

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN-ESCORTED BOMBERS LOST TO ENEMY AIRCRAFT

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The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II deserve praise as the vanguard for racial equality in the armed forces of the United States. Fighting successfully for the right to fly combat missions in defense of their country, they proved that black men could succeed in a field from which they had previously been excluded. They fought successfully against two enemies at the same time: Nazi Germany, and racism among their own countrymen. The Tuskegee Airmen often paid the supreme sacrifice in order to protect the lives of the bomber crews they were escorting, destroying well over a hundred enemy aircraft, including three German jets. They laid the foundation for the integration of all the services, and, eventually, American society as a whole. By increasing opportunities for African-Americans, they earned an important and indelible place in American history.

Not all of the statements about the legendary Tuskegee Airmen can be verified historically. One such statement is that during their escort missions, they “never lost a bomber” to enemy aircraft fire. The 332d Fighter Group sometimes escorted bombers that were shot down by enemy aircraft. This paper will focus on five days when this occurred: June 9, 1944; July 12, 1944; July 18, 1944; July 20, 1944; and March 24, 1945. There might have been other days as well.

The research method I followed in researching the question was as follows. First I determined, for each of the days in question, which bombardment wing or wings the 332d Fighter Group was assigned to escort, and the time frame and area for the escort. I

found this information in the daily narrative mission reports of the 332d Fighter Group, found in the monthly histories of the group, and in the operations orders found in the Fifteenth Air Force mission folders per day. Next I checked the Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for the day in question to see which bombardment groups were assigned to the wing or wings the 332d Fighter Group was escorting that day, and to see, among the bombardment group mission reports in the same folder, if any of the group's bombers were lost to enemy aircraft fire. Finally, I checked the missing air crew reports of the bombardment groups the 332d Fighter Group was escorting that day to confirm which of the bombers was shot down by enemy aircraft, and where and when the loss occurred. To further confirm the losses, I looked at the German fighter pilot claims, which include the bomber types shot down and when and where they were supposed to have been shot down. By looking at this combination of documents, and putting them together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, I determined if any bombers the Tuskegee Airmen were escorting were shot down by enemy aircraft that day.

Table I: Fifteenth Air Force Organization as of October 1944

Wing	Assigned Components
5 th Bombardment (B-17s)	2d, 97 th , 99 th , 301 st , 463d, 483d Bombardment Groups
47 th Bombardment (B-24s)	98 th , 376 th , 449 th , 450 th Bombardment Groups
49 th Bombardment (B-24s)	451 st , 461 st , 484 th Bombardment Groups
55 th Bombardment (B-24s)	460 th , 464 th , 465 th , 485 th Bombardment Groups
304 th Bombardment (B-24s)	454 th , 455 th , 456 th , 459 th Bombardment Groups
305 th Fighter (Provisional) (P-38s)	1 st , 14 th , 82d Fighter Groups
306 th Fighter (P-51s)	31 st , 52d, 325 th , 332d Fighter Groups

In the summer and fall of 1944, the Fifteenth Air Force had 7 fighter groups available to escort 21 bombardment groups. In other words, for each fighter group, there were three bombardment groups. In fact, on many of the missions in the summer and fall

of 1944, each fighter group was typically assigned one bombardment wing to escort on a given day, and each of those wings consisted of several bombardment groups. For example, on 12 July 1944, the 332d Fighter Group was the only group assigned to escort the 49th Bombardment Wing, which consisted of three bombardment groups. On certain days, the 332d Fighter Group was assigned to escort more than one bombardment wing. There were simply many more bombers on a day's mission than there were fighters to escort them, and the fighters sometimes were hard pressed to cover all the bombers, especially when large numbers of enemy fighters rose to attack the bombers. It is quite understandable that sometimes a fighter group, despite its best efforts, would be unable to prevent enemy aircraft from reaching and shooting down some of the bombers.¹

9 June 1944

On June 9, 1944, the 301st and 302d Fighter Squadrons of the 332d Fighter Group escorted bombers of several bombardment wings of the Fifteenth Air Force, including the 304th Bombardment Wing, from Italy toward their target at Munich in Germany. The time of the escort was between 0830 and 0925 hours.² The Fifteenth Air Force lost 17 bombers that day.³ Only two of these were shot down by enemy aircraft during the period when the 332d Fighter Group was escorting them.⁴ Both belonged to the 304th Bombardment Wing's 459th Bombardment Group.⁵ For his heroism during the mission, Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the commander of the 332d Fighter Group, earned the Distinguished Flying Cross. The Fifteenth Air Force award order noted that "Colonel Davis so skillfully disposed his squadrons that in spite of the large number of enemy fighters, the bomber formation suffered only a few losses."⁶ According to Fifteenth Air Force General Order 1473 dated 30 June 1974, members of the 332d Fighter Group

earned five aerial victory credits for shooting down enemy aircraft on 9 June 1944.⁷ They earned those victories by attacking enemy aircraft that were also attacking the bombers they were escorting. While the Tuskegee Airmen were shooting down enemy fighters, some of those fighters were shooting down two American bombers. German fighter pilots claimed several B-24s in the Munich area of southern Germany (Bavaria) that fateful morning.⁸

Table II. Bombers lost to enemy aircraft while under 332d Fighter Group escort, 304th Bombardment Wing, 9 June 1944, Mission to Munich, Germany

Group	Type and serial number	Time	Location	Missing Air Crew Report number
459	B-24G 42-78219	0905	46 deg 40 min North 12 deg 40 min East	6317
459	B-24 H 42-52318	0907	46 deg 00 min North 12 deg 40 min East	6179

12 July 1944

On July 12, 1944, more bombers were lost to enemy aircraft fire while those bombers were under 332d Fighter Group escort. The group's mission that day was to provide penetration, target cover, and withdrawal escort for the 49th Bombardment Wing on its mission to bomb marshalling yards at Nimes, France.⁹ No other fighter group was assigned to escort the 49th Bombardment Wing that day. Of the seven fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force's 306th Fighter Wing, three stood down, and each of the other four was assigned a different bombardment wing to escort.¹⁰ The 332d Fighter Group rendezvoused with the 49th Bombardment Wing's bombers at 1011 hours, staying with them until after they left mainland France and reached the island of Corsica. Seventeen of the Tuskegee Airmen were with the bombers throughout the escort mission.¹¹ One of

the 332d Fighter Group pilots, Lt. Joseph D. Elsberry, reported that 16 FW-190s attacked the bomber formation, and that he intercepted at least three of the German fighters.¹²

The 49th Bombardment Wing that day included the 461st Bombardment Group.¹³ The 461st Bombardment Group lost four bombers to enemy aircraft that day, according to its own mission report and the bombardment wing's intelligence report for that day.¹⁴

The July 1944 history of the 461st Bombardment Group (GP-461-HI Apr 1944-Feb 1945) notes the following: "In the month of July the 461st Bombardment Group ran the gamut of human experiences. The most violent of the emotions created were those of grief, chagrin, surprise, frustration, and disappointment which immediately followed the losses of forty officers and men and four airplanes at Nimes, France on the 12th of July...". It also notes, under "Mission No. 60, 12 July 1944 – Nimes M/Y, France", "For the first time in its history the 461st Group was really hit on the bomb run by a formation-concentration of enemy fighters. Twenty-eight enemy fighters hit the last flight of six planes and knocked down four of them. Three of the planes went down over the target at Nimes, France..." "The planes lost over the target were those piloted by 1st Lt. Richard S. Fawcett, 2nd Lt. Frederick L. Dunn, and 2nd Lt. Chester A. Ray Jr."¹⁵

Missing Air Crew Reports 6894, 6895, and 7034 confirm that three of the 461st Bombardment Group B-24s lost on 12 July 1944 were lost to enemy aircraft fire. The bombers were shot down at 1050 hours, 1051 hours, and 1105 hours near the target. All three missing air crew reports also contain witness statements from the members of crews of other bombers that were in the formation. Those witness statements confirm that the bombers went down after being hit by enemy aircraft.¹⁶ German records indicate that

between 1048 and 1118, as many as eight B-24s were hit by Luftwaffe fighters over southern France, including the Nimes area.¹⁷

Table III. Bombers lost to enemy aircraft while under 332d Fighter Group escort, 49th Bombardment Wing, 12 July 1944, Mission to Nimes, France.

Group	Type and serial number	Time	Location	Missing Air Crew Report number
461	B-24H 42-52723	1050	20 miles SE of Mirabeau, France	6894
461	B-24G 42-78202	1051	10 miles E of Mirabeau, France	6895
461	B-24G 42-78291	1105	43 43 N 05 23 E	7034

18 July 1944

The 332d Fighter Group Narrative Mission Report no. 28 dated 18 July 1944 states that the group's mission and target was "to furnish penetration, target cover, and withdrawal for the 5th Bomb Wing to Memmingen A/D (airdrome)." It also notes that "Bomber formation was good and easy to cover. The 301st was lead Sq; the 99th was low; the 302nd middle; the 100th high," and "36 A/C (aircraft) over target at 10:35 hours." The same report notes that eight of the 332d Fighter Group pilots claimed that day to have shot down many enemy aircraft, including FW-190s and Me-109s.¹⁸

According to the 332d Fighter Group's 100th Fighter Squadron report for the month of July, "Escorting a flight of bombers over Memmingen, Germany, 18 July 1944, the pilots' fondest hopes were realized when enemy aircraft came up to attack our bomber formation."¹⁹

The 332d Fighter Group earned aerial victory credits for shooting down twelve enemy aircraft on 18 July 1944, presumably because the enemy aircraft were attacking the escorted bomber formations.²⁰

The Fifth Wing Operations Order number 628 dated 17 July 1944 for the 18 July 1944 mission to Memmingen airdrome notes that the Fifth Bomb Wing included six bomb groups, including the 483d and the 301st Bombardment Groups.²¹

The 483d Bombardment Group had gotten separated from the other groups largely as a result of bad weather.²² The group's narrative mission report noted that the group arrived "alone" at the I.P. at 1045 and was immediately attacked from the rear by approximately 100 enemy airplanes. It noted that the fighter escort arrived 8 minutes after the initial 1045 attack. It also noted that the fighter escort was "very effective from then on, despite the fact that they were heavily outnumbered." The enemy aircraft attack lasted 20 minutes, according to the same report. In other words, for approximately twelve minutes, enemy fighters continued to attack the 483d Bombardment Group, despite the arrival of the 332d Fighter Group escort fighters. The same special narrative mission report notes that "From the above encounters, our Group lost fifteen (15) aircraft." In the report's conclusion are the words, "Total losses: from fighters-15."²³

According to General Merrill McPeak, former USAF Chief of Staff, Captain Lee Rayford led some of the 332d Fighter Group escorts on 18 July 1944, but the bombers they were to accompany were late. At the risk of his own life, and those of the other P-51 pilots who flew with him, Rayford waited longer than the orders required, and when the bombers finally arrived he and his compatriots escorted them against a superior force.²⁴

The 301st Bombardment Group Special Narrative Report for the 18 July 1944 mission to Memmingen A/D, Germany notes that enemy fighters attacked the group's bombers "in the target area" and that "no flak was encountered at the target." Under "Total Losses," the report mentions "From Fighters: One (1). No. 3 engine hit by rocket."²⁵

The Narrative Mission Report no. 47 for the 52d Fighter Group dated 18 July 1944 notes that the 52d Fighter Group was "to provide escort on penetration and a fighter sweep over target for four groups of B-17s of the 5th Bomb Wing attacking Memmingen (Germany) airdrome at 1030 hours." It also mentions "the bombers were left at 1030 hours...After leaving, the fighters proceeded to the target area, making ninety degree turns in front of the bombers. They then took a position east of the target." The same report notes that enemy airplanes attacked the bombers and were themselves engaged by the "332d". In other words, members of the 52d Fighter Group witnessed enemy fighters attack the 5th Wing bombers and also 332d Fighter Group fighters engaging the enemy fighters.²⁶

One might conclude from these documents that on 18 July 1944, the 332d Fighter Group was escorting the Fifth Bombardment Wing, including its 483d and 301st Bombardment Groups, both to and over its target of Memmingen airdrome, Germany, and that enemy fighters attacked the bombers and shot down sixteen of them, fifteen from the 483d and one from the 301st. Missing Air Crew Reports regarding the bombers of the 483d and 301st Bombardment Groups lost to enemy aircraft fire on 18 July 1944 confirm fifteen of the sixteen losses reported in the group narrative mission reports.

The index of Missing Air Crew Reports (MACRs) for 18 July 1944 includes fourteen reports for B-17s lost from the 483d Bombardment Group. All the bombers were reported to have been shot down by enemy aircraft between 1045 and 1100 in the target area. An additional MACR mentions one B-17 lost from the 301st Bombardment Group at 1104 at 47 degrees 54 minutes N and 10 degrees, 40 minutes E.²⁷

German fighter pilots claimed to have shot down or at as many as thirty-eight B-17s southeast of Memmingen and Kempten between 1047 and 1055 on the morning of 18 July 1944.²⁸

Table IV. Bombers lost to enemy aircraft assigned to 332d Fighter Group for escort, 5th Bombardment Wing, 18 July 1944, Mission to Memmingen, Germany.

Group	Type and serial number	Time	Location	Missing Air Crew Report number
483	B-17G 42-107179	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6856
483	B-17G 42-107008	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6953
483	B-17G 42-102862	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6954
483	B-17G 44-6174	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6975
483	B-17G 42-97671	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6976
483	B-17G 42-102382	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6977
483	B-17G 42-107170	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6978
483	B-17G 42-102923	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6979
483	B-17G 42-102927	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6980
483	B-17G 42-97584	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	6981
483	B-17G 42-46267	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	7097
483	B-17G 42-102422	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	7098
483	B-17G 44-6177	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	7099
483	B-17G 42-107172	1045-1100	Vicinity of target	7153
301	B-17G 42-102943	1104	47 54 N; 10 40 E	7310

20 July 1944

On July 20, 1944, the 332d Fighter Group was assigned the monumental task of escorting no less than three bombardment wings, each of which was composed of several

bombardment groups, on penetration to their target at Friedrichshafen, Germany. The 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 30 for that day noted that there were “too many wings to cover adequately.”²⁹ According to the 306th Fighter Wing’s operations order 140, dated 19 July 1944, the 332d Fighter Group was to escort the bombers after rendezvous with them at a point 45 degrees 10 minutes N latitude and 12 degrees 48 minutes E longitude at 0947 hours, and release the escort for fighter sweep after being relieved by three other fighter groups, the 31st, 52d, and 325th, northeast of the target. The other groups were assigned to rendezvous with the three bombardment wings at a point 47 degrees N latitude and 11 degrees 03 minutes E longitude at times ranging from 1035 to 1055 hours.³⁰ In other words, between 0947 and 1035 hours, and between 45 degrees 10 minutes N latitude and 47 degrees N latitude and between 12 degrees 48 minutes E and 11 degrees 03 minutes E longitude, the only escort for the 55th, 47th, and 304th Bombardment Wings was provided by the 332d Fighter Group. According to the Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 20 July 1944, the 485th Bombardment Group belonged to the 55th Bombardment Wing, and so it was being escorted by the Tuskegee Airmen that day. The 485th Bombardment Group mission report for 20 July 1944 noted the group lost two B-24s to enemy aircraft fire around 1000 hours at 45 degrees, 38 minutes N latitude and 12 degrees 28 minutes E longitude.³¹ Missing Air Crew Reports 6914 and 6919 confirm these losses to enemy aircraft during the time and within the place the 332d Fighter Group was exclusively providing escort.³² Moreover, German documents show Luftwaffe fighter pilots claimed to have shot down two B-24s between 0955 and 0956 on the morning of 20 July 1944 over northeastern Italy.³³

Table V. Bombers lost to enemy aircraft assigned to 332d Fighter Group for escort, 55th Bombardment Wing, 20 July 1944, Mission to Friedrichshafen, Germany.

Group	Type and serial number	Time	Location	Missing Air Crew Report Number
485	B-24J 44-40886	1000	45 deg 38 min N 12 deg 28 min E	6914
485	B-24G 42-78361	0954	45 deg 38 min N 12 deg 28 min E	6919

24 March 1945

General McPeak noted in a speech when he was USAF Chief of Staff that on 24 March 1945, the Tuskegee Airmen took part in an escort mission to Berlin along with five other fighter groups. The mission was to escort the bombers to the edge of Berlin and then pass them off to another fighter group. At the rendezvous point, the relieving fighter group had not arrived. Despite needing to conserve fuel for the long trip back to Italy, the Tuskegee Airmen “stayed with the bombers.” As a result, they encountered a pack of Me-262 jet fighters that were launched to shoot down the bombers.³⁴

Original documents confirm that part of General McPeak’s speech. On March 24, 1945, the 332d Fighter Group was assigned to escort the 5th Bombardment Wing to bomb the Daimler Benz tank factory in Berlin.³⁵ The 5th Bombardment Wing included the 2d, 97th, 99th, 301st, 463d, and 483d Bombardment Groups.³⁶ The 2nd Bombardment Group reported one bomber lost to enemy aircraft after attack by enemy ME-262s at 1215 hours.³⁷ The 463d Bombardment Group also reported one bomber lost to fighters after attack by enemy ME-262s.³⁸ The 483d Bombardment Group reported one bomber missing after it was attacked by two or three ME-262s at the target.³⁹ In other words, three of the six groups in the wing being escorted to Berlin on 24 March 1945 each lost a bomber after enemy aircraft attack.

The Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 24 March 1945 contains a set of encounter reports from 332 Fighter Group members. Flight Officer Thurston L. Gaines, Jr. of the 99th Fighter Squadron reported: “On 24 March 1945, I was flying number four (4) position in yellow flight furnishing penetration cover for B-17s of the 5th Bomb Wing. At approximately 1210 hours, we were escorting B-17s at an altitude of 27,000 feet about thirty (30) miles southwest of the target, when three (3) ME-262s were seen diving on the bomber formation...The second jet made his attack in a glide and after firing a burst from his guns...Immediately after observing the puff of smoke from the jets, a B-17 was seen to do an abrupt high wing over to the right and started to spin in the same direction. The second ME-262 to make a pass at the bomber fired...” 1st Lt. Richard S. Harder, also of the 332d Fighter Group’s 99th Fighter Squadron, reported that four ME-262s pressed their attack upon the bombers about 1215.⁴⁰

Missing Air Crew Reports (MACRs) for the 2d, 463d, and 483d Bombardment Groups of the 5th Bombardment Wing that lost bombers on 24 March 1945 indicate which bombers were lost to enemy aircraft fire, enemy antiaircraft fire, and a combination of the two. All of them are supported by attached witness statements. MACR 13278 notes that the 463d Bombardment Group’s B-17G serial number 44-6283 was shot down by enemy fighter aircraft at 1200, and MACR 13274 notes that the 463d Bombardment Group’s B-17G serial number 44-6761 was also shot down by enemy fighter aircraft at 1208. MACR 13375 notes that the 483d Bombardment Group’s B-17G serial number 44-8159 was shot down by enemy fighter aircraft at 1227. MACR 13374 notes that the 2d Bombardment Group’s B-17 serial number 44-6718 was shot down by a combination of enemy fighter aircraft and enemy antiaircraft artillery between 1215 and

1230. MACR 13271 notes that the 463d Bombardment Group's B-17G serial number 44-6702 was shot down by a combination of enemy fighter aircraft and enemy antiaircraft artillery at 1150.⁴¹

Members of the 332d Fighter Group earned three aerial victory credits on 24 March 1945 by shooting down three Me-262 aircraft.⁴² The opportunity arose because the Me-262s emerged to attack the bomber formations the 332d Fighter Group was protecting. In other words, while the 332d Fighter Group was shooting down enemy German jet fighters, some of the German fighters were also shooting down American bombers.

Table VI. Bombers lost to enemy aircraft while under 332d Fighter Group escort, 5th Bombardment Wing, 24 March 1945, Mission to Berlin, Germany.

Group	Type and serial number	Time	Location	Missing Air Crew Report number
463	B-17G 44-6283	1200	52 05 N 13 10 E	13278
463	B-17G 44-6761	1208	51 00 N 13 10 E	13274
483	B-17G 44-8159	1227	Berlin target area	13375

Table VII. Bombers lost to a combination of enemy aircraft and enemy antiaircraft artillery while under 332d Fighter Group escort, 5th Bombardment Wing, 24 March 1945, Mission to Berlin, Germany.

Group	Type and serial number	Time	Location	Missing Air Crew Report number
2	B-17G 44-6718	1215-1230	52 00-52 20 N 13 35 E	13374
463	B-17G 44-6702	1150	50 40 N 13 40 E	13271

Other Possible Losses to Enemy Aircraft:

The Case of August 24, 1944

The previous sections note evidence that bombers under the escort of the 332d Fighter Group were definitely shot down on five days, June 9, 1944; July 12, 1944; July 18, 1944; July 20, 1944, and March 24, 1945. There is less evidence, but evidence, nevertheless, that Tuskegee Airmen-escorted bombers might have been shot down on other days. For example, on August 24, 1944, the 332d Fighter Group provided penetration, target cover, and withdrawal escort for B-17s bombers of the 5th Bombardment Wing that raided Pardubice Airdrome in Czechoslovakia. One of the B-17s, serial number 42-31645, of the wing's 97th Bombardment Group, was hit by flak in the target area at about 1246 hours, but the bomber formation was also attacked by enemy fighters, one of which hit the crippled bomber. According to Missing Air Crew Report 7971, a witness named Sgt. Doyle C. Davidson noted that he was flying in another bomber in the 97th Bombardment Group when he noticed the bomber slowing down and dropping from the formation, although all four engines were still operating. He then saw an enemy aircraft attack the bomber. It is likely that the bomber was crippled by flak and then destroyed by an enemy aircraft after it dropped out of formation.⁴³

Table IX. Bomber Lost to Enemy Aircraft Assigned to 332d Fighter Group for Escort, 24 August 1944

Group	Type and serial number	Time	Location	Missing Air Crew Report Number
97	B-17G 42-31645	12:45-12:47	49 28 N – 15 25 E	7971

The Case of 30 June 1944

On June 30, 1944, the mission of the 332d Fighter Group was to provide route cover and penetration escort to all five bombardment wings of the Fifteenth Air Force, most of which were assigned to bomb the Blechhammer synthetic oil plant near Vienna

that day. The Tuskegee Airmen met the bombers at 0905 hours that morning and escorted the bombers to the Lake Balaton area of Hungary, where all the airplanes ran into heavy clouds that obscured visibility. The bomber formations began to break up because of the weather, and when some of them emerged into a clear area, they were attacked by a host of enemy fighter airplanes, which shot down five B-24s. Among them was one belonging to the 762d Bombardment Squadron of the 460th Bombardment Group of the 55th Bombardment Wing, which was shot down by enemy airplanes at 0938 hours in the vicinity of Lake Balaton. Another lost B-24 belonging to the 781st Bombardment Squadron of the 465th Bombardment Group of the 55th Bombardment Wing, was shot down by enemy aircraft around 1000 hours in the same vicinity. Three other B-24s were shot down by enemy interceptors that day. They all belonged to the 760th Bombardment Squadron of the 460th Bombardment Group of the 55th Bombardment Wing. All went down at 10:50 in an area about 20 miles north of Lake Balaton.⁴⁴

Records do not indicate conclusively when the 332d Fighter Group stopped escorting the five bombardment wings, which would have included the 55th Bombardment Wing that lost five bombers to enemy aircraft fire that day. The 332d Fighter Group report notes only that the group, having met the bombers at 0905 hours, escorted them to the Veszprem (Veszprem) area, which was north of the eastern end of Lake Balaton, and ran into heavy clouds. The bombers and fighters had been flying northeastward, but when they ran into the heavy clouds in the lake area, they began flying in different directions, and some turned back, not proceeding to the target area. The Fifteenth Air Force mission folder notes that of the seven fighter escort groups of the Fifteenth Air Force, three were sent to provide penetration escort for the bombers,

including the 332d Fighter Group, the 14th Fighter Group, and the 31st Fighter Group. One of the operations orders in the Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 30 June 1944 indicates the 332d Fighter Group was to meet the bombers at 0905, the 14th Fighter Group was to meet the bombers at 0937, and the 31st Fighter Group was to meet the bombers at 1017. The records do not indicate that the bomber escort mission of the 332d Fighter Group ended when the 14th Fighter Group showed up, or that the 14th Fighter Group showed up at its scheduled time. The order indicates, however, that “all escort will be to maximum prudent limit of endurance.” This suggests that the 332d Fighter Group was not obligated to cease escort even when the next group arrived. One might speculate that when the five bombers of the 55th Bombardment Wing were shot down that morning, the 332d Fighter Group was still escorting some of them. It is reasonable to speculate that at least the first two escorted bombers shot down that day were still technically under the escort of the 332d Fighter Group, since the group’s escort began less than an hour earlier, despite the fact that the 14th Fighter Group was supposed to be there as well.⁴⁵

Table VIII: Fifteenth Air Force Bombers Shot Down by Enemy Aircraft on June 30, 1944

Group	Type and serial number	Time	Location	Missing Air Crew Report Number
460	B-24G 42-78258	09:38	47 15 N-17 45 E	6809
465	B-24H 41-28915	10:03	46 18 N-18 18 E	6335
460	B-24H 41-29291	10:50	20 miles N of Lake Balaton	6394
460	B-24H 41-28988	10:50	20 miles N of Lake Balaton	6395
460	B-24H 42-51160	10:50	20 miles N of Lake Balaton	6396

The Case of July 26, 1944

On two other days, narrative mission reports of the 332d Fighter Group note that its members saw bombers being shot down, presumably while under the group's escort. Although missing air crew reports do not confirm that these additional bombers were lost to enemy aircraft, it is possible that the 332d Fighter Group narrative mission reports are at least as valid as the missing air crew reports.

The 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 37 dated 26 July 1944 notes that the mission was "to provide penetration, target, and withdrawal cover for 47th Bomb Wing to Markendorf A/D (airdrome) Austria," and, under "friendly A/C (aircraft) lost or in difficulty," "1 B-24 seen spiraling out of formation in T/A (target area) after attack by E/A (enemy aircraft) at 1100, no chutes seen to open." The 47th Bombardment Wing consisted of B-24s. Missing Air Crew Report 7340, which covers the only 47th Bombardment Wing B-24 lost that day, notes the loss as due to enemy antiaircraft fire rather than to enemy aircraft. In other words, there is conflicting evidence in this case.⁴⁶

The Case of September 12, 1944

The 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 77 dated 12 September 1944 notes the mission of the group that day was "to provide penetration, target cover and withdrawal for B-17s of the 5th Bomb Wing." Under "enemy air-resistance and activity," the report noted "10 ME 109s attacked rear of bomber formation from below – made 1 pass peeled to the right and dived to deck...The bombers were at 26,000 ft. 1 B-17 was left burning. 6 chutes seen to open." The same report noted "Bomber formation very poor. It was spread out over a large area making it very difficult to adequately cover." Missing air crew reports for bombers lost to groups belonging to the 5th

Bombardment Wing for that day note that the losses were due not to enemy aircraft fire but rather to flak. Again, in this case, the documents conflict.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The World War II documents of Fifteenth Air Force organizations, coupled by the missing air crew reports, provide overwhelming evidence that sometimes bombers under the escort of the Tuskegee Airmen (332d Fighter Group) were shot down by enemy aircraft. What is not so clear is exactly how many bombers were lost.

What is the origin of the statement that the Tuskegee Airmen's 332d Fighter Group had "the distinction of never losing a bomber they were escorting to enemy aircraft fire"? The first mention of the 332d Fighter Group not losing bombers appears in the March 10, 1945 issue of *Liberty* magazine in an article by Roi Ottley called "Dark Angels of Doom" (pages 13 and 54). Ottley wrote: "Proof of their sincerity is the fact that in more than 100 combat missions on which the Red Tails have given escort cover to their "Big Friends"- the long-range heavy bombers-they haven't lost a single ship to enemy fighters!"⁴⁸ Historical researcher Bob Iversen discovered a March 24, 1945 article in the black newspaper *Chicago Defender* entitled "332nd Flies Its 200th Mission Without Loss."⁴⁹ The article does not mention anyone as a source, but does say "with the 15th Air Force, Italy." A War Department press release dated 21 June 1945, which announced that Colonel Benjamin O. Davis was assuming command of the 477th Bombardment Group, repeated the *Chicago Defender* wording almost exactly. It noted that "On February 28, 1945, Colonel Davis' Group had completed 200 missions with the 15th Air Force and had served as escort to heavy bombers without losing a single bomber to enemy fighters."⁵⁰ Apparently the March 24, 1945 article statement was repeated in the

official press release of June 21, despite the fact that it was historically inaccurate at the time it was issued.

The 332d Fighter Group flew its 200th mission for the Fifteenth Air Force on February 28, 1945. The dates I found bombers under 332d Fighter Group escort shot down by enemy aircraft were 9 June 1944, 12 July 1944, 18 July 1944, 20 July 1944, and 24 March 1945. In my research, I found there might have been no losses of bombers under Tuskegee Airmen escort between July 1944 and March 1945. It is possible that persons not familiar with the losses before August 1944 might have been led to believe there had been no losses when the 332d Fighter Group flew its 200th mission on 28 February 1945, since there might have been no bombers lost while under 332d Fighter Group escort for seven months in a row.

In any case, the “never lost a bomber” statement contradicts historical documents of the group itself and other groups in the Fifteenth Air Force. In fact, on 24 March 1945, the day the second article was published, more bombers under 332d Fighter Group escort were shot down. I found a version of the statement in the autobiography of Colonel and later General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the most famous commander of the Tuskegee Airmen. He noted that it originated in a letter of commendation from Brigadier General Yantis “Buck” Taylor, commander of the 306th Fighter Wing, to which the 332d Fighter Group belonged. I could not find a copy of this letter at the Air Force Historical Research Agency. I also searched the papers of General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. where they are stored at the archives of the National Air and Space Museum in Suitland, Maryland, but did not find the letter. The context of the letter might explain the discrepancy between the other documents and the letter. The order that awarded the

Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) to Davis for action on 9 Jun 1944, however, which noted that “in spite of the large number of enemy fighters, the bomber formation suffered only a few losses” had been signed by a Colonel R. K. Taylor, who had been Chief of Staff of the Fifteenth Air Force when the order was issued in August 1944. It is possible that Davis, when recollecting his past years after World War II, confused the “only a few losses” citation of the DFC, signed by Colonel R. K. Taylor, with a letter of commendation from General Yantis Taylor that supposedly said no bombers were lost. In fact, among the Davis papers is a copy of the DFC citation that mentioned “only a few losses”.⁵¹

In the 1990s, historian Al Gropman conducted an interview with then General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. in the 1990s. Gropman tried to get Davis to confirm that the Tuskegee Airmen never lost a bomber. Davis responded that he did not make the statement himself, or that if he did make the statement it was without much enthusiasm. He told Gropman that, just between the two of them, he questioned the statement, but that the statement had been made so often, “people were coming to believe it.”⁵²

What About “Never Lost a Bomber in 200 Escort Missions”?

When the “never lost a bomber” statement about the Tuskegee Airmen first appeared in a newspaper article in March 1945, it noted that the 332d Fighter Group had flown 200 escort missions without having lost a bomber, but that statement was not true. Although the 332d Fighter Group completed its 200th mission at the end of February, it had already escorted bombers that were shot down by enemy aircraft, and by then only 138 of the missions had been bomber escort missions.

Some persons have suggested that although the “never lost a bomber in 200 escort missions” was not true when it appeared, it might have eventually become true, because the 332d Fighter Group flew more than 300 missions for the Fifteenth Air Force in World War II. In order to test the statement, I looked at 309 of the 311 mission reports of the 332d Fighter Group while it served the Fifteenth Air Force in World War II (two mission reports, 31 and 32, were missing, but mission report 30 notes that 31 and 32 were air-sea rescue missions). I found that of the 311 missions, only 179 (less than 200) were bomber escort missions. The other missions were fighter sweeps or strafing missions or missions in which the fighters escorted single reconnaissance or small numbers of cargo aircraft. Of the 179 bomber escort missions the 332d Fighter Group flew for the Fifteenth Air Force, 146 did not encounter any enemy aircraft. Of the 33 bomber escort missions the 332d Fighter Group flew for the Fifteenth Air Force that encountered enemy aircraft, at least five were missions in which 332d Fighter Group-escorted bombers were shot down by enemy aircraft. The 332d Fighter Group flew at least 170 bomber escort missions for the Fifteenth Air Force without losing a bomber, but 146 of these missions encountered no enemy aircraft.

By the time the 332d Fighter Group began escorting heavy bombers of the Fifteenth Air Force from Italy in June of 1944, the German Air Force was only a shadow of its former self. It concentrated its remaining energy farther north, against the U.S. and British armies advancing eastward from France and the Soviet armies advancing westward from eastern Europe. Although the Germans continued building new aircraft in great quantity, their supply of fuel and skilled pilots was running out by June 1944. That

explains why 146 of the 179 bomber escort missions the 332d Fighter Group flew for the Fifteenth Air Force encountered no enemy airplanes.

Despite their best efforts, the Tuskegee Airmen could not prevent any enemy aircraft from shooting down bombers they were protecting. Sometimes the number of bombers they had to cover and the number of enemy fighters that attacked the bombers were significantly greater than the number of escort fighters. The “never lost a bomber” statement is not accurate, but the courage and valor of the Tuskegee Airmen survives. The fact that some bombers were lost does not diminish the legendary contributions of the Tuskegee Airmen to the defeat of Nazi Germany and to the defeat of racism, both within the United States military, and in American society at large.

Dr. Daniel L. Haulman
26 November 2008

¹ Fifteenth Air Force daily mission folders, summer and fall of 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332.

² 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 3 dated 9 June 1944, AFHRA call number GP-332-HI, June 1944; Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 9 June 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, 9 June 1944.

³ Missing Air Crew Reports Index at AFHRA.

⁴ Missing Air Crew Reports numbered 6317 and 6179.

⁵ Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 9 June 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, 9 June 1944.

⁶ Fifteenth Air Force general order number 2972 dated 31 August 1944, AFHRA call number 670.193.

⁷ Fifteenth Air Force general order number 1473 dated 30 June 1974, AFHRA call number 670.193.

⁸ Oberkommando der Luftwaffe (O.K.L.) Fighter Claims, Chef fur Ausz. Und Diziplin, Luftwaffen-Personalamt L.P. [A] V Films & Supplementary Claims from Lists, Reich, West, & Sudfront, May-July 1944, Issue no. 1, from Tony Wood's Combat Claims and Casualty Lists: <http://www.lesbutler.ip3.co.uk/tony/tonywood.htm> accessed on 14 Mar 2007.

⁹ 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 23 dated 12 July 1944, AFHRA call number GP-332-HI, July 1944, and Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 12 July 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, 12 July 1944.

¹⁰ 306th Fighter Wing Operations Order 131, dated 11 July 1944, for 12 July 1944 mission, in Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 12 July 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, 12 July 1944.

¹¹ 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 23 dated 12 July 1944, AFHRA call number GP-332-HI, July 1944, and Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 12 July 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, 12 July 1944.

¹² Supplement to narrative mission report number 23 dated 12 July 1944, AFHRA call number GP-332-HI, July 1944.

¹³ 49th Bombardment Wing Intelligence Report for 12 July 1944, contained in the Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 12 July 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, 12 July 1944.

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- ¹⁴ 461st Bombardment Group mission report for 12 July 1944 and 49th Bombardment Wing Intelligence Report for 12 July 1944, both contained in the Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 12 July 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, 12 July 1944.
- ¹⁵ 461st Bombardment Group history, July 1944, AFHRA call number GP-461-HI, July 1944.
- ¹⁶ Missing Air Crew Reports 6894, 6895, and 7034 and witness statements attached to them, on microfiche at the AFHRA.
- ¹⁷ O.K.L. Fighter Claims, Reich, West & Sudfront, May-July 1944, Issue no. 1
- ¹⁸ 332d Fighter Group Narrative Mission Report no. 28 dated 18 July 1944, contained in the 332d Fighter Group history for July 1944 (AFHRA call number GP-322-HI, July 1944), and in the Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 18 July 1944 (AFHRA call number 670.332, 18 July 1944).
- ¹⁹ 332d Fighter Group history for July 1944, AFHRA call number GP-332-HI, July 1944.
- ²⁰ Fifteenth Air Force general orders 2202, 2350, and 2484 for 1944, AFHRA call number 670.193.
- ²¹ Fifth Wing Operations Order number 628 dated 17 July 1944, for the 18 July 1944 mission, contained in the Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 18 July 1944 (AFHRA call number 670.332, 18 July 1944).
- ²² Kenn C. Rust, *Fifteenth Air Force Story...In World War II* (Temple City, CA: Historical Aviation Album, 1976), 31.
- ²³ 483d Bombardment Group Narrative Mission Report: Mission 18 July 1944, contained in Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 18 July 1944 (AFHRA call number 670.332, 18 July 1944). A copy of the same report is contained in the July 1944 history of the 483d Bombardment Group (AFHRA call number GP-483-HI, July 1944).
- ²⁴ Merrill A. McPeak, "The Tuskegee Airman Story: An Air Force Legacy," speech by the USAF Chief of Staff, number 93-06, from the Secretary of the Air Force Office of Public Affairs (168.7646-18 in the McPeak collection at the Air Force Historical Research Agency).
- ²⁵ 301st Bombardment Group Special Narrative Report, 18 July 1944, contained in Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 18 July 1944 (AFHRA call number 670.332, 18 July 1944).
- ²⁶ 52d Fighter Group Narrative Mission Report no. 47 dated 18 July 1944, contained in Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 18 July 1944 (AFHRA call number 670.332, 18 July 1944), and 52d Fighter Group History, July 1944 (AFHRA call number GP-52-HI, July 1944).
- ²⁷ Index to Missing Air Crew Reports and Reports numbered 6977, 7098, 6954, 6979, 6980, 6981, 6976, 7097, 6978, 7153, 6856, 6953, 6975, 7099, and 7310, on microfiche at AFHRA.
- ²⁸ O.K.L. Fighter Claims, Reich, West & Sudfront, May-July 1944, Issue no. 1.
- ²⁹ 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 30 dated 20 July 1944, AFHRA call number GP-332-HI, July 1945.
- ³⁰ 306 Fighter Wing operations order number 140 dated 19 July 1944, for mission of 20 July 1944, in Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 20 July 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, 20 July 1944.
- ³¹ Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 20 July 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, 20 July 1944.
- ³² Missing Air Crew reports 6914 and 6919 on microfiche at AFHRA.
- ³³ O.K.L. Fighter Claims, Reich, West & Sudfront, May-July 1944, Issue no. 1.
- ³⁴ Merrill A. McPeak, "The Tuskegee Airman Story: An Air Force Legacy," speech by the USAF Chief of Staff, number 93-06, from the Secretary of the Air Force Office of Public Affairs (168.7646-18 in the McPeak collection at the Air Force Historical Research Agency).
- ³⁵ 332d Fighter Group narrative mission report number 246 dated 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number GP-332-HI, March 1945.
- ³⁶ Fifth Wing A-2 Section Daily Intelligence Report, 24 March 1945, contained in Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.
- ³⁷ 2d Bombardment Group Mission Report for 24 March 1945, contained in Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.
- ³⁸ 463d Bombardment Group Mission Report for 24 March 1945, contained in Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.
- ³⁹ 483d Bombardment Group Mission Report for 24 March 1945, contained in Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.
- ⁴⁰ 332d Fighter Group encounter reports for 24 March 1945, contained in Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.
- ⁴¹ Missing Air Crew Reports numbered 13278, 13274, 13375, 13374, and 13271, on microfiche at AFHRA.
- ⁴² Fifteenth Air Force general order number 2293 dated 12 April 1945, AFHRA call number 670.193).

⁴³ 332d Fighter Group Narrative Mission Report number 61 dated 24 August 1944, contained in the August 1944 history of the 332d Fighter Group, Air Force Historical Research Agency, call number GP-332-HI, August 1944; Missing Air Crew Report Number 7971.

⁴⁴ 332d Fighter Group Narrative Mission Report number 15 dated 30 June 1944; Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 30 June 1944; Missing Air Crew Reports 6809, 6335, 6394, 6395, and 6396; 762d Bombardment Squadron history for June 1944; 781st Bombardment Squadron history for June 1944; 760th Bombardment Squadron history for June 1944.

⁴⁵ 332d Fighter Group Narrative Mission Report number 15 dated 30 June 1944; Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 30 June 1944; Missing Air Crew Reports 6809, 6335, 6394, 6395, and 6396; 762d Bombardment Squadron history for June 1944; 781st Bombardment Squadron history for June 1944; 760th Bombardment Squadron history for June 1944.

⁴⁶ 332d Fighter Group Narrative Mission Report number 37 dated 26 July 1944, contained in the July 1944 history of the 332d Fighter Group, Air Force Historical Research Agency call number GP-332-HI, July 1944; Missing Air Crew Report number 7340.

⁴⁷ 332d Fighter Group Narrative Mission Reports number 77, dated 12 September 1944, contained in the September 1944 history of the 332d Fighter Group, Air Force Historical Research Agency call number GP-332-HI, September 1944; 301st Bombardment Group narrative mission report dated 12 September 1944; Missing Air Crew Reports numbered 8623 and 8360 (although the Missing Air Crew Report index notes that both of these reports refer to B-17s lost by groups of the 5th Bombardment Wing, report 8623 actually describes a P-51 loss).

⁴⁸Roi Ottley, "Dark Angels of Doom," *Liberty*, (March 10, 1945), 13; J. Hanible McMillan letter to editor, *America in World War II*, vol. III, no. 6 (April 2008), 4.

⁴⁹ "332d Flies Its 200th Mission Without Loss," *Chicago Defender*, March 24, 1945, p. 2, discovered by researcher Robert Iverson.

⁵⁰ War Department Press Release, 21 Jun 1945, found among papers of General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. at the archives of the National Air and Space Museum at Suitland, Maryland, box 6, folder 14.

⁵¹ Distinguished Flying Cross citation awarded to Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. for action on 9 Jun 1944, found among the papers of General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. in the archives of the National Air and Space Museum in Suitland, Maryland, box 119, folder 2.

⁵² Interview of General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., by Air Force historian Al Gropman, AFHRA call number K239.0512-1922.