

# Benjamin Oliver Davis

1912–2002



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** Benjamin Oliver Davis was commander of the famous Tuskegee Airmen of World War II, and the first African-American four-star general.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Benjamin Oliver Davis's father may have influenced him to achieve all that he did.*

Benjamin Oliver Davis was born in Washington, D.C. on December 18, 1912. His family had an honored history of military and government service. Davis's father, for example, was a cavalry officer. Therefore when the time came for Davis to pursue his own career goals, the military seemed like a natural step towards fulfilling his ambitions to become a pilot.

In 1932 Davis began his military training and education at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. As the only African American cadet at the academy Davis faced considerable discrimination. Davis **endured** the four year training at West Point, however, and was successful despite the obstacles. In 1936 he became only the fourth African American graduate of the academy, finishing 35th in his class of 276.

In 1941 Davis became one of the first African Americans admitted to pilot training for the **U.S. Army Air Corps**. During World War II, Davis organized and commanded two groups: the 99th Fighting Squadron and the 332nd Fighting Group. In addition, he led the decorated Tuskegee Airmen in combat flight. Davis earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, among many other awards, for his service.



©Bettmann/CORBIS

## VOCABULARY

**endured** to continue without yielding despite suffering

**U.S. Army Air Corps** one of several former names for today's U.S. Air Force

After the war, Davis served as the chief of the fighter branch for the U. S. Air Force. In 1953 he led the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing during the Korean War. Davis became the first African American Air Force officer to achieve the rank of general.

Throughout his life, Davis was faced with many challenges as an African American in the military. In his book, *Benjamin O. Davis, American: An Autobiography*, he described how his father's leadership in the face of adversity had set an important example for him:

“How lucky I was to have a father who, in spite of formidable obstacles, would fight for his beliefs and ambitions and win! Throughout my own military career and beyond, his achievements stood as an example of what could be accomplished in the face of seemingly impossible social opposition.”

Davis retired from the military in 1970, but still served in a variety of important government posts. President Bill Clinton promoted Davis to four-star general in 1998.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What two military groups did Benjamin Oliver Davis organize and command during World War II?

---

---

2. **Sequence** List several of the important events of Benjamin Oliver Davis's life in chronological order.

---

---

---

### ACTIVITY

3. Write an epitaph for Benjamin Oliver Davis that might appear at his gravesite at the Arlington National Cemetery.