GERMAN MESSERSCHMIDTS WERE BUZZING around the Anzio beachhead like hornets, and anti-aircraft guns sprayed at Allied fliers when Lt. James Wiley led his flight of six P-40s into the air in January 1944. Above them, the screaming Messerschmids dove on the Allied invasion forces, belching bombs and cannon fire. Meanwhile, back in Washington, Army brass in the Pentagon was preparing to scuttle Wiley’s all-black fighter unit more completely than even the German enemy could.

The experiment of the Negro 99th Pursuit Squadron, born despite dire warnings that blacks had neither the intelligence nor the courage to fly airplanes in combat, nearly came to an end a few weeks earlier. Only the refusal by Army Chief of
Staff George Marshall to act promptly on a negative report by a white officer — a report believed by many to be racially inspired — had saved the squadron. Marshall ordered a thorough investigation; the results were due right as the Anzio operation moved into full swing.

James Wiley, who is now retired and living in Seattle, was born in Illinois but grew up on Pittsburgh's North Side. Known to his fellow pilots as "a studious engineering type," Wiley was one of the first volunteers to flock to the 99th after the Army Air Corps reluctantly opened its first class for black cadets in 1941.

Before the war, he won a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh and worked in the steel mills in the summer, "so I always had money and I had a car available to me. I was a physics major. I was educated, and I thought I would be able to walk out and get a job." In 1940, Wiley learned later that the Manhattan Project to build an atomic bomb was just starting. Some of his classmates "just disappeared," presumably into secret government work. He would have liked to work on that project, too, "but there were no job opportunities for me."

Instead, "I went to graduate school at Carnegie Tech, where I entered Civilian Pilot Training (CPT)."

"FOR ANYONE TO PUT ME IN HIS GUNSIGNS AND CALL ME INCOMPETENT WAS JUST A DIRTY LIE, AND I'D HAVE TOLD HIM THAT TO HIS FACE. I WAS AS GOOD AS ANYONE IN THE FIELD. HERE I WAS, FIGHTING FOR MY COUNTRY, AND I WAS JUST AN EXPERIMENT!"

I was a good pilot; they couldn't turn me down, because I was as good as, or better than, anyone else. And I knew it."

With war clouds gathering, the Army begrudgingly opened its first flight school for black cadets at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. "I saw an opportunity, and I grabbed it. I had never been in an all-colored outfit before, but, as a black person, I'm so happy that I had an opportunity to go to Alabama and meet these fine black guys. Tuskegee was an oasis in the middle of the desert. I made a lot of good friends. My eyes were open to a new way of life."

At Tuskegee, he also met "a bunch of fine white instructors, whom I kept up with after integration. You have to give them a lot of credit. I don't know if I'd have done it — give up a chance for a career and a chance to make general, as some of them did, in order to train blacks."

"THERE WAS NO DISCRIMINATION on the flight line, but in the rest of the camp and the town itself, Jim Crow ruled. Sheriff Pat Evans harrassed the blacks in town, and the first two camp commanders ran a segregated base. The commander was "an aloof type of person, typical of commanders of colored troops at that time. They were in it for a promotion. A colonel has to be a leader, especially with pilots, who are intelligent; you wreck their spirit by being very authoritarian."

He was replaced by Col. Noel Parrish, a Southerner who immediately moved to improve conditions and morale. The first three flight classes had suffered from a high "washout" rate, perhaps because standards were higher for the blacks, or perhaps, as some suspected, because the Army demanded that a certain percentage of CPT grads succeed. To cut down on washouts, Parrish insisted that the fourth class be made up mostly of CPT graduates. Pearl Harbor had given added urgency to the training, and CPT grads skipped the pre-flight and primary flight phases and went directly into basic flight training.

Parrish had been right about selecting CPT grads. Of 28 who started, 14 graduated on June 3, 1942. One of the students selected was James Wiley. "He was a natural-born pilot," says Clarence Jamison, a fellow flier, "and a brilliant student of physics. He knew the engineering, he loved the mechanics of it." He was quiet, another said, "but he was a brain."

With each graduating class, the 99th filled out. Their commander, B.O. Davis, was the son of the Army's only black general and had endured four years of the "silent treatment" at West Point. A ramrod-stiff, spit-and-polish commander, Davis was the man most responsible for driving the unit to excel.
“Davis just commanded attention,” Wiley said.
“Whenever he came into the room, you knew B.O. was there; everyone became silent. He still, at the age of 86, has that bearing. He reminds me of what I think MacArthur was like.”

The pilots were divided into three flights of four planes each under Lemuel Custis, Jamison, and Wiley. No overseas commander would take the unit, however, so they went through several training cycles, sharpening their training with mock dogfights. It meant that when orders finally did come, to sail to northern Africa, the 99th had more training and more hours in the air than any rookie white outfit.

They disembarked in Morocco, marching down the gangplank in freshly pressed pink-and-green dress uniforms. Unlike white squadrons, the 99th had no cadre of veterans whose successes could be emulated, and they had to learn the tricks of combat the hard way. They were given battle-scarred, oil-leaking P-40s from the China theater that had been the workhorses for the famous Flying Tigers. The P-40 was much slower than the German Messerschmidt or Focke Wulf, but it was well-armed and well-armored and could out-turn and out-dive its German opponents.

On June 2, 1943, four pilots from the 99th—Bill Campbell, Charlie Hall, Wiley, and Clarence Jamison—climbed into their cockpits to fly into combat. Their assignment: to bomb the enemy island of Pantelleria between Libya and Sicily. Hall and Campbell paused at the head of the runway and gunned their engines to the cheers of the other pilots and crews. “I was scared,” Campbell admits, “but I was determined to stay on my [crew] lead’s wing even if he carried me to the enemy’s front door.”

The 99th was part of an otherwise all-white fighter group whose commander had made it clear he didn’t trust the competence of black pilots. Wiley’s assignment was to “fly wing” (support) for the fighter group’s top officer, who told Wiley before leaving the airfield: “You all boys, keep up.”

Wiley recalled: “I stuck right with him. He couldn’t get rid of me, though I think he tried.”

It was the squadron’s first taste of anti-aircraft flak, the ominous black doughnut explosions peppering the sky.

After that, the 99th flew its own missions, encountered its first enemy planes, suffered its first combat deaths, and scored its first kills. Hall, one of Wiley’s students before joining the 99th, went on to down three enemy planes and became the first star of the squadron; (“a very good student, caught on quickly—I soloed Charley Hall,” Wiley says proudly). The unit also helped to bomb Pantelleria into surrendering, the first time an enemy gave up real estate through aerial firepower alone, without infantry to assault it on the ground.

But the 99th chafed. For the invasion of Sicily, the squad was assigned the thankless job of ground strafing, while white squadrons got the more glamorous assignments of knocking down German planes. The fighter group’s white commander wrote the scathing report on the 99th that almost halted its development. He charged that the black fliers broke formation, were afraid to engage the enemy, and scored less kills than his other squadrons. He recommended that they be reassigned to rear-area patrol duty.

“You have to remember the time,” said Wiley, adding that officers from the South were known to control the U.S. air defense forces. Wiley was indignant: “For anyone to put me in his gunsights and call me incompetent was just a dirty lie, and I’d have told him that to his face. I was as good as anyone in the field. I was as tenacious, I was proud of what I was doing, and I did it well. And I resented that even the War Department considered us an ‘experiment.’ Here I was, fighting for my country, and I was just an ‘experiment’!”

B.O. Davis rushed back to Washington to plead with the generals to save his unit. As a result, Chief of Staff Marshall ordered the study that delayed action. The 99th, meanwhile, was assigned to a
new fighter group under Col. Earl Bates. "You had princes, and you had bastards," Wiley said. "Bates was a prince. He came over to us and welcomed us aboard.... We got promotions through Bates; he wrote recommendation letters for us. And he wrote letters that were read aloud to all his squadrons, saying he was very happy and to keep up the good work."

When the Allies invaded Italy at Salerno, Bates sent his other squadrons and the 99th on missions together in support of the British Eighth Army and named 99th pilots to lead some joint missions. Morale quickly improved.

Meanwhile, Wiley flew his 50th mission, and still he wasn't rotated home (as was the custom after 50 missions). In January 1944, the Allies launched a second invasion at Anzio on the west coast of Italy to link up with British and American infantry forces. At Anzio, while Fifth Army Commander Mark Clark waited for supplies, the Germans occupied the hills and showered the Allies with heavy artillery.

THE CITY HELD A PARADE HONORING "MACHINE GUN" KELLY, A PITTSBURGH COMBAT HERO. THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PAPER, THE PITTSBURGH COURIER, POINTED OUT THAT WILEY OUGHT TO HAVE A PARADE, TOO. "AND SUDDENLY I WAS A HERO."

"Then it was up to us," Wiley said, "to come up from Naples and cover the invasion and hit the Germans in the hills."

"The Germans were very tenacious. The Messerschmidts were also coming down from above Rome, and the invasion had to have protection from them. There were cargo ships in the harbor, and they had to be protected. So, we were flying close support in the hills around Anzio and flying almost continuous cover for the invasion."

"We shot down a lot of airplanes, because there were a lot of ... youngsters evidently—the experienced ones had gone over to the Russian front."

Soon afterward, B.O. Davis arrived with three more squadrons to join the 99th in the famous 332nd Fighter Group, known as the "Red Tails." By Spring 1944, most of the 99th pilots had logged more than 50 missions, and, added Wiley, "a lot of the original guys were lost. I lucked out and ended up only with a chopped-up airplane. We were doing a lot of close support work, and I was right down on the ground with the target I was blowing up. Most of my trouble was flying through a lot of debris from train engines after I shot them up."

At last, after 101 missions, Wiley boarded a ship for home. He went immediately to see his wife, Ruby, then to his parents in Pittsburgh.

The city had just held a parade honoring "Machine Gun" Kelly, a Pittsburgh combat hero. The African American paper, the Pittsburgh Courier, pointed out that Wiley ought to have a parade, too. "And suddenly I was a hero. I was waltzed down to the mill where I had worked to talk to the laborers and tell them what a good job they were doing, and was invited to downtown clubs I had never been in."

At the parade held in his honor, Wiley sat in the back seat of the limo with Mayor Scully, who was "quite nice. What a difference! I had left Pittsburgh on a shoestring and come back a hero."

Wiley would continue his military career as a B-25 bomber pilot and as a training officer at Godman Field in Indiana, where he was part of a controversy involving the desegregation of the base's off-duty clubs. His old comrade B.O. Davis eventually won a promotion to commander, the first time an African American had directed an integrated base.

In 1948, largely due to the splendid record of the 99th and 332nd, President Harry Truman formally abolished segregation in the armed forces.

After the war, Wiley worked as a manager in Air Force programs to develop ballistic weapons and on the X-20, predecessor to the Space Shuttle. After retiring from the Air Force in 1965, he joined Seattle-based Boeing Corp., where he worked as an engineer until his retirement in 1981.
On January 27, 1944, however, Wiley, leading one flight, and Clarence Jamison of Cleveland, leading another, put an end to the 99th's stigma.

At the time, the furious battle for Italy was beginning at the beachhead at Anzio. The Twelfth Air Force was assigned to isolate the battle area to prevent enemy forces from bringing up reinforcements and supplies. Meanwhile, the order for the 99th was to support ground troops by dive bombing and strafing railyards, troop concentrations, highways, bridges, posts, and supply centers. With five other pilots under his command, Flight Leader Jamison spotted a group of enemy fighters over Anzio and decided, "This was new image time...We were going to win big that day or all die in trying."

Jamison’s flight group, outnumbered two-to-one, broke formation and in less four minutes downed five enemy aircraft. Shortly afterward, Flight Leader Wiley brought his men in and they destroyed three additional enemy planes in dogfights, bringing the 99th a total of eight kills. The day's action brought recognition and ended the negative press. After Anzio, the pioneer black airmen went on to destroy 111 planes in the air, 150 on the ground, sink 16 barges and boats, and destroy 57 locomotives as well as two oil and ammunition dumps.