



checkpoints

# ***EAGLE EXCELLENCE***

50 YEARS AND SOARING

AOG USAFA ALUMNI MAGAZINE  
DECEMBER 2024





# RISE ABOVE

Cadet Squadron 20 changes name from Trolls to Red Tails

Story and photos by Bryan Grossman

**“They had to fight for their right to go fight.”**

**G**en. (Ret.) Robin Rand '79 shared these words along with the many accomplishments of the famed Tusgee Airman Sept. 21, while standing before a crowd in Polaris Hall at the Air Force Academy. Gen. Rand, who commanded the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing, Balad Air Base, Iraq, from June 2006 to July 2007, delivered the keynote address during Cadet Squadron 20's ceremony marking the transition from Trolls to Red Tails. The Red Tails name honors the first Black military aviators.

Second-generation Tusgee Airman Chief Master Sgt. (Ret.) Loran Smith, as well as 101-year-old Col. (Ret.) James Harvey, one of the original Tusgee Airmen, attended.

The ceremony culminated a 19-month effort, as one doesn't rename a squadron overnight. The impetus for the change: a Mitchell Hall lunchtime conversation in February 2023 led by cadets Julian Jackson and Jillian Howe.

“We were talking about the Red Tails and the Tusgee Airmen in general,” Jackson recalls. “To our surprise, no one at the table knew who the Red Tails were. So, after that, Jill and I started talking, like, ‘Hey, what if we changed the squadron to Red Tails? That'd be pretty cool to emulate what they did and bring awareness to what

they did, because obviously not enough people know who they are.”

## CAN-DO ATTITUDE

That spirit of action is appropriate, considering Cadet Squadron 20's origin story. CS-20 began in the fall of 1960 as the “Can-Do” Squadron and, according to A Brief History of Cadet Squadron 20 Patches, available at [usafa.org](http://usafa.org) and written by Lt. Col. (Ret.) Doug Jenkins Jr. '64 and 1963's CS-20 cadet commander, the original Can-Do patch included an aircraft “reminiscent of the Convair B-58, which was proudly flown by the 305th Bomb Wing at the time. ... The squadron motto, ‘Can-Do,’ suggested that there was no task the squadron couldn't handle or goal they couldn't reach.”

Though the squadron wore the patch until 1972, it was the early 1960s when CS-20 decided it needed something tangible to represent itself.

According to Col. Jenkins, “In looking for a worthy and unique mascot, we sought alliteration, uniqueness and inspiration for the squadron to accomplish great things. Mascots like Tigers and Tramps were considered and soon discarded. Finally, the Troll idea sprang from the fertile minds of the cadets of that day.”

Shortly after, the new mascot took shape

through drawings and cadets penned the Troll Song, further inspiring support for the imposing green giant.

So, when and how did CS-20 officially convert from the Can-Dos to the Trolls?

“The Troll did not grace the CS-20 Patch until 1972,” Col. Jenkins writes. “In that year, CS-20 stirred up a hornet's nest when they asked to have their patch changed from the Can-Do to the Troll design. Ultimately, their efforts were successful.”

## CHANGING IDENTITIES: A BRIEF HISTORY

Dr. Brian Laslie, USAFA's command historian, says his office oversees “the official lineage, honors and heraldry of the emblems of the Air Force Academy.” Those include the USAFA emblem, and those of the 10th Air Base Wing and the 306th Flying Training Group, to name a few.

“Those patches they wear on their shoulders basically have a lineage and honors tied to them that says where that unit's been, what its awards are, when it was established,” Laslie says. “That process runs through my office and on down to the Air Force Historical Research Agency, then up to the Institute of Heraldry. Basically, once those emblems get approved, you can't touch them anymore. What makes cadet squadron patches unique is they're not of-



Col. (Ret.) James Harvey, right, an original Tuskegee Airman, and Chief (Ret.) Loran Smith, a second-generation Tuskegee Airman, salute the flag during a Squadron 20 renaming ceremony at Polaris Hall on Sept. 21.

ficial Air Force emblems — they don't go through that same process. All of that is owned by the Cadet Wing, so that allows the cadet squadrons a little leeway in being able to change their patches.”

Laslie explains that many cadet squadrons have changed their identities and mottos (the Red Tails motto is now “Rise Above”) over the years.

“Prior to the mid-’60s, we had 20 cadet squadrons, and so when the Academy expanded, obviously the squadrons expanded and ... about half of the emblems have changed and about half of them are still using the same patch that they had when they were established. The one that immediately comes to mind for me is the 1st Squadron, Mighty Mach 1. That patch is based off the 1st Fighter Wing patch. There are a lot of similarities, but that has been in use since the early 1960s, so they’ve had that patch from 1962 to the present.”

Another squadron with shifting identities is Starship 19, which readopted

that name last year [see September 2023 *Checkpoints*].

“They were Playboy 19, and they had a Playboy bunny as their emblem,” Laslie says. “In the archives, there’s a letter from the Playboy Corporation and Hugh Hefner that says, ‘Yay, verily, you are allowed to use this.’ We get to the mid-’70s and that [name and imagery] starts to fall out of favor.”

CS-19 was influenced by the popularity of Star Trek and replaced the problematic Playboy identity with the Starship 19 moniker in 1976, just as women were entering the service academies. Starship 19 stuck until 1993, when CS-19 became the Wolverines — before reverting to Starship 19 in late 2023.

“Again, there’s a letter upstairs for CS-19 from [Star Trek creator] Gene Roddenberry, himself an Air Force veteran, who said, ‘Yeah, absolutely, you can use the Starship Enterprise,’” Laslie explains.

Laslie says he was all in when he was

approached about consulting on CS-20’s name change.

“They came to me and said, ‘Hey, we want to increase representation of other aspects of Air Force history not currently represented in the patches, and also to honor the Tuskegee Airmen,’” Laslie recalls. “So, to me, that was a no brainer. I was very willing to jump on board and help out.”

## OPENING DOORS

In 1991, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Leon Butler commissioned from USAFA with 977 of his classmates. Thirty-three years later, Col. Butler, national president of Alabama-based nonprofit Tuskegee Airmen Inc., returned to his alma mater to witness the CS-20 renaming ceremony firsthand.

A pilot himself, Col. Butler spent 20 years on active duty, accumulating more than 5,000 flying hours, primarily in the KC-10, T-37 and T-6 airframes. From his home in Dallas, he now heads the ►



LEFT: Vice Superintendent Maj. Gen. Thomas Sherman '95 stands, with others, to recognize the service of Col. (Ret.) James Harvey and Chief (Ret.) Loran Smith.

BELOW LEFT: Keynote speaker Gen. (Ret.) Robin Rand '79 talks during the Squadron 20 renaming ceremony at Polaris Hall. Gen. Rand commanded the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing from June 2006 to July 2007. Squadron 20 was renamed the Red Tails in honor of the first African American military aviators.

BELOW RIGHT: U.S. Space Force's Maj. Brinetta Hence, Squadron 20 AOC, addresses the crowd during the Squadron 20 renaming ceremony.



nonprofit whose mission is to “focus on honoring the accomplishments and perpetuating the history of African Americans who participated in air crew, ground crew and operations support training in the Army Air Corps during WWII.”

Col. Butler is a member of the Gen. Daniel “Chappie” James Jr. Chapter, and he supports the chapter’s youth drone flying program and its annual golf tournament. Col. Butler says he’s committed to preserving the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen and mentoring young people toward careers in aviation and military service.

He says he was a cadet when the Tuskegee Airman statue, created by the late Tuskegee Airman Lt. Col. Clarence

Shivers, was erected on the Academy’s Honor Court.

“That was my first inspiration,” he says. “My dad told me stories about the airmen when I was a kid, but to see that and meet original Tuskegee Airmen, that was pretty cool.”

In addition to the Honor Court’s statue, nods to the Tuskegee Airmen legacy can be found across the Air Force Academy. USAFA’s airfield was renamed Davis Airfield in 2019 after Red Tail Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. And the Air Force Academy Foundation and USAFA will break ground on a static display in early 2025 featuring a P-51 Mustang — an aircraft piloted by the Tuskegee Airmen

— as well as a T-7A Redhawk complete with a red tail. A double-V sculpture, representing the Tuskegee Airmen’s military victory abroad and social victory at home, will be erected between the two aircraft.

The U.S. Space Force’s Maj. Brinetta Hence, CS-20’s air officer commanding, shares Col. Butler’s enthusiasm, adding this renaming is important to the U.S. Air Force’s heritage.

“The Red Tails fought for a country that didn’t really welcome them back after getting shot at all day. So, I think [the history] is important because it talks about rising above adversity,” she says. “Cadets deal with adversity all the time — obviously not what the Red Tails dealt with, but



ABOVE: A challenge coin depicts the history of Squadron 20, from the Can-Do Squadron, to the Trolls, and now the Red Tails.


BELOW: Squadron 20, formerly the Trolls, has been renamed to the Red Tails. About half of the 40 cadet squadrons have undergone name changes since USAFA's inception.

different challenges where they feel they might not be adequate. They have to rely on their brothers and sisters to really pull through and take each day one at a time.”

She adds, “[Cadet Squadron] 20 has a lot of pride. That’s why I’m glad I came to the squadron, because they’re super welcoming. They have pride in Trolls or Red Tails.”

When asked about the disconnect between cadets and the Red Tails’ legacy, Col. Butler says it points to the need for a change.

“It means we still have work to do, and it means that our organization still has a

viable mission to contribute to our overall Air Force community,” he says. “This is a living, breathing story, because without the original Tuskegee Airmen’s sacrifice, I would not have had the chance to have the career that I’ve had; I wouldn’t have been able to attend the Air Force Academy. They opened doors through their sacrifice and excellent service. For whatever reason, this story is not mainstream. But by preserving the legacy, it’s our mission to make it a mainstream story.” 

## TUSKEGEE AIRMEN: BY THE NUMBERS

**15,000+**  
COMBAT SORTIES

**262**  
ENEMY AIRCRAFT  
DESTROYED

**112**  
ENEMY AIR-TO-AIR  
KILLS

**66**  
KIA

**33**  
POWS

**3**  
DISTINGUISHED  
UNIT CITATIONS

**2**  
SILVER STARS

**96**  
DISTINGUISHED  
FLYING CROSSES

**14**  
BRONZE STARS

**744**  
AIR MEDALS

**60**  
PURPLE HEARTS