



# Curriculum Guide

*"Red Tailed Angels": The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen*

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum



## Red Tailed Angels

### ***"Red Tailed Angels": The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen***

*Overview: The Tuskegee Airmen*



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## Overview: The Tuskegee Airmen

### The Struggle to Get America's First Black Airmen Off the Ground

African-Americans had been struggling to gain entrance into the Army Air Corps since the first planes were used in warfare in World War I. On the eve of the Second World War, in April of 1939, Public Law 18 calling for the expansion of the Air Corps was passed. One section of the law authorized the creation of training programs in black colleges to prepare black military personnel for various support services.

Two years later on January 16, 1941, the War Department announced the formation of the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron, a black flying unit to be trained at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. The training of black pilots had an added element of difficulty as there were no black instructors in the military at the time. Eleven white officers were assigned to instruct the 429 enlisted men and 47 officers thus introducing one of the first examples of an 'integrated' military unit. The "Red Tailed Angels" as the black pilots came to be known were born.

The 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron was later renamed the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron and flew missions in the Mediterranean and Europe. The group flew with distinction serving as a bomber escort group protecting American bombers on missions deep into enemy airspace without ever losing an aircraft to enemy fire. Many of the pilots went on to serve in other black Air Corps units, including fighter, bomber, and composite squadrons and groups. From 1941 to 1946 nearly 1000 black combat flyers completed their training at the Tuskegee Institute. They flew more than 5,500 sorties, and destroyed 261 enemy aircraft.

The courage and dedication of these brave men helped to defeat our enemies overseas and served as an inspiration for the fight against prejudice here at home.



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## Overview: FDR and World War II

The Second World War was the most devastating war in the history of mankind. Between 1939 and 1945, an estimated 60 million people were killed in fighting that literally spanned the globe. Democracy was threatened in every corner of the world and its survival hung in the balance.

Franklin Roosevelt understood the importance of this immense challenge and possessed an instinct for power and a willingness to exercise it. With America's entry into the war after the December 7, 1941 surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt moved aggressively to centralize strategy and high command in the White House. He organized the work of war mobilization and military information gathering so that he could closely monitor and direct events himself. He set priorities and focused attention on the goal of total victory. Under his direction, the government assumed unprecedented powers over the economy. Federal defense spending skyrocketed and the public was mobilized to pay the bill. Millions of Americans began paying federal taxes for the first time. War bond sales raised billions of additional dollars. To control inflation, the government put limits on wages, prices, and rents. And to conserve scarce goods for military use, products ranging from gasoline to sugar were rationed.

Roosevelt's military advisers ranged from the anonymous Admiral King to the flamboyant General MacArthur. The President employed his formidable political skills to manage relationships with, and among, them. Together, he and his generals virtually created the modern American military. The armed services grew from an unprepared force of 334,473 active duty personnel in 1939 to 12,123,455 in 1945. The army and navy expanded and modernized and, with FDR's endorsement, American air power increased dramatically. The President also supported new agencies like the Office of Strategic Services (precursor to the CIA) and the Office of Scientific Research and Development.

In addition, Roosevelt held the key position in a wartime coalition of 26 nations he called the "United Nations." He, Josef Stalin, and Winston Churchill comprised the "Big Three" at the heart of this coalition. But, as the war progressed, FDR increasingly acted as the group's ultimate broker and decision-maker. Throughout the war, the President emphasized the importance of coalition building. Diplomacy, as much as military strategy, became a hallmark of his wartime leadership.

To fight a global war, the United States needed to mobilize its entire population along what became known as the "Home Front." Children organized scrap drives to salvage rubber and metal for war industries, while their parents joined civil defense units, planted



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Victory Gardens, and purchased war bonds. Government propaganda reminded people to report suspicious activity and Americans joined the Red Cross, the USO, and other service organizations. This enormous national effort touched nearly every aspect of American life and set in motion economic and social forces that would reverberate for decades.

During the war, Eleanor Roosevelt continued the ceaseless activism that had long marked her as America's most public First Lady. However, her activism sometimes led to controversy. Mrs. Roosevelt was outspoken in her support for racial and gender equality. She championed the Tuskegee Airmen, women's entrance into the armed services, and the right of workers to organize.

In 1942, she flew to England to offer support to America's allies and returned with detailed reports for FDR. But her most ambitious foreign trip was a 25,000 mile tour of the South Pacific in 1943 as a representative of the American Red Cross. Although she had long wanted to visit the troops in the combat zones of the South Pacific, FDR only permitted the dangerous trip when press criticism of Mrs. Roosevelt's civil rights work increased. During her tour, the First Lady traveled in military transports, putting herself at risk to visit hospitals, military camps, and Red Cross clubs. She saw an estimated 400,000 American servicemen and women.

The First Lady continued to advocate progressive goals like racial integration in the military and defense industries, day care for the children of women war workers, and planning for the postwar economy. She argued that America could not fight for democracy and equality abroad without also ensuring it at home.

Though he died before final victory was achieved in World War II, Franklin Roosevelt lived long enough to know that victory was assured. World War II profoundly changed global economics, politics, and social relationships and continues to influence the world we live in today.