

State and Local Government Committee
Representative Fred Strahorn
Sponsor Testimony H.B. 361

Good morning Chairman Wiggam, Vice-Chair Stephens, Ranking member Kelly and members of the House State and Local Government committee. I am here today with my colleague Representative Terrence Upchurch to give sponsor testimony on H.B. 361. This bill concerns something near and dear to my heart, namely the Tuskegee Airmen.

The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black military aviators in the U.S. Army Air Corps., commanded by Colonel Benjamin O. Davis whose portrait is displayed in the Ohio Statehouse. They were comprised of 992 pilots (355 were deployed overseas) and approximately 15,000 navigators, bombardiers, mechanics, crew chiefs, air traffic controllers, cooks and other personnel.

They were trained at and near Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama. The 99th Pursuit Squadron (eventually the 99th Fighter Squadron) was the first group of black pilots to become activated out of Tuskegee and later joined three other black squadrons (the 100th, 301st and 302nd squadrons) to form the 332nd Fighter Group. They flew roughly 200 escort missions in Europe and North Africa during WWII. The 332nd Fighter Group became one of the first Italy-based fighter units to escort B-17 bombers all the way to Berlin and back. By the end of the war in Europe, the Tuskegee Airmen had destroyed over 250 enemy aircraft (in the air and on the ground) and demolished over 600 railroad cars. The 332nd Fighter Group became one of the most respected flying combat units of WWII.

The 332nd Fighter Group received 3 Distinguished Unit Citations. They received 96 Distinguished Flying Crosses (received by 95 airmen, Captain William Campbell received 2). They received 1 Silver Star, 14 Bronze Stars, and 8 Purple Hearts, in addition to 744 other various air medals. Over the course of the war, the 332nd Fighter Group saw 66 pilots killed in action and another 12 killed in training or non-combat missions.

H.B. 361 recognizes March 29th as Tuskegee Airmen Day in Ohio in honor of these men who served in the Army Air Corps during World War II, a number of whom were from Ohio. The unit was also stationed in Ohio after the war at Lockbourne Airbase (currently known as Rickenbacker National Guard Air Base), right here in Columbus.

This bill is a way to commemorate the brave service of a group of men from “The Greatest Generation” who risked their lives to fight for freedom abroad that they themselves still did not enjoy here at home. It illuminates the patriotism of a group of people who had to fight for the right to serve their country because it was felt that Blacks did not possess the intellect to fly planes in combat. It recognizes that these men demonstrated the aptitude to fly combat missions so well that they soon became the escort that white bomber pilots requested.

H.B. 361 has personal significance to me. At the age of twelve I developed an intense interest in aviation and, in fact, majored in aviation at Ohio State University with the anticipation of joining the United States Air Force. In my reading as a young man I ran across stories about the Tuskegee Airmen and their incredible accomplishments. I began to collect memorabilia and from time to time had opportunities to meet with surviving members of the squadron.

They are incredible men with an amazing history that deserves to be shared whenever possible. They were an inspiration to me as a young African-American man. They present so many lessons about not doubting one's own ability just because others do. On the occasions of meeting them I was in awe and after spending time with them I felt special and lucky to have had the honor. They serve as an example, to not just African-Americans but the whole nation, of what it means to be committed and to persevere in the service of your country.

Thank you, Chairman Wiggam, Vice-Chair Stephens, Ranking member Kelly and members of the committee, for allowing us an opportunity to give testimony on H.B. 361 and I would be more than happy to answer any questions at this time.