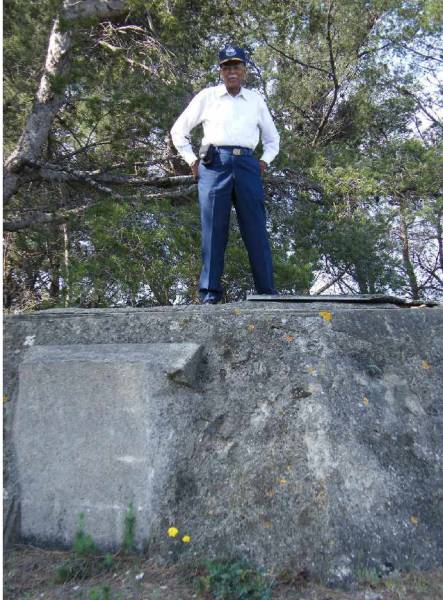


Tuskegee Airman Returns to Spot in France Where He Was Shot down in 1944



by Ronald L. Albers, Colonel,
USAF, retired

On August 14, 1944, 22-year-old 2nd Lt Alexander Jefferson of the famed Tuskegee Airmen 332nd Fighter Group was flying his “red tail” P-51 Mustang (named Margo, after his girlfriend at the time) on his 19th combat mission over Europe.

His formation’s mission that day was to strafe Nazi radar units right along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in southern France in preparation for the Allied Forces invasion there two days later called “Operation Dragoon.”

Using his .50 caliber machine guns, Alex and the other three in his flight blasted over the target at treetop level and max airspeed. While shooting at the radar tower, Alex saw his wingman, Lt Daniels, get shot - his P-51 erupting into a ball of flames and banking right toward the Med which was only a few hundred yards away. An instant later, ground fire came through the floor of Alex’s cockpit and exited through the canopy. In a matter of seconds, Alex pulled back on the Mustang’s stick to gain some bailout altitude while simultaneously putting full nose-down trim in the P-51. When he released the stick, the trim nosed the craft over; and Alex was easily ejected.

Alex immediately found the D-ring on his parachute and pulled it. No sooner did the chute inflate than he hit some trees and crashed to the ground. Before he could catch his breath, he was surrounded by Nazis aiming rifles at him. Alex was captured! He soon learned that Daniels had been afraid to bail out, so he ditched his plane in the sea and was also immediately captured. They were in the village of Le Pradet, just east of Toulon, France. Both were quickly taken to a mansion nearby where the Germans did their first interrogation of them.

Jefferson & Daniels were taken by train to a German POW camp (Luft Stalag IIIA, about 80 miles from Berlin, near the Polish border) where they remained with nearly 5000 other Allied officers until just before the war ended. As the Russians advanced from the east, they were moved for a brief stay in a camp in Bavaria (near Munich) where they were liberated by General Patton’s 3rd Army on April 29, 1945. One can read all the details in Alexander Jefferson’s autobiography, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*. By the way, there were 32 Tuskegee Airmen who ended up as POWs in Germany, and only five are still alive today.

Through my numerous contacts in France, I was able to discover that there are still some French people today who know all the details of Jefferson’s shoot-down and capture. In fact, we even knew of an eye witness, who was 12 years old at the time. For a while there was talk of some French organizations erecting a monument on the site to honor Alex and/or Daniels. A few years ago, I had told Alex all I knew and also put him in touch with one of the experts on his crash, a fire captain in Toulon named Albert Meuvret.

Last fall I met Alex at the GML2007 (The Gathering of Mustangs & Legends--The Final Roundup, Sept. 27-30, at Rickenbacker International Airport, in Columbus, Ohio. Originally named Lockbourne Army Air Base, it became home to the Tuskegee Airmen after World War II. There were more than 100 P-51 Mustangs at this air show, which featured both the planes and their legendary pilots.) He told me that, at age 86, he couldn’t wait much longer for the French to plan and build a memorial for him. So I promised that I’d make arrangements for him to visit the place where he was downed nearly 64 years ago.

My very good French friend Jean-Pierre Garnier is a member of ARSA, a group of retired men who have researched, planned, and implemented numerous monuments and ceremonies to honor pilots downed on French soil while liberating France from the Nazis in 1944 & 1945. Via e-mail we coordinated a visit for Alexander Jefferson.

Alex flew alone from his home in Detroit, and Jean-Pierre and I met him when he arrived on May 13th at Marseille's Marignane Airport. It was Alex's first time back in France in more than six decades.

The following day we drove to Toulon and met Albert Meuvret, who was dressed in his fireman's uniform and driving his fire department van (which came in handy during our morning tour.) Our first stop was to join six sailors from the US Navy's Aegis Class destroyer, Oscar Austin. (I am not certain how they learned of our plans, but their ship was in Toulon's Navy shipyard for a few days before returning to Norfolk; and these gentlemen were eager to accompany us and watch a famed Tuskegee Airman visit such a historic site for the first time in so many years.) Our next stop was to pick up the eyewitness to Alex's bailout and crash. He rode with Albert and spoke no English. Of note is that he presented Alex with a single piece of the P-51 that he had saved. It was a stainless steel hose clamp from the Mustang's engine, and it seems he had been using the clamp on a water hose of his own all these years.

Obviously, much of the area has now changed, but some things have not. Where the fighter had impacted the ground is now a paved road in the middle of a cluster of private homes. Nonetheless, Alex stood on that piece of ground, while - through Albert & Jean-Pierre's interpreting - the eyewitness described what he'd seen. Next, we drove to where Alex landed in his chute and was captured. It didn't look familiar at all to him. Then we drove to the mansion that the Nazis had used as a headquarters and interrogation room. That, Alexander remembered; because it hadn't changed much. Finally, we drove to the radar site which had been Lt Jefferson's target so many years ago. The concrete base still stands, and Alex could visualize his final few seconds of flight in 1944. He stood atop the base and marveled at what he was doing at the moment today and what he had been doing at that moment almost 64 years ago. It was quite emotional. We doubt that any other Tuskegee Airman has returned to France to see first-hand where he had been in WW II. (By the way, it appears that there is little chance that a monument will be erected to Alex; because the only logical place would be at the radar's concrete base. Unfortunately, that is now in the restricted area of a French military camp where the public would not have access to see it.)

Following our site visits, the mayor of Le Pradet and some other local dignitaries provided a lunch for everyone and gave Alex some tokens of their appreciation. He was interviewed by two radio stations and featured in two local publications the following day.

The Navy personnel who accompanied us were eager to give us a personally guided visit to their ship, so we followed them onto the Navy base and got a wonderful tour of the USS Oscar Austin. Because Alex was wearing his Army Air Corps Jacket with Tuskegee Airmen on it, he was constantly stopped by the Navy personnel wanting a photo op or simply to shake his hand and chat a bit. (We found that everywhere we visited during Alex's 9-day visit to Provence. Even the French know and love the Tuskegee Airmen.)

On May 15th we briefly toured the old harbor (Vieux Port) of Marseille and then took a ferry out to one of the islands where the Germans had built substantial fortifications to guard the harbor in WW II. After eating lunch on the island, we took the ferry back and had an audience with the U.S. Consul General at his office. We then were treated to a 2-hour personal tour of the museum of the French Foreign Legion in Aubagne. There again a young troop left his formation to come up and shake Jefferson's hand. He knew all about the Tuskegee Airmen but had never met one. Later he returned with a friend and camera to have his picture taken with Alex.

Friday we leisurely drove up north of Orange to a small village where we participated in a ceremony on Saturday to honor an American P-47 Thunderbolt pilot from Illinois, Flight Officer Keith Jennings, who was killed at the age of 20 in August 1944 there. ARSA and some local people have built a monument to Jennings on the very site where his plane crashed; and we held a ceremony to unveil the memorial. Two of Jennings' nieces came from the U.S. to be at the ceremony, which included a reception and then a long meal with local dignitaries and attendees.

Alex, Jean-Pierre, and I joined the party of Americans and local hosts (a total of about 15 people) for some tours of wineries, castles, and other sites on Sunday. For the next three days Alex and I stayed with friends in Mornas, just north of Orange; and we got the royal tour of that city, including the 2000-year-old Roman amphitheatre that is still used. We visited the Palace of the Popes in Avignon, toured another winery in Chateauneuf du Pape. On one morning we gave presentations to three different classes of school children, who were extremely receptive to Alex's story. We were hosted at city hall in the village of Lapalud and given a warm reception. Our host for those three days was my friend, Nicholas "Nico" Courtine, another French friend who has spent untold hours researching downed American pilots from WW II on French soil. The Courtine family showed us the epitome of French hospitality.

On Alex's final day we toured the area around Istres, site of the last U.S.A.F. installation in France (which closed about three years ago.) We visited the beautiful harbor at Martigues, Nostradamus' home in Salon de Provence, the villages of San Remy and Le Baux...

We think Alexander Jefferson enjoyed a monumental visit back to the place where he made history in WW II. And during his 9 days there, he visited the finest tourist destination in the world, the Provence region of France. He was treated to the greatest hospitality anywhere - by folks who still remember that, were it not for heroes like Alexander Jefferson, they may well be still under Nazi rule and speaking German today.

The writer retired after nearly 34 years as a pilot & commander in the USAF & Ohio Air National Guard. His e-mail address is [PRo Mo@wowway.com](mailto:PRo_Mo@wowway.com).

Alexander Jefferson returned to be a flight instructor at Tuskegee Airfield for two years before leaving the Air Corps. In 1969 he retired from the Air Force Reserve as a Lieutenant Colonel. In 1948 he began his teaching career in Detroit, retiring in 1972.