

100th FTS continues proud tradition of Tuskegee Airmen

By Robert Goetz

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RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas -- The Army Air Corps pilots who comprised the 99th, 100th, 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons in the latter stages of World War II stood tall in their mission, escorting bombers in their red-tailed P-51 Mustangs and proving their doubters wrong.

They're better known as the Tuskegee Airmen, four squadrons of black pilots who displayed their resolve with a string of impressive sorties in Europe, shattering racial stereotypes along the way.

The spirit of the Tuskegee Airmen lives on at Randolph, where the seasoned associate instructor pilots of the 100th Flying Training Squadron - an operational unit that is a descendant of the 100th Fighter Squadron - prove their mettle by showing other pilots how to become instructors.

"We uphold their tradition of excellence with the training we provide," said Lt. Col. Robert Wittmann, 100th FTS commander.

The 100th FTS, which reports to the 340th Flying Training Group at Randolph, is unique for the continuity it brings to the Air Education and Training Command's Undergraduate Pilot Training. Some of its instructors have contributed more than a few years of service to AETC. The squadron itself has been assigned to the base for nearly 10 years.

"About one-third of our instructor pilots are full time, but the rest are part-time, traditional reservists," said Lt. Col. George Quehl, 100th FTS assistant director of operations. "They're citizen Airmen. They have a wealth of knowledge and experience."

Colonel Wittmann said the reservists who contribute an average of 10 to 11 days a month as instructors are professionals in the civilian sector.

"They're business owners, airline pilots and contractors on base," he said.

Though they work part time as instructors, their know-how is much in demand, said Colonel Wittmann, who is also a commercial pilot. He said when active-duty personnel present ideas for training, they often seek the advice of 100th FTS instructors.

"We're asked to be part of that because of the knowledge and continuity we bring to the fight," he said.

"Recent accolades highlight our instructors' experience," said Colonel Wittmann.

Maj. Bobby Loher was recently recognized as the first military aviator to log 5,000 hours in a T-1. Another instructor, Maj. Rusty Wallace, was selected as this year's 19th Air Force's Instructor Pilot of the Year.

"They receive recognition from their active-duty counterparts," he said.

The instructors are also versatile pilots.

"We fly all the airplanes on base except the T-43," said Colonel Quehl.

Colonel Wittmann said he is proud of the squadron's mission to "train tomorrow's instructors."

"We take an individual who may not have any experience instructing," he said. "First we qualify them in an airplane, then we transition to teaching them how to be instructors."

The training helps prospective instructor pilots anticipate problems, the colonel added.

"We teach them the mistakes that students make so they can identify and correct the root cause of a problem," he said. "The finished product is a superior instructor pilot."

For reservists, being an instructor pilot is a delicate balancing act, Colonel Wittmann said.

"It takes a special breed of person," he said. "Some of them commute here from other parts of the country. They're juggling many plates - their family, their job here and their civilian job."

Colonel Wittmann said reductions in the commercial airline industry following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, resulted in furloughs for many part-time instructors, enabling them to dedicate more time to the AETC Pilot Instructor Training mission.

"It was a win-win situation," said Colonel Wittmann. "Airmen branched out in all facets of the mission from squadron to group, wing and Headquarters AETC levels. We are providing unprecedented support. We call it vertical integration."

Colonel Quehl said the squadron works hard to uphold the tradition established by the Tuskegee Airmen.

"We're proud of our heritage and try to carry it forward," said Colonel Quehl.

Colonel Wittmann added that squadron members meet regularly with the surviving members of the Tuskegee Airmen.

"The best thing we can do is honor their heritage of excellence," he said.

The 100th FTS was instrumental in bringing together - for the first time - representatives of all four squadrons of the Tuskegee Airmen to their annual convention in Phoenix, Ariz., last year, said Colonel Wittmann.

The squadron also pays tribute to the Tuskegee Airmen in other ways.

Last October, the 100th FTS celebrated the planned construction of its own building on base with a ground-breaking and a rollout of one of each of the aircraft that squadron instructor pilots fly - the T-1, T-6 and T-38. Each was freshly painted with the red tail that distinguished the P-51s of the Tuskegee Airmen and was emblazoned with their panther patch. The Airmen were invited to the event.

"That identified to folks the legacy behind the 100th," Colonel Wittmann said.

He added that the squadron also displays photos of the Airmen at their present headquarters in Building 663 and will devote even more space to that heritage when the new structure is completed, possibly this October.

"The new building will have a lot of historical documents, photographs and signed memorabilia," he said.

The colonel said the squadron also provides educational opportunities for underprivileged students by letting them experience the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen. Colonel Wittmann said seeing the successes of those four squadrons might inspire young people to set their sights high.

"If we can tap into just one of those students and let them see that there's hope," he said, "the sky's the limit."