TUSKEGEE AIRMEN-ESCORTED BOMBERS LOST TO ENEMY AIRCRAFT

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Updated 26 Nov 2008

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

> 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.

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.[1] On certain days, the 332d Fighter Group was assigned to escort more than one bombardment wing. There were simply many more bomb
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.

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 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
Davis so skillfully disposed his squadrons that in spite of the large number of enemy fighters, the bomber formation s [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 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 306th Fighter Wing, three stood down, and each of the other four was assigned a different bombardment wing to escort.[10] The

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

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

[29] According to the 306th 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 4440886	1000	45 deg 38 min N 12 deg 28 min E	6914
485	B-24G 4278361	0954	45 deg 38 min N 12 deg 28 min E	

The Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 24 March 1945 contains a set of encounter reports from 332 Fighter Group member Flight Officer Thurston L. Gaines, Jr. of the 99th

(4) position in yellow flight furnishing penetration cover for 12 B-17s of the 5th

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 461st 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 764th 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 Vesprem (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 in

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

On two other days, narrative mission reports of the 332d Fighter Group note that

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

appeared, it might have eventually become true, because the 332d Fighter Group flew more than 300 missions for the Fifteenth Air Force in World

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. 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.

[14] 461st Bombardment Group mission report for 12 July 1944 and 49th Bombardment Wing Intelligence