

BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN INC. PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 830060
TUSKEGEE, AL 36083

LEMUEL RODNEY CUSTIS



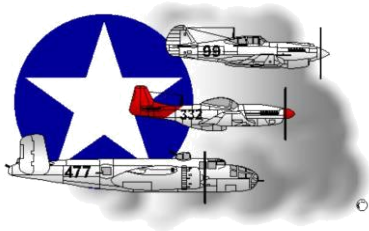
Lemuel Rodney Custis was one of the very first Tuskegee Airmen, graduating from flight training in March 1942, along with classmate Benjamin O. Davis Jr. and three others. (Eight of the class' 13-original students had washed out.) Custis had already earned a BS degree from Howard University, and in 1939 he had become the first African-American police officer in Hartford, Connecticut. Custis later became a proud member of the Maj. Gen. Irene Trowell-Harris Chapter, in New Windsor, New York.

Lem Custis was assigned to the 99th Fighter Squadron. He flew 92-combat missions over North Africa, Sicily and Italy. During one sortie, over the Anzio beachhead in January 1944, he and 15-squadron mates, all flying Curtiss P-40 Warhawks, tangled with a group of 15-Luftwaffe Focke-Wulf Fw-190s, German fighters that were faster and more sophisticated than the obsolescent P-40s. Nonetheless, the Tuskegee Airmen shot down five of the Focke-Wulfs, one of which fell to Custis's own guns, with no losses of their own. (Custis was later credited with an additional two probable kills.)

Custis became the Operations Officer of the 99th—essentially number-two in command—and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with oak leaf clusters for his bravery. In 1944, in light of his combat record and talent, he was sent back to Tuskegee, AL as an advanced flight instructor. He demobilized in 1946, having attained the rank of Major.

After the war, he returned to Connecticut and a job in state government, from which he retired in 1980. He died at the age of 89 on February 24, 1989. Lemuel Rodney Custis was the last survivor of that original 1942 class of Tuskegee Airmen. In his memory, the East Coast Chapter established the Captain Lemuel Rodney Custis National Award, an annual prize to be given a TAI Member who best represents the perseverance, determination and motivation that Lem Custis embodied. As Tuskegee Airman Dr. Roscoe C. Brown once said of Custis, "We stood





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on the shoulders of that class. If he and the four others from that class had not been successful 63 years ago, the rest of us would never have been Airmen."

