FIRST GRADUATING CLASS OF THE TUSKEGEE FLIGHT SCHOOL

WWII HEROES AND TECHNOLOGICAL TRAILBLAZERS, THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN SOARED ABOVE RACIAL INEQUALITY.

ALABAMA AVIATORS

In the 1940s, African American aviators from across the country arrived in Alabama to learn to fly the most sophisticated combat aircraft of the day. The school that Booker T. Washington founded had an excellent aeronautical engineering program; consequently, the U.S. military selected it as a place to train pilots in preparation for World War II. While most American military fought one war, those who trained at Tuskegee's Moton Field fought two—one against the Nazis, and one against racism.

TEXT BY TODD KEITH

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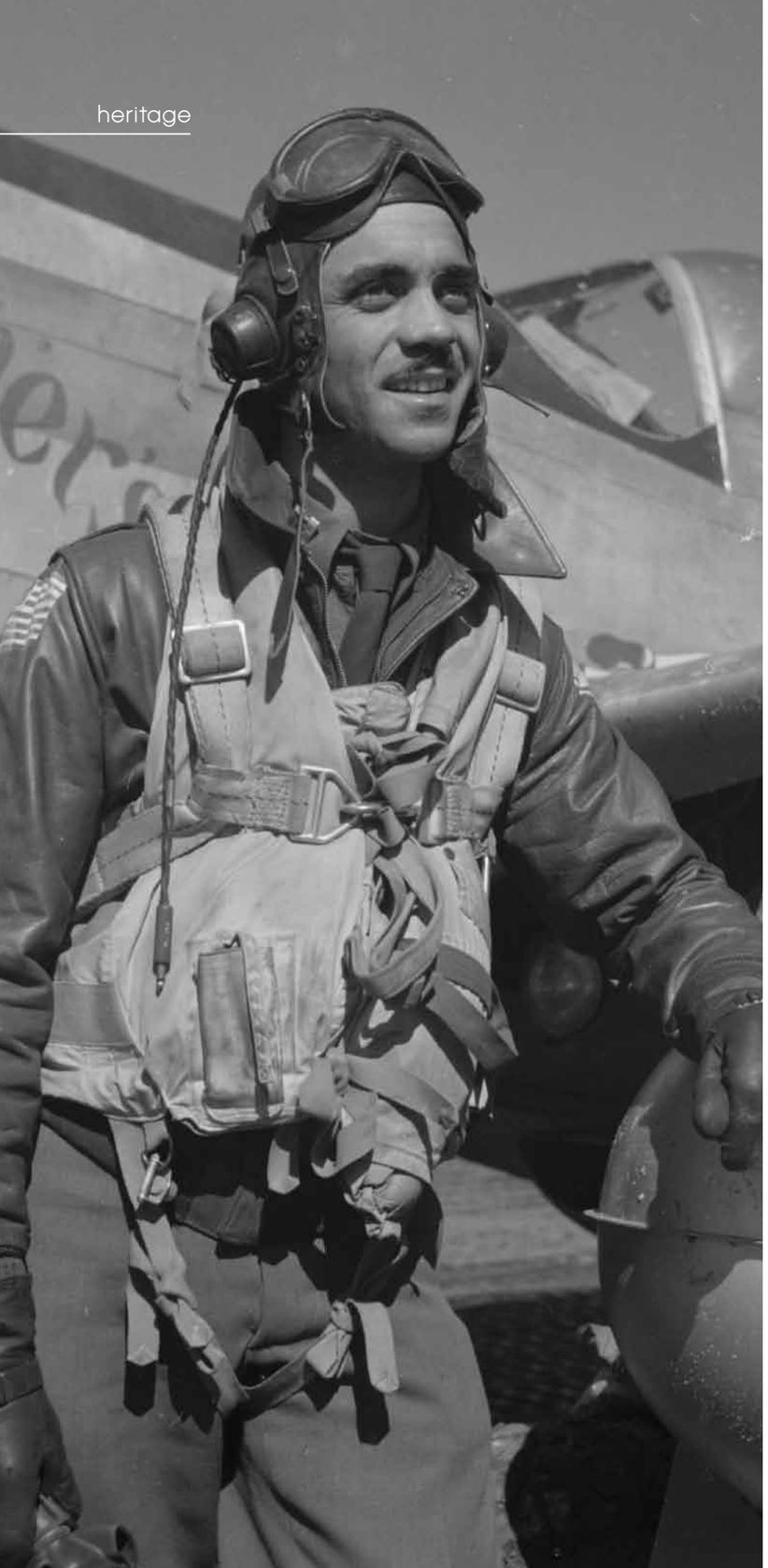


"Inside the gates of the Tuskegee Airfield, you were a citizen with equal privileges corresponding to your achievements and your rank," said Lieutenant Colonel Herbert E. Carter, an original member of the Tuskegee Airmen 99th Fighter Squadron. "But the minute you stepped beyond that gate, it was a different world. This was the 1940s, and this was Alabama, you have to remember." Colonel Carter has since passed away, as the number of these legendary heros continues to shrink. Today, fewer than 20 pilots and roughly 100 support crewmen remain.

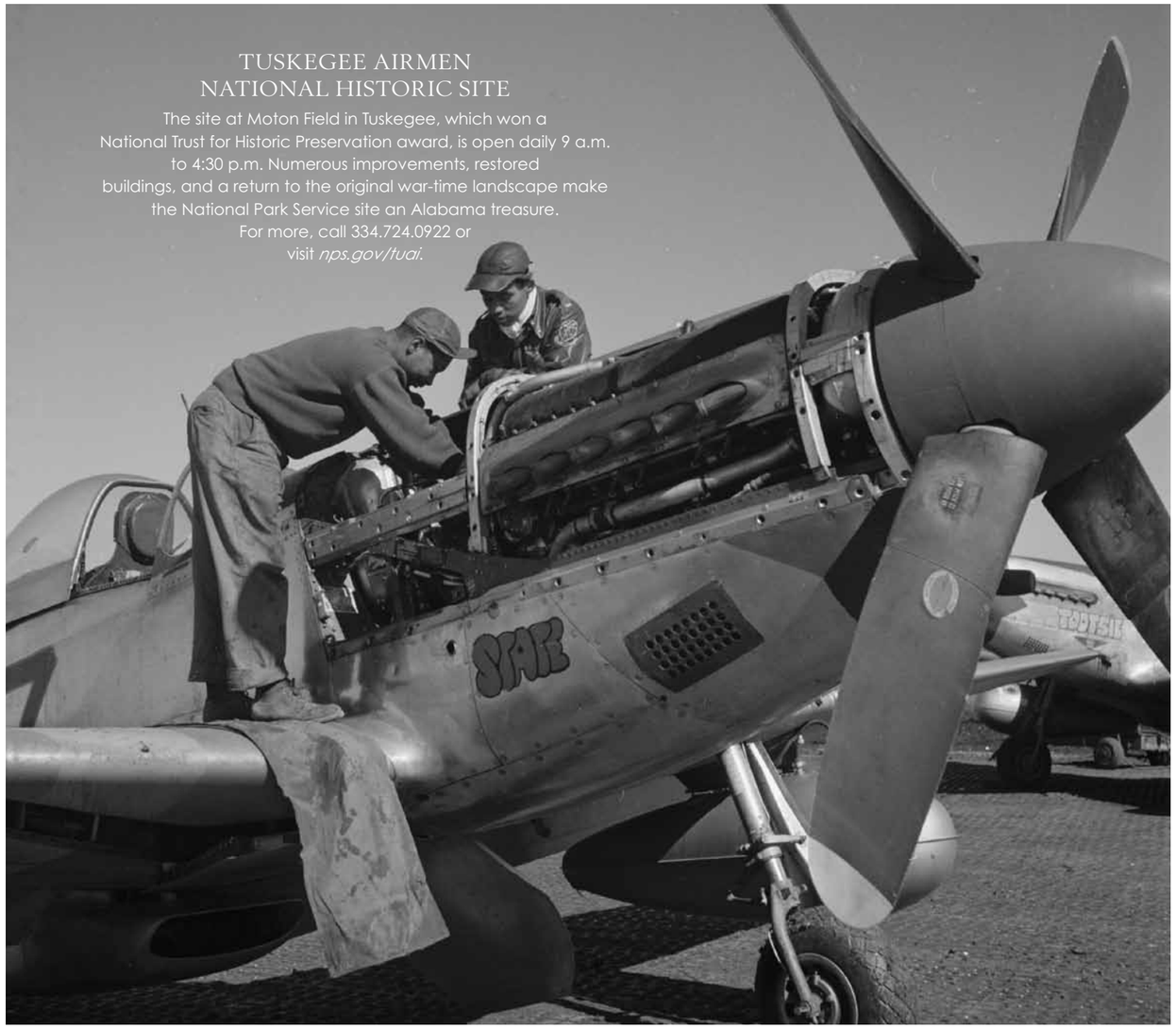
Carter started flying 90 mph PT-17 biplanes and ended his Air Force career in 1969 flying Mach 2 F-106. He flew 77 combat sorties against German and Italian air forces in the European Theater during the war. His awards and accomplishments, from the Air Force Commendation Medal to France's Legion of Honor, are too numerous to mention.

"It was said that the negro was subservient. Well, you have to give me the opportunity to prove myself before you can utterly dismiss me," said Carter. "That's how we all felt."

That the pilots and support staff became one of the most highly respected fighter groups in the war effectively settled any debate on the ability and motivation of African Americans before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. "We made some mighty sacrifices," said Carter. "Four hundred fifty pilots flew in the European theater. We lost 66 men in combat and had 33 taken as POWs. It was considered to be part of the job even though what we accomplished was above and beyond what many achieved."

Retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Dan Twomey has helped keep the Tuskegee Airmen story alive among his peers. "They were so optimistic about their mission, their role, their capabilities, and that had a lot to do with the success they had in the armed forces, during World War II and beyond," Twomey says. "The Tuskegee Airmen understood that they would be judged harshly even if they weren't overwhelmingly successful—which they were—and they pressed on to greatness anyway."

The term "Tuskegee Airmen" is a bit of a misnomer: They were fighter pilots, bomber pilots, yes, but also mechanics, intelligence officers, instructors, parachute riggers, and everyone else who helped keep the planes in the air. The Tuskegee Airmen also included women in support roles, including Carter's wife, Mildred, the first African American woman in Alabama to earn her private airplane license. Against the odds, the Tuskegee Airmen turned obstacles into achievements that would change Alabama and the world beyond.



TUSKEGEE AIRMEN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

The site at Moton Field in Tuskegee, which won a National Trust for Historic Preservation award, is open daily 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Numerous improvements, restored buildings, and a return to the original war-time landscape make the National Park Service site an Alabama treasure. For more, call 334.724.0922 or visit *nps.gov/tuai*.

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