

Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.



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Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., in full **Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr.** (born December 18, 1912, Washington, D.C., U.S.—died July 4, 2002, Washington, D.C.), pilot, officer, and administrator who became the first African American general in the U.S. Air Force. His father, Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., was the first African American to become a general in any branch of the U.S. military.

Davis studied at the University of Chicago before entering the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, in 1932. After graduating in 1936 he was commissioned in the infantry and in 1941 was among the first group of African Americans admitted to the Army Air Corps and to pilot training. Upon his graduation he was swiftly promoted to lieutenant colonel, and he organized the 99th Pursuit Squadron, the first entirely African American air unit, which flew tactical support missions in the Mediterranean theatre. In 1943 he organized and commanded the 332nd Fighter Group (the Tuskegee Airmen). By the end of the war Davis himself had flown 60 combat missions and had been promoted to colonel.

After the war Davis held other commands, and he helped plan the desegregation of the air force in 1948. He graduated from the Air War College in 1950, commanded a fighter wing in the Korean War, and was promoted to brigadier general (a one-star general) in 1954. In 1959 Davis became the first African American officer to reach the rank of major general (a two-star general) in the air force and was promoted to lieutenant general (a three-star general) in 1965. After retiring in 1970 he was named director of civil aviation security in the U.S. Department of Transportation. In that post he devised and coordinated measures that effectively ended a wave of aircraft hijackings in the United States. Davis

became an assistant secretary of transportation in 1971.

Davis received many decorations during his career, including two Distinguished Service Medals and a Silver Star. On December 9, 1998, Davis was awarded his fourth general's star (making him a general of the highest order within the U.S. military). He was the first African American to be so honoured in retirement. His 1991 autobiography, *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., American*, recounts his career.

"Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 26 Feb. 2015
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