

Papers of Lt. General Benjamin O. Davis of the "Tuskegee Airmen" Now Open for Research at National Air and Space Museum

Press Release

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The papers of Lt. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. are now available to researchers at the archives of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum's Paul E. Garber Facility in Suitland, Md.

The collection -- 71 cubic feet of documents -- covers the general's military and civilian careers and is an important source of information on race relations in the mid-20th century. Davis donated the papers in 1991 with the stipulation that they be made available to the public at least 10 years later. The opening of the collection coincides with Black History Month.

Davis, a 1936 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, was commander of the 99th Fighter Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group -- known as the "Tuskegee Airmen" -- during World War II. He earned the Air Medal, Distinguished Flying Cross, Legion of Merit, and Silver Star. Davis died July 4, 2002.

"This collection will enhance exhibitions and programs at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum and enable researchers, particularly young people, to appreciate the pioneering role the Tuskegee Airmen played in our history," said Gen. J. R. "Jack" Dailey, museum director. "Gen. Davis' papers provide insights essential to understanding the challenges faced by African American pilots in support of their country."

The all-black Tuskegee Airmen units in the racially segregated military saw action in North Africa and Europe. They flew as combat escorts for bomber units on combat missions and were so effective in protecting those bombers from enemy attack that the 332nd Fighter Group earned a Distinguished Unit Citation. Their superior performance successfully challenged racially based assumptions common at the time that blacks could not fly in combat and helped make the case for integrating the military services.

Gen. Davis' papers include materials from the African American press in the 1940s, revealing their response to the work of the Tuskegee Airmen. The papers also shed light on the units' combat performance and morale issues stemming from segregation. Other documents show how, in his retirement, Davis worked to increase public knowledge of the role of black servicemen during World War

II. Much of the collection documents Davis' civilian career, including his work in racially polarized Cleveland of 1970 and his attempts to improve civil aviation security in the face of aerial hijackings in the early 1970s.

Access to the collection is available only through appointment, which can be arranged by calling (301) 238-3480 or writing to: National Air and Space Museum Archives, National Air and Space Museum, MRC 322, P.O. Box 37012, Washington, D.C. 20013-7012.

Davis retired from the U.S. Air Force at the rank of Lt. Gen. on Jan. 31, 1970. Subsequently, he served as director of public safety for Cleveland, Ohio; director of civil aviation security, U.S. Department of Transportation; and assistant secretary of transportation for safety and consumer affairs.