HISTORY This Week EP 410: Tuskegee Top Gun
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. January 11, 2022. I'm Sally Helm.

Lieutenant Colonel James Harvey arrives at Nellis Air Force base in Las Vegas, Nevada. He hasn't been on this base in seventy-three years. Today, he wears a burgundy suit coat with an airplane pin on it. Plus, a patch, embroidered with yet more planes, and the words: "Tuskegee Airmen." When he was a younger man, Harvey served as a pilot in the Air Force's 332nd fighter group. The first Black airmen in the United States military, who fought during World War II and were named for their training ground in Tuskegee, Alabama.

But what really catches the eye about Harvey's outfit today…is his black baseball cap. It says: "1st Top Gun Winner. 1949."

That is the year that Lieutenant Colonel James Harvey last stepped foot on Nellis Air Force base in Nevada. 1949. He was there for the Air force's first ever weapons meet. When the military's most talented pilots, the best of the best, competed against each other in simulated acts of aerial warfare.

Harvey was on a team of three pilots. The only Black pilots competing. And…they won.

But over the years that followed, the official record of their victory was either lost or neglected. Or both. Lieutenant Colonel Harvey has been lobbying to change that. And today, he arrives at Nellis Air Force base to accept a plaque commemorating the Top Gun victory.

Col. Harvey: **Mission accomplished, but almost 73 years. That's a lifetime for some people.**

Sally Helm: Today: the Tuskegee Top Gun champions. Who were these exceptional Black pilots? And what did it take to rescue their accomplishments from obscurity and bring them into the light?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Lieutenant Colonel James Harvey III is now 99 years old. But talking to him, I pretty quickly got a sense of what he must have been like growing up. An ambitious, hard-charging eldest child.

Col. Harvey: **I was the anchorman on the gymnastics team, captain of the basketball team. And then in my senior year, I was class president and valedictorian.**

Sally Helm: **You were, you were doing it all.**

Col. Harvey: **Well, when I was growing up and up until the time I got married, I was a perfectionist. And then when you're a perfectionist and marriage don't go together. [laughs]**

Sally Helm: But for years, perfectionism kinda worked for him. He'd set his mind to something, and then do it. That's how it was with becoming a pilot.

Col. Harvey: I was in my yard one day and uh, I heard this sound overhead and I looked up, it was four P 40 s flying information and I said, 'I'd like to do that one day.' And that was it. So, I pursued it.

Sally Helm: Harvey was growing up in a tiny Pennsylvania town. And around the same time, in New York City, a kid named Harry Stewart, Jr. was also dreaming of flight. He grew up near what's now LaGuardia Airport.

Col. Stewart: I used to go over and watch the planes land and take off. And I used to fantasize myself as being the pilot at the time.

Sally Helm: But, you know, they don't let kids fly planes. The closest he could get was flying model airplanes with his friends.

Col. Stewart: They were made out of balsa wood, bamboo paper and rubber bands. And we would race them. We would fly them and see how long we can, keep them aloft.

Sally Helm: Were you good, Colonel Stewart? Did you come in first in those balsa wood competitions?

Col. Stewart: I would say I was in the middle of the pot.

Sally Helm: Really? [laughs]

Col. Stewart: Yes.

Sally Helm: Stewart grew up in a racially mixed neighborhood. Meanwhile, Harvey was from the only Black family in his Pennsylvania town. But both men told me: their first real experience with racism happened when they joined the military as young people in the early 1940s.

Stewart enters the service in 1943, at age 18, alongside friends from his New York neighborhood. And he leaves home for training.

Col. Stewart: My parents had warned me of what it would be like training in the south there. And the day I went into the service some of the other kids in the neighborhood, and I guess four of them were white, we went down to Pennsylvania station to catch the train. And when we got to Washington, the conductor came back and he pointed to me and he said, "you'll have to go up into the first car." And I knew what he was aiming at and the fellas that I was with said, "we'll go with you, Harry." And the conductor said, "no, no, no, no. That's for the colored people up there. You'll have to stay back here." And later on in the day, I had a pass to eat in the dining car. And when I sat down, they conducted polars green curtain around me so that my being there wouldn't offend the sight of the other people who were eating in the dining car there.

Sally Helm: Do you remember what you felt?

Col. Stewart: Yes. I, I felt a twinge of well, I don't know whether you call it disgust or hatred or whatever you would call it. But I let my eye on the prize, hold on there. And my prize was to go ahead and get my wings and to become a pilot.

Sally Helm: Stewart arrives at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. And has another novel experience: being surrounded by an all-Black group of peers. Men who would become fellow members of his fighter group. And his friends.

Black men had only recently been allowed in the Army Air Corps at all. Pilots held the rank of officer, and for many years, the Army didn't want Black officers in charge of white troops.

But in 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt overrules that backwards view. He approves a law that allows Black pilots in the Army Air Corps…and creates training programs at historically Black colleges. In 1941, airfields open in and around the all-Black Tuskegee Institute. That's where Harry Stewart ends up.

There is an idyllic campus:

Col. Stewart: I remember the trees, the foliage that they had there, they were just absolutely beautiful, lovely, lovely, lovely campus.

Sally Helm: There's also a bit of hazing by the upperclassmen:

Col. Stewart: All sorts of jokes and that type of thing. Designed to toughen you up.

Sally Helm: Stewart has to complete some coursework at Tuskegee. But soon enough, he is sitting down in the cockpit of a plane. This young kid just out of high school.

Sally Helm: Did I read in an interview you gave that you learned to fly a plane before you learned to drive a car?

Col. Stewart: That's correct.

Sally Helm: Wow!

Col. Stewart: When I when I got my wings, I still didn't know how to drive a car.

Sally Helm: The plane is not quite as he had pictured it.

Col. Stewart: I had just imagined what the controls would be like on an airplane from the little model airplanes that I built. But the controls were just a little bit opposite to what I had been using.

Sally Helm: You were using them from the models in your head, those models you were flying in New York?

Col. Stewart: That's right. But I soon, I soon overcame that.

Sally Helm: James Harvey, who had been valedictorian of his class back in Pennsylvania, he winds up at Tuskegee, too. He'd actually tried to enlist in the military before and had been turned away. But three months later, the military called *him* up. And drafted him.

Col. Harvey: They were hurting for, for people period.

Sally Helm: But the Air Corps still limited the number of Black pilots it let in. As a retired military officer and historian put it, this whole Tuskegee program was seen as "at best an experiment and at worst an unwarranted political intrusion." Harvey told us, you could feel that in the training, which was notoriously tough.

Col. Harvey: As far as the white cadets go, all they had to do was demonstrate they could get the aircraft off the ground and back on the ground safely. That was it. Everything we did had to be perfect. Everything. No exceptions.

Sally Helm: So, there was a higher bar for the Tuskegee group, for the black airmen.

Col. Harvey: Yes. Yes.

Sally Helm: It's a rigorous program. Aspiring pilots have to complete all the physical training of joining any military unit, plus learning navigation, and the mechanics of flight. Here's Lt. Col. Stewart.

Col. Stewart: When I first got to Tuskegee, I remember the commanding officer, I gave us a speech and he says, I want you to look at the man at your left, and now I want you to look at the man at your right and they will not be there when you graduate. And that's true.

Sally Helm: Only about 40 percent of those who started their training at Tuskegee end up graduating. Including both Harvey and Stewart.

In June of 1944, Stewart gets his wings. A few months later, he's assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group and deployed overseas. His job is to escort Allied bombers over Central Europe.

Col. Stewart: Something like, 5—600 bombers and almost a like, number of fighters there.

Sally Helm: So, there were a thousand planes in the sky.

Col. Stewart: Oh, yes. It's a sight that very few people have seen, and you probably notice when you look up in the sky sometimes, and you see the airliners come across and they're leading these white streamers and they're called vapor trails. Well, can you imagine, I'd see these streamers and these arches and the sky there and the beautiful white streaks that the engines were leaving there. And that's what I call the belly in the sky.

Sally Helm: Ballet in the sky.

Sally Helm: **It sounds beautiful.**

Col. Stewart: **It is beautiful.**

Sally Helm: **It almost sounds peaceful.**

Col. Stewart: **And that's how, there was a, a general, I forget who it was, describing, what flying combat was like, and its sheer boredom with moments of actually, terror. So that's, that's what it was.**

Sally Helm: During one attack, a plane in Stewart's group is shot down. The pilot is killed on the spot. Another man parachutes to Earth…only to be snagged and hanged on a lamppost.

On Stewart's wall today, there's a depiction of one of the many German fighter jets that tried to down his plane.

Col. Stewart: **That's an enemy plane that's on my tail. He's trying to shoot me down. And unfortunately, or fortunately, I guess you would say, he lost control of the plane and, and flew into the ground. And he was killed. It could have been just as well; it could have been me.**

Sally Helm: The war ends in 1945. And both Stewart and Harvey remain in the Air Corps, which becomes the Air Force in 1947.

The Cold War is now brewing. So, although there's not active combat happening, the Air Force wants to keep its pilots sharp. And…a notice goes out.

Col. Harvey: **In January of '49, the chief of staff of the Air Force sent a directive out to all the fighter groups in the United States, that they were to have this intramural weapons competition between each fighter group on each base.**

Col. Stewart: **Competitions finding out who the best pilots were in the various groups that were flying at the time.**

Col. Harvey: **And they were to select their three high scores to represent their group in the first ever top gun weapons meet to be held by the United States Air Force in May of '49.**

Sally Helm: "Lessons learned in tactical weapons competition will pay huge dividends for all of us should the need arise to engage another aggressor," says the program of events. Only the best of the best pilots are chosen to compete.

Col. Stewart: **They took the most recent scores that we had on our training flights, and that's how I happened to get picked at the time.**

Sally Helm: **That's how you happened to get picked because you were really good. You had the highest scores.**

Col. Harvey: We didn't know what was going on until the names were mentioned, and then when the names were mentioned, okay, we're the members, let's go.

Sally Helm: Then First Lieutenant James Harvey and First Lieutenant Harry Stewart end up on the same three-man team. They're joined by a captain, Alva Temple. They also have an alternate, First Lieutenant Halbert Alexander, in case someone has to drop out. And from there:

Col. Harvey: We were headed to Las Vegas Air Force Base

Col. Stewart: To enter a 10-day competition.

Col. Harvey: Before we left, we met with our commanding officer, and he said, if you don't win, don't come back.

Sally Helm: Soon after arriving in Las Vegas, Harvey says, he got the sense that some of the officers running the event weren't thrilled that the Black pilots and their support crews would be competing. Like when a member of the Tuskegee team met with the rules committee to talk about the details of the contest.

Col. Harvey: They didn't want to hear anything he had to say. Nothing. Tell him to keep quiet. Well, that ticked him off. We asked him how his meeting went, and he told us and that ticked us off. So, the only thing for us to do now is to go out and win this thing.

Sally Helm: Easier said than done. Remember, everyone in this competition has been selected because they're at the very top of their units. Over ten days, they'll tackle five events. A mix of dropping bombs, shooting targets, and firing rockets. All from the air.

Col. Stewart: 10 days of serious flying.

Sally Helm: Some of the most strenuous, and dangerous, events that have ever been designed for a military competition are about to unfold. In one case, tragically. And the Tuskegee team, from the 332nd fighter group, they're the underdogs.

Col. Stewart: We were sort of ignored by the rest of the pilots out there. When I say ignored, I don't think they looked at us as being any kind of competition for them.

Sally Helm: Those other pilots have no idea what's coming.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: On a May Day in the Nevada desert, the 1949 US Air Force weapons meet begins. The first event is aerial gunnery.

Col. Harvey: You have this multi engine aircraft, who towed this target. Facing you, you just fired an in

Sally Helm: **So, try to hit a target essentially from the air. It was like an aiming test.**

Col. Harvey: **That's right. Now how can they tell whose bullets go through the target? We'll take three colors, red, green, and blue. They would dip the bullets into that color wax.**

Col. Stewart: **So that when the bullet hits the target, it leaves the trace of the color there.**

Col. Harvey: **Each pilot had a different color bullet. Then on the ground we had three different people, each one assigned a color to count the bullet holes in the target.**

Sally Helm: **How'd you do in that first event?**

Col. Stewart: **Better than the other squadrons [laughs]**

Sally Helm: Captain Temple, the captain of the Tuskegee team, gets the highest score of any competitor. At the end of the first two shooting events, their group is in second place.

Next up is dive bombing. Plunging toward a target on the ground, dropping a bomb and then quickly pulling up without crashing.

Col. Harvey: **It's not too easy. No one did very well in dive bombing.**

Sally Helm: In fact, it's a really dangerous event when not executed perfectly. During the competition, a member of the Tuskegee maintenance crew asks to fly along with one of the other team's pilots. But that pilot:

Col. Harvey: **He didn't start pulling out soon enough and he hit the ground, killed both of them.**

Sally Helm: Lt. Col. Stewart had seen men die in combat before…but these deaths shook him.

Col. Stewart: **That I don't like to remember. It soured everything for that, for that period.**

Sally Helm: Still, the Air Force decides that the competition must go on.

With the meet more than half over, the Tuskegee airmen are still in second place, almost 20 points behind the leading team. But they have a strategy for the next event: skip bombing—which requires you to drop a bomb so that it bounces and propels through a vertical target.

Col. Harvey: **You come in very low to the ground. And you release your bombs. I won't give our secret as of why we had a hundred percent, but I won't tell you how we got that—**

Sally Helm: **You won't tell me even now.**

Col. Harvey: **[laughs] You may go out and win a contest.**

Sally Helm: **Col Harvey, I'm not close to winning a skip bombing contest. I promise you that.**

Col. Harvey: **I'll tell you how I did it. When the target goes under the nose of the aircraft, you punch the bomb off.**

Sally Helm: **Hmm.**

Sally Helm: Captain Temple is up first. He hits his targets: 6 for 6. Then goes Stewart: 6 for 6.

Col. Harvey: **I was number three.**

Sally Helm: **So, the two people before you had both had a perfect score, six for six.**

Col. Harvey: **Right. Then I had one.**

Sally Helm: Harvey hits all six of his targets perfectly, too.

Col. Harvey: **That's when we had the perfect score. That's when we pulled ahead.**

Sally Helm: By the time they start the final event, rocket firing, the Tuskegee Airmen have taken the lead. And in rocketry?

Col. Harvey: **Temple had a good score. Stewart and I missed by one rocket.**

Sally Helm: **Still a good score. Five out of six, that, it's a good score. [laughs]**

Col. Harvey: **We still won the event though. [laughs]**

Sally Helm: Finally, on May 12, almost two weeks after they'd arrived in Las Vegas, it's time to tally the scores. And the winners of the propeller plane division, with over a 20-point lead…are the Tuskegee Airmen.

Col. Harvey: **We win the weapons meet, first ever weapons meet. They said we couldn't fly. We didn't have the ability to fly aircraft or operate heavy machinery. We were inferior to the white man. We were nothing. We proved him wrong at every turn.**

Sally Helm: But:

Col. Stewart: **The euphoria, it didn't last that long.**

Sally Helm: Lt. Col. Harvey says, he recalls a distinct feeling around the awards.

Col. Harvey: **The wrong group won the meet. They didn't plan on that.**

Sally Helm: When it came time for their team to be photographed with their trophy, Lt. Col. Harvey remembers being ushered into a hotel room.

Col. Harvey: They quickly set up this table, put the trophy on it, had us stand behind it, took our pictures. Okay. Out. You see that picture today and it was so hastily set up. And if you look between the base of the trophy and Colonel Temple on the right, you can see a lot of stuff in there. You can see A1 sauce bottle, salt and pepper shakers, sheet music stands. That's how quickly they set this thing up. They were anxious for us to get out of there.

Sally Helm: Lt. Col. Stewart still holds on to that photo.

Col. Stewart: That's the Loving Cup that they had.

Sally Helm: Wow. You're showing me a picture of the trophy.

Col. Stewart: That's the trophy, yes. That's the trophy itself. Wow.

Sally Helm: But…that is the last these men see of the trophy, for decades. It gets shipped off to the Smithsonian for storage. And it's pretty much the last they hear of their win, too.

Col. Harvey: We won in May of 1949. Once a year, the Air Force Association puts out an almanac. When the Almanac came out, the winner of the '49 weapons meet was listed as unknown.

Sally Helm: Unknown. We asked Tobias Naegele, editor in chief of Air & Space Forces Magazine, about it. He told us that the magazine "never intentionally sought to hide the accomplishments of the remarkable Tuskegee Airmen." He did confirm that the victory was omitted from some issues of the Almanac. But added that, "as the editors uncovered historical facts in subsequent years, the records of [those] early competitions were published correctly."

After the contest, Lt. Col. Harvey stays in the military. He becomes the first Black combat pilot to fight in the Korean War. Lt. Col. Stewart leaves the Air Force in 1950 and tries to get a job as a commercial airline pilot.

Col. Stewart: And I was summarily dismissed. One of 'em said, you know, right out you know that yes, it's because of your color there. The other one never gave me any, uh, any response. I was summarily dismissed right at the reception desk.

Sally Helm: Years pass. In 1986, a film called *Top Gun* is the highest-grossing movie in the US. It tells the story of a naval contest, with officers competing to win a weapons meet. But few remember that first Air Force competition in Nevada…including Stewart himself.

Col. Stewart: I had forgotten about the trophy and the competition.

Sally Helm: Until...in 2004, a woman named Zellie Rainey Orr is researching a Tuskegee airman from her town in Ohio. And she meets Captain Alva Temple. The captain who had teamed up with Harvey and

Stewart at the weapons meet all those years before. Orr decides to track down the missing trophy. All it took were a few phone calls to find out: it was in storage at the National Museum of the US Air Force in Dayton, Ohio.

Col. Stewart: Some people thought there was some kind of skullduggery or something like that, but I don't think so. I just think it was a mishandling.

Sally Helm: The Air Force Historical Research Agency directed us to former agency historian Dr. Daniel Haulman, who told us that he believes "the Air Force did not hide the trophy…in a racist attempt to hide the achievement" of the Tuskegee pilots. The trophy acknowledged *four* winning teams from 1949 and 1950, and only one of those was Black.

The Air Force and its Museum told us, the Museum can only display about 10 percent of its collection at any given time. So, while the trophy was on display for an exhibit in the '80s, it was then stored until it went on permanent display in 2005.

Col. Harvey: Now the story didn't end there. The story ended January 2022. Finally got recognition and it's at Nellis Air Force Base. The 332nd Fighter Group, or the Tuskegee Airmen, won the first ever Top Gun weapons meet. It's finally put in place.

Sally Helm: How did that feel?

Col. Harvey: It felt good. Finally. Finally. Finally. Yes.

Sally Helm: It took decades for the accomplishment to be recognized. And over those decades, in the military itself, there was progress. Stewart recalls, shortly after their win in 1949, the Air Force implemented President Truman's order to desegregate the armed forces.

Col. Stewart: The base that we were on was disbanded and all of the personnel was sent to the four corners of the Earth and there was true integration.

Sally Helm: The move was a long time coming. Black Americans in the military had more than proven themselves, over and over, for centuries. And yet:

Col. Stewart: There was always the brunt that you had to take of this prejudice that was going on. You couldn't really get an equal footing, or any respect or dignity.

Sally Helm: One of the most powerful refutations of that broken system was given by the Tuskegee Airmen in 1949. In the skies above the Nevada desert.

Col. Stewart: To win the top gun contest, and this means the best of the best, it was like a vindication.

Col. Harvey: We proved them wrong, again. [laughs] We're always proving them wrong. Just because the person is a different color doesn't mean anything. I don't know where they get this stuff from, but anyway, we proved them wrong.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today. If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Thanks to our guests: Lt. Col. James Harvey III, and Lt. Col. Harry Stewart Jr. Lt. Col. Stewart is the co-author of a book, *Soaring to Glory: A Tuskegee Airman's Firsthand Account of World War II.* Thanks also to Zellie Rainey Orr, author of *Heroes in War, Heroes at Home: A Tribute to the "first" Air Force Top Guns*, and to Daniel Haulman, retired historian at the Air Force Historical Research Agency. Dr. Haulman's new book, *Misconceptions about the Tuskegee Airmen,* will be out in February 2023.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Dan Rosato. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Corinne Wallace, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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