experience very rewarding, both professionally and socially before moving on to the Air Staff assigned to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, where he continued to put his Airmanship skills to use. In an interview, Davis described how as Chief of the Fighter Branch his office became “the authority on the Korean War” developing doctrine for fighter aviation across the entire Air Force,

learned from the wartime experience of USAF fighter units. Col Davis took his team to the theater of war in Korea to discuss operations with the combatants themselves, earning tremendous respect. He remarked that “our word carried a lot of weight” (Davis, 1991, pp. 159–165). Davis later commanded in Wing in Korea, was promoted to general officer, and served in senior staff positions in Europe, Washington, DC, and Korea, making important contributions in each assignment.

Lt Gen Davis became the commander of the 13th Air Force at Clark Air Base, Republic of the Philippines, in August 1967. It was another laurel in his string of “firsts” and he continued his excellent service, supporting his fellow numbered air force commanders who were fighting the War in Southeast Asia (Gropman, 1990). The next year, Lt Gen Davis was called upon to serve as the Deputy Commander in Chief, US Strike Command with headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. He was also named as Commander in Chief, Middle-East, Southern Asia, and Africa and became heavily involved in humanitarian operations in Pakistan, India, and Africa. However, due to the intensification of the War in Southeast Asia, operations at Strike Command were being curtailed and its senior leaders opted for retirement. This included Lt Gen Davis, who officially retired from Active Duty on February 1, 1970 (Davis, 1991).

Even in retirement, Gen Davis continued to serve our Nation. He held several government posts beginning in 1970. In response to a surge in airline hijackings, he was named head of the Federal Sky Marshal Program, and in 1971 he was made Assistant Secretary for Environment, Safety, and Consumer Affairs of the US Department of Transportation (Davis, 1991).

Perhaps Gen Davis’ most important contribution to the Air Force was his work for the United States Air Force Academy. He was elected to both the Board of Visitors of the Academy as well as the Board of Trust-

ees of the Association of Graduates in 1971. The early 1970s were a very turbulent era of the Air Force Academy as it was for the rest of the Nation. It was a period of anti-war protests, violence, and drug use that spilled over to the Academy and the Cadet Wing. Attrition soared—reaching 43.77% for the Class of 1974. Minority cadets were among the hardest hit, and when the Equal Rights Amendment seemed on the verge of passing in 1972, the admission of women to the military service academies seemed to be inevitable (HQ USAFA, 1973, 1974, 1975).

Lt Gen A.P. Clark, the Academy Superintendent, turned to the West Point classmate he had silenced in 1932 for help, asking Gen Davis to assist the USAF Academy in its time of need. Gen Davis enthusiastically applied the same resolve and integrity to these challenges as he had on Active Duty. He was personally involved with cadets, faculty, and staff, speaking to classes and in small groups. As President of the Board of Visitors, he collaborated with Clark and his staff, and OPLAN 7-73, a contingency plan to integrate women into the Cadet Wing, was produced. As a result, attrition was curbed and when the Class of 1978 arrived it saw the largest admission of minority cadets of all kinds that the Air Force Academy had ever received up to that time. Two years later, USAFA became the first military service academy to admit women (Clark, 2002).

The Academy’s Falcon Foundation paid tribute to him with a scholarship named in his honor, and Gen Davis served as a member of the Foundation from 1982 to 1991. In 1995, Gen Davis was honored by the Cadet Wing when he was presented the Thomas D. White National Defense Award. His indispensable work for the Air Force Academy secured its mission of creating Leaders of Character for our Nation for many generations to come (Davis Biography, 1995).

On December 9, 1998, President William Jefferson Clinton recalled him to Active Duty and advanced him

to the rank of General, US Air Force (four-star rank). General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. then returned to the roll of retired officers. General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. passed away on July 4, 2002 and was buried with full military honors on July 17, 2002 at Arlington National Cemetery.

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