

Good Afternoon! What a spectacular day and a momentous occasion. I am privileged to join Governor Riley, Mayor Ford, and Dr. Payton to share in this celebration of the opening of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site. I am especially honored to join Lt. Gen. Russell Davis and the Tuskegee Airmen, along with their families. On behalf of Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne, I thank all those gathered for bringing us to this time of celebration. Special thanks to the National Park Service for their outstanding work here at this national historic site.

Ten years ago, November 6, 1998, Congress established the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site as among the Nation's most significant places of history. Moton Field and the Tuskegee Airmen were recognized for outstanding contributions to the fabric and sustenance of this nation.

Sometimes, certain moments in history and certain acts of individuals transcend the particular events of the time, and even the circumstances that gave rise to those actions. The story of the Tuskegee Airmen is one of those transcendent sagas. Yes, the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen is one of triumph at a time of war.

Their legacy is one of military distinction. Today, we hear accolades retold of 1,000 African American pilots trained at Tuskegee. Both the 99th Squadron and the 33rd Fighter Group were awarded Presidential Unit Citations. These airmen flew over 15,000 combat sorties. They destroyed 111 German airplanes in the air and another 150 on the ground. These airmen earned 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 744 Air Medals, 8 Purple Hearts, and 14 Bronze Stars. These are accomplishments of the highest order in service to this Nation. Each and every one of us owes a debt of gratitude to these men and to the men and women of today who serve this Nation.

But the Tuskegee Airmen and their story transcend these military accomplishments. For these men, with their courage, their tenacity, their skill, and their dignity, laid the foundations for a better America. Through their courage they brought this Nation closer to the ideals articulated by our founding fathers: ideals of freedom, equality, and the rights of all men and women to have lives of opportunity.

Their courage at war and in peace paved the way for desegregation of the US Armed Forces. Their leadership set the stage for President Harry Truman's Executive Order of 1948. It was an order that directed equality of treatment and opportunity in all the armed forces. The order became a building block in this Nation's long struggle toward racial equality.

As I read more of the history of the Tuskegee Airmen, I was struck by their transcendent place in American History. These men, as one narrative described, fought two wars: one against a military force overseas and the other against racism at home and abroad. Imagine these men fighting for this Nation yet barred from officers' clubs. Imagine these men with highest achievements yet facing limits on their advancement.

Still, they continued to serve and excel. I read the words of Joseph Philip Gomer, a Tuskegee Airmen, as recounted by his daughter Ms. Gomer-Douglas. She writes that her father observed, and I quote: "I flew for my parents, for my race, and for our battle for first-class citizenship of this country. We were fighting for the millions of black Americans back here. We were there to remove barriers, open a few doors and do a job." And then Joseph Gomer continued: "But we are all Americans, that's why we chose to fight."

I thank Mr. Gomer for his service. I thank each and every member of the Tuskegee Airmen for their service. I thank their families for their courage at home and abroad—a courage at home and abroad that helped forge for all of us a better Nation. Ms. Gomer-Douglas, writing her tribute to her father, reminds us of a longer and too often forgotten history—a history in which African Americans from the very beginning helped lay foundations of freedom. She reminds us that over 10,000 African Americans served during the American Revolution, and thousands fought during the Civil War.

The Tuskegee Airmen carried forward this commitment to freedom and equality. We celebrate today the grand opening of this National Historic Site so that our children and their children thereafter will know this history, be inspired by the courage and commitment of the Tuskegee Airmen, and be reminded of dark days of discrimination so that we might continue to forge a better America. With great pride for our Nation, I am honored to officially open the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site.