

Out of the Wilderness

A courageous officer risked his career for a principle that had been honored more in the breach than in the observance.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

To fight with few allies for a principle opposed by a majority of the people and institutions of one's own country demands spiritual and moral resources that are rare, indeed—a kind of valor for which decorations are seldom given. Flying against the Luftwaffe's best fighters, some of the time with second-rate equipment, called for a different order of valor. Both battles were fought simultaneously by a tall, erect man of innate dignity. That man is Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the first black man to graduate from the US Military Academy in the twentieth century, the first to lead an AAF group in combat, and the first black general officer in the Air Force. The principle for which he laid his career, and his life, on the line many times was racial equality. Success in the air war over Europe was a key to its attainment.

It is difficult for younger Americans to appreciate the depth of racial prejudice that existed in this country fifty years ago. Segregation was enforced rigidly in our military services. Ben Davis knew that when he accepted an appointment to West Point in 1932. His father was one of the Army's few black officers, later its first black general. During young Ben's years at West Point, he was "silenced" by his fellow cadets. Despite constant pressure to force him to resign, he graduated thirty-fifth in a class of 276 and hoped to enter flying training. But the Air Corps accepted no blacks in any capacity.

In late 1940, President Roosevelt directed the Army Air Corps to establish a flying program for blacks at Tuskegee, Ala. The field opened in July 1941 with Capt. Ben Davis as

leader of the first class, which was to form the nucleus of the 99th Pursuit Squadron. Commanded by Davis, the squadron completed combat training, but for more than a year no theater commander would accept them. Finally, they were sent to North Africa, outfitted with obsolete P-40s, and sent into combat in July 1943 without the customary leavening of experienced pilots from other units. It was, as Davis told his men, their great opportunity for themselves and for all black Americans.

The squadron scored its first victory against a FW-190 a month later. Nevertheless, commanders in the theater and in Washington recommended that it be withdrawn from action and that no more black units be assigned to a combat theater. Davis successfully defended the performance of the 99th before a top-level War Department committee. By war's end, his 332d Group (which included the 99th), based in Italy and flying P-51s, had completed more than 1,500 missions, destroyed at least 250 enemy aircraft in the air and on the ground, and achieved the unique distinction of never losing a bomber to enemy aircraft in some 200 escort missions. Colonel Davis, who insisted that his men respond to indignities with performance rather than pro-



Lt. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.: A courageous, often lonely, campaign.

test, led more missions than any other of his officers. The 332d proved not only that its commander but that many other blacks as well could compete successfully with whites in the most technical of the military services.

Despite the record of Davis's group, the Army—and its Air Forces—clung to a policy of racial segregation after the war. Both Ben Davis and his father attacked that policy before a board of general officers in 1945. The younger Davis continued to fight for racial integration with an argument that commanders understood—efficiency. Segregation made it impossible to fill shortages by transferring people among operational units that had been decimated by demobilization.

In 1948, the Air Force, assured by the achievements of Davis's fighter group and spurred on by the urgency of rebuilding a shattered combat force, announced an end to segregation. Three months later, President Truman directed equal opportunity, though not racial integration, in the services. The other services moved slowly in the same direction as the Air Force, and the country as a whole quickened its long, painful march toward racial equality.

Discrimination within the services did not end with integration. Until his retirement in 1970 as a lieutenant general, Ben Davis worked toward truly equal opportunity for all races, based on ability and performance. On those criteria, he selected his subordinates in the integrated Air Force.

No man deserves more credit for narrowing the gap between a professed ideal and an imperfect reality than Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. With dignity, intelligence, and measured judgment, he waged a courageous, often lonely, campaign that helped change the character of America. ■

[Thanks to Col. Alan Gropman for sharing his short biography of General Davis that will soon appear in a book on Air Force leaders.—J.L.F.]