



Freeman Field Mutiny: 477th Bombardment Group

The 477 Bombardment Group was a part of two groups of African American pilots who became known as the “Tuskegee Airmen” and part of a World War II-War Department experiment. This experiment was designed to prove that African Americans did not possess the skills or mental aptitude to accomplish any level of competency beyond mediocre or service task. In 1925, the military leadership expressed the point of view in a War Department report that it would be a waste of resources to attempt to place African Americans in any position that exceeded this stated level of competency. In order to support their false conclusions, they adopted a policy that the inclusion of African Americans in any higher skill levels than those reported in their 1925 report must be considered an experiment, which would ultimately fail. To its credit, the War Department did its best to insure that failure. It attempted to force the unit to deal with inadequate equipment, improper training and institutionalized racism.

When war clouds began to gather in Europe in the late 1930s, it became obvious to most European nations that the Nazi military regime in Germany could only be dealt with by the use of military power. The United States government had concluded that it needed to increase its air power and by 1939, it had started a civilian pilots training program to boost the number of pilots available for military training.

Going back to the formation of the United States of America, African Americans were historically denied rights as human beings. They were forced into capacitive slavery and brutalized from the country's inception. Comments made by the first President of the United States, George Washington (who was a slave master), is a typical example of a slave’s status when the country was formed - African Americans were described as, “troublesome property.” By the late 1850s, abolitionists had become vocal and several slave uprisings had convinced the Southern slave masters that the institution of slavery was crumbling and a show of force and superior violence would be required to sustain its presence. Their conclusion became known as the rebellion or Civil War in which over 700,000 soldiers lost their lives and millions were wounded and disabled. During this war, African Americans gave a remarkable account of themselves by winning the Medal of Honor and fighting in some of the war’s most intensive battles. In 1925, the War Department chose to ignore these and other military accomplishments made by African Americans.

By 1865, the south had been defeated and was forced to give way to a new rising tide of freedom for African Americans. This wave lasted until 1877, when martial law was removed from the Southern states. By early 1900s, white southern Christian males had regained a large portion of the control they had lost. This control was exacted through violence, intimidation and the invention of a system of “Jim Crow” laws, which were directed exclusively at African Americans. These laws were exercised to their fullest extent during World War I. African Americans had distinguished themselves during the

Civil War; nevertheless, the War Department was determined to discredit their previous military accomplishments. As a consequence of its attempt to discredit the future use of African American troops in any military leadership role, the War Department issued a report in 1925, which in effect said that African American troops were only capable of service duties and responsibilities that required no leadership capabilities.

During World War I, African Americans were not allowed to fight with American troops in France, so they were attached to French forces wherein they gave a remarkable account of themselves. The 369th Regiment of the 93rd Division was awarded the highest Medal of Honor that the French government could award a unit. Having this information readily available in military records, the War Department decided that it would use their 1925 report to keep African Americans from getting involved in World War II. When the War Department was finally forced to accept African Americans into pilot training, it labeled their participation as an experiment and began an intimidation campaign to discredit them. The 99th fighter Squadron and the 477 Bombardment Group were examples of their campaign to discredit African American military contributions to the war effort.

The group of pilots selected to go to the Bombardment Group also came from the Tuskegee training program. The Bombardment Group was never selected to go overseas into war zone. Due to the racist policies of the military and American “Jim Crow” laws, no military commander in any theater of war would accept their services. They were forced to remain stateside throughout the entire war.

From its inception, the War Department never intended for the 477th to be a combat unit. Their main goal was to discredit and eventually eliminate the unit. Similar tactics had been tried with the 99th fighter Squadron at stateside and overseas installation of the 99th was able to reverse their negative image with their combat record. The 99th fighter Squadron and later, the 332nd fighter Group, rose to the challenge and at the end of World War II, their combat record provided clarity to their professionalism and talent as officers and military pilots.

The weather and assigned equipment problems, which the personnel of the 477th were confronted with, could be overcome with expertise and resourcefulness; however, racism and “Jim Crow” laws gave no “quarter” on or off military facilities. As an example of this, there were segregated facilities on military installations and promotions were primarily given to white officers who were in charge of their activities. This lack of equal opportunity gave rise to their determined will to achieve the second symbol of their “Double-V” campaign - victory over Nazi Germany and victory over racism at home. The Freeman Field incident helped open the doors to integrating the military services within a few years after the incident took place.

By January 1945, the American efforts during World War II had climaxed to the point of victory over the Axis powers and the war's end was in sight. Military operations in the United States had begun to slow down. Unfortunately in the United States, racism was still alive and well. Regrettably, Freeman Field would not be noted for its contribution to

the war effort, but for its contribution to the 477th War against racism, which had its roots deeply embedded in the Constitution of the United States by its founding fathers and slave owners.

The 477th was the first African American unit given the opportunity during their military service to participate in multi-engine pilot training. Originally stationed at Selfridge Field in Michigan outside of Detroit where race riots had occurred, the military leadership made a decision to move the unit to Godman Field in Kentucky where they felt they would have more control due to the fact that it was below the Mason-Dixon line. To further compound the training issue, it was decided to move the unit a second time to a different installation in Indiana, which had adequate training facilities.

At Freeman Field, African American officers were denied access to the Officer's Club and approximately sixty were arrested for attempting to enter the Officer's Club. The base commander, Col. Selway, signed an order that separated base personnel into two groups of Airmen, base personnel and training personnel. The 477th, as an African American group, fell into a training category, which was designed to separate the races and as a consequence were barred from the white officer's club. This recurring theme was first enumerated by General Hunter when the 477th was located at Selfridge Field in Michigan when he stated:

“The war department is not ready to recognize blacks on the level of social equality to white men. This is not the time for blacks to fight for equal rights or personal advantages. They should prove themselves in combat first. There will be no race problem here, for I will not tolerate any mixing of the races. Anyone who protests will be classed as an agitator, sought out and dealt with accordingly. This is my base and as long as I am in Command, there will be no social mixing of white and colored officers. The single Officer's Club on base will be used solely by white officers. You colored officers will have to wait until an Officer's Club is built for your use. Are there any questions?”

Concerned that there would be continuous trouble in enforcing these policies in its current location, the 477th was moved to Godman Field in Kentucky on May 5, 1944. On March 1, 1945, the 477th had outgrown its inadequate facilities at Godman and was once again moved to Freeman Field, Indiana. Upon their arrival at Freeman Field, African American officers began to test the discrimination policy of Col. Selway with a plan to force the issue of the officer's club discrimination policy.

Their strategy was well planned. When they entered the officer's club and requested service, they were refused. After several groups attempted to get service on numerous occasions, the base commander became alarmed and decided to write an order detailing which buildings on the base white officers would use and which buildings black officers would use. On April 5, 1945, Col. Selway published his order to draw a legal line between training and supervisory personnel in violation of the recreational facilities use order AR210-10 which ordered equal treatment in mess facilities.

On April 3, 1945, two days prior to the final move to Freeman Field, Lt. William Ellis returned to Godman after having been removed as an agitator by Col Selway. He briefed the remaining officers on what to expect when they arrived. They made plans to confront the situation when they arrived. A plan of action was developed by Lt. Coleman Young for five officers to enter the club when they arrived. At Freeman Field, their plan of action also called for them to enter the officer's club in small groups of no more than five officers at a time and to remain non-violent. They had vowed not to create a disturbance that would reflect discredit upon themselves as a group.

On April 5, 1945 at approximately 16:45 (4:45PM), the last members of the 477th Group arrived from Godman Field. They went to their quarters, settled in and began to execute their plan to enter the officer's club at Freeman Field. They were not aware that Major Joseph A. Murphy, Commander of "C" Squadron, had been alerted to their plan and had called Col. Selway, who in turn called Maj. Baumgartner, the Provost Martial, and ordered him to put an assistant Provost Martial at the front door of the Officer's Club in order to enforce his order of May 1, 1945. The club officer was told to lock all doors to the club except the front door. When the group of African American officers arrived at the front door, they were met by an armed officer who wore a brassard, which indicated that he was acting on behalf of the base commander. An armed officer had been placed at the front door to dissuade entry of the African officers determined to confront the racism that prohibited them from exercising their legal privilege as a United States military officer.

The officers of the 477th Group headed over to the Club and were met by the Officer of the Day. The first 477th Group Officer was stopped at the entrance and told that the club was not open to them; while this conversation was taking place, the remaining Officers in the group walked into the Club and asked for service - whereupon they were confronted by the Club Officer, Major White, who informed the group that if they did not leave they would be placed under arrest. When they did not leave, they were placed under arrest and ordered to return to their quarters. They did as ordered and were placed under arrest and confinement to their quarters.

As additional 477th Group officers entered the White Officer's Club, the same procedures were applied to each group as the first group of officers. Realizing that their efforts were being nullified, the club manager and the 118th Base Commander assembled all of the 477th African American Officers and expressed to them that, if they had any complaints they would be personally addressed by him as their Commanding Officer.

Once again they returned to their quarters as ordered; however, the incident was not quite over. Once again the Officer's Club duty officer was confronted by three more African American officers from the 477th Group attempting to enter the Club. The duty officer was not sure of the race of two of the Officers; however, one of the three he identified as African American.

One of the 477th Group Officers, Lt. Terry, was confronted by the Officer of the Day. It

was alleged that Lt. Terry pushed the Officer of the Day aside and entered the Club. At that point, Major White placed the three African American Officers who had entered, under arrest and ordered them to return to their quarters. Later, Major Baumgartner arrived and closed the Club for the night.

As a consequence of their efforts to enter the Officer's Club, thirty-six African American officers were arrested. After these arrests, Col. Selway was confident that there would be no more attempts by African American Officers of the 477th to integrate within the White Officer's Club. Col. Selway ordered the Club reopened without the presence of the Provost Martial at the Club's front door.

Starting at 15:15 (3:15 PM), another twenty-five African American officers entered the Club and no attempt was made to stop them. However, Major White intercepted each group, took their names, ordered them to leave the Club and placed them under arrest. Col. Selway was informed of the latest incident and he ordered the Club closed again.

In an attempt to satisfy his superior Officer, General Hunter, Col. Selway decided to court martial the African American officers who had entered the "secret domain" of the White Officer's Club in accordance with his stated intent to keep them out. After some consideration on the matter, Col. Selway decided on a new tactic that he believed would provide perhaps more legal leverage; he create a base regulation, which was mandatory that all African American officers were required to read and place their signature on the regulation to attest to their understanding of the regulation. This regulation gave specific instructions pertaining to which buildings they were allowed to enter. In spite of this requirement, 101 African American officers refused to sign Base Regulation 85-2 attachment indicating that they had read and understood the contents of the regulation.

In his book titled, "The Tuskegee Aviation Experiment," Le Roy Gilead, one of the 401 original Tuskegee Airmen arrested, Mr. Gilead stated:

"April 13 to Godman Field... this was the day after president Roosevelt-
"our savior" we thought-died. Upon arrival, the 101 reverted to arrest in
quarters and were incarcerated in two of their old bachelor officers
quarters...these three buildings were made ready and surrounded with
barbed wire with guards equipped with automatic weapons guarding the
wire fence."

A total of 162 officers were arrested for entering the white officers club at Freeman Field, additional charges were filed against Lts. Terry, Clinton and Thompson due to the allegations that they had used force during their attempt to gain entry into the Officer's Club. Vigorous press coverage by the African American press and other civil rights organizations forced the War Department to take charge of the situation and order the release of all arrested officers.

The Tuskegee Airmen had scored another important victory in their "Double-Vee" campaign by forcing the War Department to eventually integrate the United States of

American military forces. While their brother unit the 332nd Fighter Group achieved victory over the Axis powers in Europe in the air, the 477th also achieved their victory over racism, which was perhaps the most difficult to achieve. After all, it was fighting one of the most resourceful enemies any group could confront, "The United States of America."

