

Gen Benjamin O. Davis Jr.

ASPJ STAFF



"During World War II, a group of blacks went to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to train as pilots. The famous Tuskegee airmen went on to serve with distinction in the European theater and in the nation's military for years thereafter. The most notable of these men was Benjamin O. Davis Jr."¹

Davis was the son of Brig Gen Benjamin O. Davis Sr., the first black flag officer in the US military. Davis Jr. was West Point's fourth black graduate and its first in the twentieth century; "Davis did not have a pleasant four years there. Because of his race, he was officially 'silenced' by all cadets—no one spoke to him during his entire stay except on official business; he roomed alone; and he had no friends. That so many cadets, faculty members, and senior officers could allow such behavior is astonishing and surely stands as one of the most shameful chapters in West Point history" (71). He graduated 35th out of 276 in the Class of 1936 and became one of only two black line officers in the US Army at the time—the other was his father. He was "promptly turned down for pilot training—no black officers were allowed in the Air Corps. While he served in the infantry in 1940, however, the service reconsidered this policy, and Davis went to Tuskegee for pilot training. Because of the war and his ability, promotion followed rapidly, and he soon found himself a lieutenant colonel commanding the 99th Fighter Squadron in combat. After one year with this all-black unit in Italy, Davis was promoted to colonel and tasked to form the 322d Group, a black fighter unit that served admirably for the remainder of the war" (71-72).

In the summer of 1947, the Army Air Forces integrated aviation training at Randolph Field, Texas; and in April 1948, Gen Carl Spaatz, the first Air Force chief of staff, publicly announced that the Air Force would desegregate to improve its combat effectiveness. That announcement was followed by President Truman's 26 July 1948 Executive Order 9981 to integrate the entire US military. Davis then attended the Air War College in the class of 1949-50. Afterwards he "served in the Pentagon, and went to Korea in 1953 to command a fighter wing.



The following year, he received his first star and moved to the Philippines as vice commander of Thirteenth Air Force at Clark Air Base (AB). After tours in Taiwan, Germany, the Pentagon, and a return to Korea—gaining two more stars in the process—Davis became commander of the Thirteenth. Obviously relishing this command at the height of the Vietnam War, he was reluctant to leave in July 1968 to become deputy commander of US Strike Command. He retired from that assignment in 1970" (72) as a lieutenant general and then held several government posts. In 1998 President Clinton awarded him an honorary promotion to general. General Davis died on the Fourth of July, 2002.

Note

1. Col Phillip S. Meilinger, *Airmen and Air Theory: A Review of the Sources* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 2001), 71. Subsequent references to this book are indicated parenthetically in the text.

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Davis, Benjamin O., Jr. *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., American: An Autobiography*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.

Gropman, Col Alan L. "Benjamin Davis, American." *Air Force Magazine* 80, no. 8 (August 1997). On-line. Internet, 30 January 2003. Available from <http://www.afa.org/magazine/Aug1997/0897benja.html>.