

The Road Ahead Derives from the Path Behind

By Robert Kodosky, Westtown Township Historical Commissioner

Why preserve the past? Others routinely ask this of historians. And it is, after all, a fair question. Societal progress derives from looking ahead. **Why then look back?** The answer is simple. Imagine driving a car which lacks rearview mirrors. Moving forward depends on knowing what resides behind.

Take the case of Salem Poor. He exhibited valor fighting at Bunker Hill where he mortally wounded British Lieutenant Colonel James Abercrombie. He unwaveringly served with Patriot forces until his discharge in 1780. This included spending the winter of 1777 encamped with George Washington and the Continental Army at Valley Forge, PA.

After the war, Poor faded into obscurity. It required a national bicentennial to locate him. In 1975, on the eve of America's 200th birthday, the United States Postal Service issued a commemorative series of stamps that identified Poor as a "Contributor to the Cause." Such belated recognition as afforded to Salem Poor is not atypical. It stands as the rule, rather than the exception, concerning African Americans who served their nation.

It necessitated the Hollywood film *Glory* (1989) to affirm widely the combat roles performed by African Americans during the Civil War that the Union and Confederacy waged over one hundred years earlier. Until then, history largely lost sight of the efforts exerted by African Americans in a war that secured their freedom. So too, history long neglected the Harlem Hellfighters (369th Infantry).

The all black unit spent more time in Europe's trenches during the First World War than did any other from the United States. One of its members, Private Henry Johnson, performed exceptionally well in helping to "make the world safe for democracy." This earned him a Purple Heart, only awarded in 1996, and a Medal of Honor granted by President Barack H. Obama in 2015, one hundred years after the United States entered the Great War.

By 1925, seven years after World War I concluded, Private Johnson's heroics became ones that history forgot. That year the United States Army War College in Carlisle, PA issued a report about the prospects of African Americans serving in combat. It found that the "American negro is inferior to our white population in mental capacity." Moreover, the report suggested that an African American soldier constituted an "inferior technician" and "and as a fighter he has been inferior to the white man."

This apparent memory lapse resulted in the need for African Americans to continue to fight for the right to fight for their country. The Second World War, one that the United States entered following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, afforded them that opportunity. African Americans seized on it to wage a campaign for "Double Victory," one that defeated fascism abroad and racism at home. It proved successful. President Harry S. Truman issued executive order 9981 on 26 July 1948. This abolished discrimination in the armed forces and eventually resulted in their desegregation.

No unit featured more prominently in initiating these changes than did the Tuskegee Airmen. The group played a crucial role in escorting American bombers in North Africa and Europe. This history, nearly lost after the war ended, came to be salvaged decades later by television, *The Tuskegee Airmen* (1996), theater, *Fly* (2009) and film, *Red Tails* (2012). These contributed to a widespread appreciation of the unit's exemplary wartime performance, but they remain limited. This stood as evident in working with the Greater Philadelphia Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen to publish *Tuskegee in Philadelphia: Rising to the Challenge* (The History Press, 2020).

The book's title serves to counter the notion that the unit's membership originated from Tuskegee. Not a single pilot came from the entire state of Alabama. Most came from Chicago, Illinois (66), the only place that contributed more than the Philadelphia area (48). Regardless of where trainees originated, they likely learned how to fly from Roscoe "Coach" Draper, a native of Haverford, PA. Draper had trained under Bryn Mawr's Charles Alfred "The Chief" Anderson, Tuskegee's first chief flight instructor. The Chief and the Coach that he trained, both Philadelphia area natives, provided Tuskegee's Airmen with their wings.

Of course, as *Tuskegee in Philadelphia* chronicles, only a fraction of the unit's members performed as pilots. The bulk of individuals served as medical, mechanical, and support staff. This included a number of women who confronted sexism as well as racism. The very name Airmen, of course, resists gender inclusiveness. The women of Tuskegee, including Philadelphia resident Miss Alma Bailey, one who trained as a nurse, earned scant recognition for their service. While this remains the case, the first chapter of *Tuskegee in Philadelphia* is entitled "Ladies First."

Understanding the unit's diversity enables one to grasp the totality of the contributions made by the men and women of Tuskegee. It also reveals the challenges they faced during the war and after. While the 332nd Fighter Group earned respect from the bomber crews they escorted, Tuskegee's own Bombardment Group, the 477th, never deployed. Its members instead battled against the racism that grounded them. In doing so, they contributed to achieving a "Double Victory." This campaign, one that entailed defeating racism at home, continued long after the war overseas ended.

Tuskegee in Philadelphia tells this story. Confronted by postwar racism, the men and women of Tuskegee continued their service to the nation by working to attain civil rights. They did this with great dignity and success. Luther H. Smith, for example, flew more than 130 combat missions during the war. He earned numerous medals, including the Distinguished Flying Cross. As a prisoner of war, however, Smith received more respect from his Nazi captors than he did back home. That failed to deter him. Smith's work after the war as a mechanical engineer in General Electric's aerospace division in Philadelphia earned two U.S. patents.

Smith's story, and the others contained in *Tuskegee in Philadelphia*, suggest the importance of preserving the past. It inspires ways to negotiate successfully the obstacles that remain for all on the road ahead.

