



America the Beautiful Quarter, U.S. Mint

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN: RED TAILS

Chapter 1:

General Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr.

The First African American Officer to Become a Brigadier General in the United States Air Force - Later Earning the Ranks of Major General (the First Black Two-star General in the Military) and Lieutenant General (Three Stars), and, Being Honored with a Fourth Star, as General, Post Retirement



U.S. Air Force Photo

Objectives

Describe why Benjamin Davis was driven to destroy segregation.

Explain the meaning of “being shunned” and how it affected Benjamin Davis.

Objectives

Fold and fly a stunt plane.

Create a paper P-51 Mustang.

Read a book on perseverance and complete associated character trait activities.

Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr. was born on December 18, 1912, in Washington, D.C.

His father was career Army officer, Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. Losing his mother at age four, the younger Davis was raised on various military posts and watched as his father dealt with segregation issues throughout his military career. The elder Davis served 41 years before he was promoted to brigadier general in 1940, the first African American to reach this rank. He taught his son about the evils of segregation; instilling in him a determination to destroy it.

The younger Davis wanted to fly. When he was almost 14 years old, he went on his first flight in an open cockpit biplane at Bolling Field in Washington, D.C. After some steep turns in a barnstorming stunt plane, he decided flying was for him. (He was also inspired by the flights of the young Charles Lindbergh.) To reach his goal, he set his sights on the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Davis, Jr. earned a 1932 nomination to the U.S. Military Academy from Rep. Oscar



Davis as a U.S. Military Cadet
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S. De Priest (R-Ill), then America's only black congressman. He was the first African American to be admitted to the Academy since Reconstruction. (Reconstruction was a very turbulent era, 1865-1877, after the South surrendered to the North in the Civil War. Read more about implications to African Americans during [Reconstruction](#).) He believed he would be accepted for his character and not be rejected for his race. However, for four years he was shunned. Other cadets would only speak to him for official reasons. He had no roommate and ate his meals sitting by himself. Those who practiced this had hoped to drive Davis from the Academy, but their actions only made him more determined to stay, graduate, and fly. He found, though, that even graduating 35th in the 276-member Class of 1936 could not convince the U.S. Army Air Corps to allow him, a black, to enter flight training.

After graduation, he married Agatha Scott, and his first assignment as a second lieutenant was at Ft. Benning, GA, where he commanded the black service company. After a year, he was appointed to the Infantry School. In the two years Davis served at Benning, the nine white Academy classmates also assigned there only talked to him in the line of duty. When Davis graduated from the Infantry School, he was qualified to be in an infantry unit, but, instead, was sent to be a military tactics instructor for the Reserve Officers Training Corps at Tuskegee Institute, AL. As with his father, instructing ROTC cadets was an opportunity to lead young people.

Davis was serving at Tuskegee in 1940 during the second reelection campaign of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Determined to hold onto every group that had supported him in his two previous election victories, Roosevelt was especially worried about the black vote. To solidify his

African American support, he promoted the elder Benjamin Davis to brigadier general (the first African American general in the military), and, in January 1941, ordered the War Department to create a black flying organization in the U.S. Army Air Corps.

A black Academy graduate was desired to command the first black flying unit, called the 99th Pursuit Squadron (later called the 99th Fighter Squadron). The younger Davis, then Captain Davis, was the only living black West Point Academy graduate, so was ordered to join the first training class at Tuskegee Army Air Field, AL. He clearly saw an opportunity to begin eroding segregation.

In May 1941, Davis entered advanced flying school at Tuskegee Army Air Field. He was the first black officer to solo an Army Air Corps aircraft. In June 1941, the U. S. Army Air Corps became the U.S. Army Air Forces. Thus, on March 7, 1942, Davis, and four other black officers, pinned on U.S. Army Air Forces silver pilot wings. In time, they were joined by almost 1,000 additional Tuskegee Airmen.

Later that year, Lt Col Davis became commander of the first black flying unit, the Tuskegee 99th Pursuit Squadron. He later took command of the larger Tuskegee 332nd Fighter Group in October 1943.

In the spring of 1943, Davis and the 99th departed for North Africa to join the fight against the Axis. (The Axis was a [military alliance](#) that fought in [World War II](#) against the [Allies](#), of which the United States was a part.) The Tuskegee Airmen carried with them the usual burdens and concerns that men about to enter combat feel, but, also, the certain knowledge that upon their inexperienced shoulders rested the future of black Americans in aviation.

In June of 1943, Davis led the 99th in its first mission. They attacked enemy troops between North Africa and Sicily, an island in southern Italy near North Africa. A few months later, and after they had flown many combat missions, the commander of the 33rd Pursuit Group accused the 99th Pursuit Squadron of not having the same desire to fight as white pilots. A committee, headed by Chief of Staff of the Army, George C. Marshall, was organized to study the complaint. Davis was questioned and told of how his men sometimes flew six missions in one day because they were short on men. He told how his men were determined to succeed and eager to fight. In the end, Marshall and the Advisory Committee agreed that the 99th should not be pulled, and, in fact, the 332nd would be sent overseas to continue their work.

In January and February of 1944, Tuskegee Airmen were flying [Curtiss P-40 Warhawks](#). In one mission, they shot down six German planes and damaged four more in the morning. That afternoon, they shot down three more German planes. This continued, and within a two-week period the Tuskegee Airmen had seven victories to one loss.

Davis was sent on bomber escort missions. He saw this as an opportunity for black aviators to demonstrate their flying capabilities and again erode segregation. They flew the P-47 and then the P-51 Mustangs. Davis led a group of eight P-47s which attacked eighteen German Messerschmitt Bf 109s and the Tuskegee Airmen shot down five German fighters that day.

March 24, 1945 was an amazing day for the Tuskegee Airmen. Then Colonel Davis led them on a round trip mission to Berlin, Germany. They shot down three German jets and six fighters. The 332nd shot down 111 enemy aircraft and destroyed 150 on the ground. This was a testimony to Davis's leadership and the skill of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Davis had been in difficult situations where he encountered segregation and mistreatment throughout his life, but he never gave up trying to end this unjust treatment. He returned to the U.S. in 1945 and served in leadership positions in both Kentucky and Ohio. While working at (then) Lockbourne Army Air Base in Ohio, the civil servants working there were all white and the supervisors were black. This was the only place in the country where blacks supervised whites, and it worked.

Davis demonstrated in many arenas that blacks could perform as well as whites. Thus, in July 1948, then President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 ordering the racial integration of the armed forces. In 1947, the U.S. Army Air Forces had become a separate branch of the military, the U.S. Air Force, thus, Colonel Davis helped draft the plan for implementing this order for the new U.S. Air Force in 1948. By 1949, the U. S Air Force had become the first branch of the military to end segregation and integrate fully. This act helped Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. feel he had helped fulfill a portion of his and his father's dream to end racial inequality, but there was a long way to go.

For officers to be promoted past the rank of colonel, they had to attend Air War College. Therefore, in 1949, Colonel Davis and his wife, Agatha, moved to Montgomery, AL, for him to attend as the first black student at Air War College located at Maxwell Air Force Base. As it happened in previous locations, he was prohibited from going to nice restaurants and hotels in the city. He persevered because he wanted to graduate from the college and move to a position at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. He did so. After graduation, he became Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Headquarters U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C.

Davis continued to be posted to a variety of command and staff positions both within the United States and abroad. He was successful in every position. He served in the Korean War, and then went on to Japan where he was appointed Director of Operations and Training in Far East Air Forces.

After 10 years serving as a colonel, he was promoted to brigadier general in October 1954. He was the first black officer in the new U.S. Air Force to be promoted to this rank. From there, he moved to Germany where he was Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations in Europe. In June 1959, he was promoted to major general, the first black two-star general in the military. In 1961, he returned to the U.S. and served in the Pentagon. In 1965, he was promoted to lieutenant general, a three-star general. In 1967, he became commander of the 12th Air Force where he led thousands who served in the Vietnam War. He went on to become deputy chief commander of the U.S. Strike Command in 1968, where he traveled to see the conditions of areas where those

he led might have to serve. Two years later, in 1970, he retired at the rank of lieutenant general of from the U.S. Air Force with 33 years of service.

After military retirement, he worked for the U.S. Department of Transportation. As the Assistant Secretary of Transportation for Environment, Safety, and Consumer Affairs, he oversaw the development of airport security and highway safety. He was instrumental in helping to enact the 55 mile per hour speed limit across America in 1974, which has helped to save gasoline and lives. Following in his father's footsteps decades later, he served on the American Battle Monuments Commission in 1975 and 1978.

In summary, nothing stopped Benjamin Davis from becoming a pilot. He faced many obstacles, but accepted the challenges and overcame them all with strong resolve, or determination. He helped prove that blacks could fly and were just as capable as white pilots. When Davis joined the military, he was the only black officer. When the Air Force integrated in 1949, there were 375 black officers. Today, there are more than 4,000 black officers in the U.S. Air Force. Davis did an amazing amount of work to end segregation. He was most proud of this among his many other accomplishments in life. To honor him and his achievements, in 1998, President Bill Clinton promoted him to the rank of full general with his fourth star.

General Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr.

Retired, USAF, February 1, 1970 Died, July 4, 2002

[See video of American, General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.](#)

(YouTube Introduction Clip to PBS Legends of Air Power, Season 1, Episode 2, 2014)



Public Domain Photo

General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Accomplishments and Recognitions



Photo courtesy of International Hall of Fame, San Diego Air and Space Museum, used with permission

“Davis had no lack of resolve; he was a soldier and he had decided to serve, wherever his future lay in the US Army. Davis was not deterred by the bleak prospects proffered by a tradition of rigid segregation. It was clear from the start that his was not going to be a career made easy by happenstance and serendipity.”
~ Ohio Humanities, April 2018

Military and Civilian Recognitions:

- 1992 - recipient of the [Langley Gold Medal](#) from the [Smithsonian Institution](#)
- 1996 - inducted into the [International Air & Space Hall of Fame](#) at the [San Diego Air & Space Museum](#) (see his induction page [HERE](#))
- 1998 - President Bill Clinton awarded him his fourth star raising him to the rank of General, post retirement
- 2002 - scholar [Molefi Kete Asante](#) listed Davis on his list of [100 Greatest African Americans](#)
- 2012- [Benjamin O. Davis High School](#) of the [Aldine Independent School District](#) in [Houston, Texas](#), opened, while, also, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Aerospace Technical High School in Detroit, Michigan, and Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Middle School in Compton, California, as well as the former Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Aviation High School in Cleveland, Ohio all named in his honor
- 2007 - recipient of The Congressional Gold Medal presented to the Tuskegee Airmen for their service to our nation during WWII
- 2015 - West Point named a newly-constructed barracks after him
- 2019 - the airfield at the [United States Air Force Academy](#) in [Colorado Springs, Colorado](#) was re-named Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Airfield
- Gen Benjamin Davis was the “first” for many things, such as:
 - the first African American to be admitted to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (1932) since Reconstruction (which ended in 1877)
 - the first black officer to solo an Army Air Corps aircraft (1941)
 - among the first four black officers to pin on U.S. Army Air Forces silver pilot wings (1942)
- The Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Award is presented to senior members of the [Civil Air Patrol](#) – [United States Air Force Auxiliary](#) who successfully complete the second level of professional development, complete the technical training required for the Leadership Award, and attend Squadron Leadership School, designed "to enhance a senior member's performance at the squadron level and to increase understanding of the basic function of a squadron and how to improve squadron operations"



Civil Air Patrol Awards and Decorations



Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Award



(Ribbon design submitted to NHQ for approval by Capt Jim Thomasson-MER-NC-001)



The [Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Award](#) is presented to senior members who successfully complete the second level of professional development. It is named for Benjamin O. Davis, an aviation pioneer and commander of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II.

Videos for additional information:

Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Interview, 1970 www.archives.com: <https://youtu.be/xa8LWkkul60>

Barnstorming Airplane Stunts of the 1920s <https://youtu.be/FI6STwhPCuI>

General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Destined to Lead- His Experience in the US Military Academy, West Point (1 hour) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=ZwGjuYKMgKE>

General Benjamin O. Davis Jr. video at his gravesite at Arlington National Cemetery (2:29 minutes) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDVmxm5H_6o

U.S. Air Force Academy Airfield Naming Ceremony- U.S. Department of Defense <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/Videos/?videoid=719373>



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Review

Ask the students the following questions as a review of Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.

1. Describe why Benjamin Davis was driven to destroy segregation.
2. How would you describe the meaning of “being shunned”?
3. How did being shunned affect Benjamin Davis?
4. How would being shunned affect you?

Review Answers:

1. He watched his father be held back in life due to segregation. He experienced it at every turn. He felt all men and women deserved equal opportunity for hard work.
2. People ignoring you and acting as if you are not there or treating you as worthy to do anything.
3. He did not let others see that it bothered him. He was resolved to achieve his goals no matter how he was treated.
4. Answers will vary.

STEM Connection Activities

1- Make and Fly a Stunt Paper Airplane

Why a stunt airplane? General Benjamin Davis, Jr. took his first flight in a barnstorming stunt airplane and loved how the steep turns made him feel! He knew he wanted to fly! See what types of steep turns can be created with these two paper stunt planes!

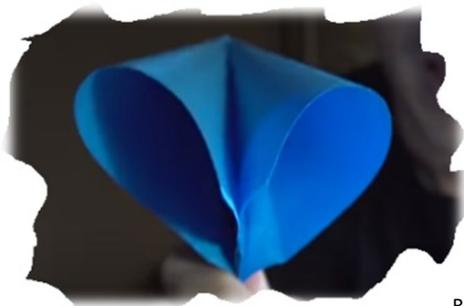
- a. Fold N Fly Stunt Paper Plane from www.FoldnFly.com



- Paper stunt airplane folding directions found at <https://www.foldnfly.com/16.html>
- Level of difficulty- hard, as there are 7 folds
- Fun Aerobatic Trick Paper Airplane Tutorial Video: <https://youtu.be/peJslO8YnAw>

FoldnFly.com Photo

- b. Rob's World Epic Paper Popper and Stunt Plane



Rob's World Photos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70CuIM0xl0g>

2- Build a paper model of a [P-51 Mustang](#)

Why a P-51 Mustang? That is the signature airplane of the Tuskegee Airmen and the 332nd Fighter Group. They painted the tail section red for distinction and were admirably called the “Red Tails,” as described at the [National WW2 Museum.org page](#).



1- Make the micro paper model of the P-51 Mustang on the left by printing the model pieces on cardstock paper. Cut and tape pieces together.

To add a rubber band propellor and see the design to build this model, go to the [Micro P 51 Mustang with Rubber Band-Powered Propeller YouTube video](#).

2- For another paper model, use the template on next page.

3- For a more complex paper model design and build instructions, go to [4dpaperairplane.com](#).

World War II P-51 Mustang
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NOTE: 110 lb. CARD STOCK paper is recommended for this project.
Supplies needed: Glue, 110 lb. CARD STOCK paper, one 3/4" brass fastener, scissors, and a hole puncher.

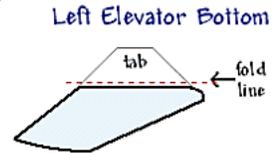
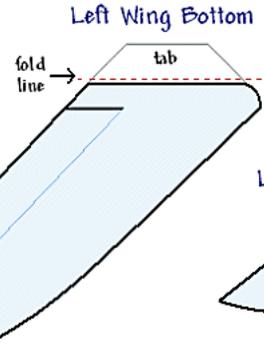
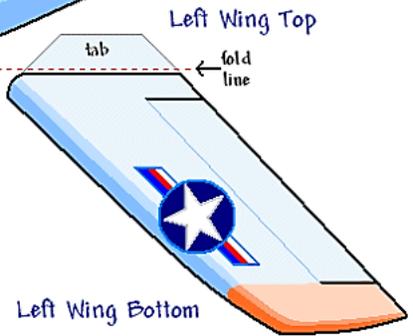
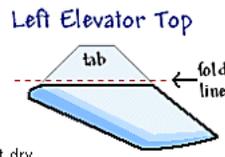
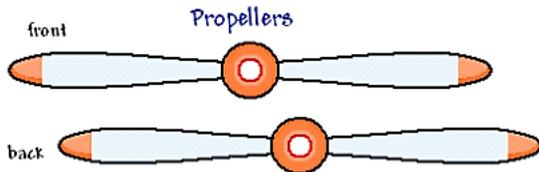


Directions:

1. Cut out as close to image edges as possible.
2. Glue airplane body LEFT to RIGHT except for PROPELLER NOSE.
3. Glue Wings, Elevators and Propellers together, FRONT to BACK.
4. Fold Wing Tabs down where indicated and glue to side of airplane.
5. Fold Elevator Tabs down as shown and glue to side of airplane.

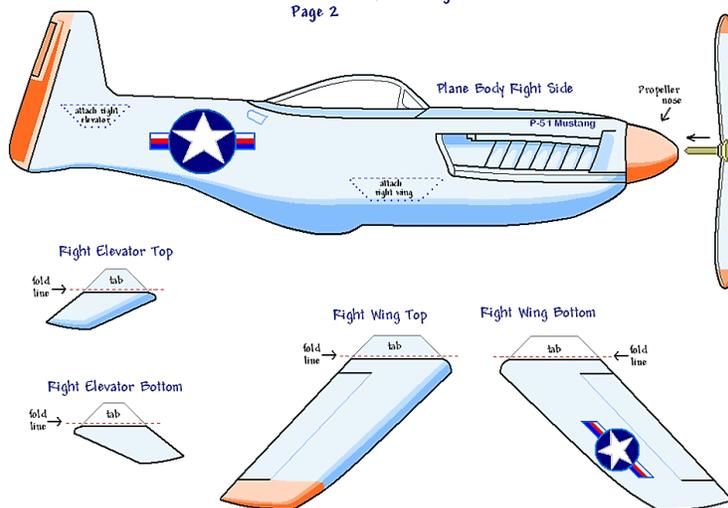
Propellers:

6. Punch holes in red circles on propellers. Slip 3/4" brass fasteners through punched hole and insert ends of fastener in between left and right propeller nose.
7. Allow just enough room between propeller nose and blades for propeller to spin freely and glue thoroughly into place.
(Hold between fingers and press until completely dry)



World War II P-51 Mustang
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From www.Printablee.com



Character Connection Activities

Fly, Eagle, Fly: An African Tale by Christopher Gregorowski (PERSEVERANCE)

1. Read the story from the book or listen to the story at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= Bgl4tVcRHs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bgl4tVcRHs). Discuss what perseverance means by using the suggested lesson plan found at <https://schools.cms.k12.nc.us/beverlywoodsES/Documents/AprilPerseverance.pdf>.
2. Have students complete one or more of the perseverance activities from the lesson plan above.

Suggested activity follows:

Icy Perseverance

Needed: an ice cube for each student with a penny frozen inside

Begin by giving each student an ice cube. Explain that the first person to get the penny out of their ice without putting it in their mouth or hitting it with another object is the winner.

Afterward, discuss:

- a. How does waiting for the ice cube to melt compare to reaching one's goals?
 - b. Did you ever feel like quitting?
 - c. Why do some people quit before reaching their goals?
 - d. Could you have gotten the penny quicker had you broken the rules?
 - e. Would you feel as good about winning if you didn't follow the rules?
 - f. How do hard work and perseverance help you achieve your goals?
3. Other character traits related to Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. are found below. Have students make a list of character traits they feel they wish to exhibit and be called.

bold
courageous
determined
goal oriented
resolved
steadfast
strong-willed



References:

Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. | Military.com <https://www.military.com/history/gen-benjamin-o-davis-jr.html>

Benjamin Davis, American, by Alan L. Gropman, USAF (Ret), Air Force Magazine, August 1997 <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/0897davis/>

Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., 89, Dies; Dispelled Racial Myths as Leader of Pilots' Unit, by Richard Goldstein, July 2, 2002, The New York Post <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/07/us/gen-benjamin-o-davis-jr-89-dies-dispelled-racial-myths-as-leader-of-pilots-unit.html>

History.com/Reconstruction <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/reconstruction#:~:text=Reconstruction>

General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.: A Lifetime of Resolve and Discipline, The Ohio Humanities, April 30, 2018 <http://www.ohiohumanities.org/general-benjamin-o-davis-jr-a-lifetime-of-resolve-and-discipline/>