

RedTails (2012)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V -3; L -1; S/N-3 . Running time: 2 hours 5 min.

*Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him, and he will act.
He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.
Psalm 37:5-6*

Largely financed by George Lucas, this fact-based but fictional story of the Tuskegee Airmen chronicles just part of the fight on the ground required for the African American pilots to get the right to fight in the sky.

It skips most of the ground fight staged back in the US, so well told in the HBO film [The Tuskegee Airmen](#), although Clarence Howard is shown as the Washington-bound black officer who fights the military bureaucracy and prejudiced congressmen for his squadron's right to fly and fight.

This film focuses instead on the action in the skies where the pilots protected the B-17 bombers flying over Germany. The Germans had been able to lure away the fighters piloted by whites that were supposed to protect the bombers that the bomber attrition rate had climbed to an alarming rate. Ordered to stay with the bombers rather than engaging in dogfights, the Tuskegee pilots gave far better protection, and yet still managed to shoot down a great many enemy planes. The Airmen, the tails of their fighters painted red, performed so well that the once prejudiced bomber crews changed their views concerning African American pilots' skills The film succeeds

far better as an action film than as one exploring the depths of racism of the time. The computer generated aerial combat scenes overshadow the shallow dramatic ones, turning what could have been a sociological film into a comic book action movie. Indeed, with its stereotypical characters—there is the pipe smoking commander; a hot shot pilot who loves to show off his flying skills, a can-do maintenance man able to patch up a damaged plane overnight; a pilot with a drinking problem, a religious pilot with his picture of “Black Jesus” taped to his control panel, and a snarling Nazi airman whom we cannot wait to see going down in flames—and a bit of flag-waving the film reminded me a lot of those I enjoyed as a boy, films such as *God Is My Co-Pilot* and *Flying Fortress*. There is never any doubt that God is on the side of Americans killing Germans, nor is there any qualm raised about the civilian deaths caused by our massive bombing attacks.

Cuba Gooding, Jr., who plays the desk-bound major in charge of the squadron also starred in the far better 1995 film mentioned above. To discover the enormity of the racial barrier faced by the squadron at its very inception I urge you to see it. In this film when one pilot enters into a liaison with a local Italian beauty there is not a ripple of criticism from her family or from the Air Force brass. This may add interest for women viewers, but it brings into question the filmmakers’ hold on the reality of the times. Despite this and other shortcomings, the film does a service by bringing to a mass audience a little known episode in the long march toward racial equality.

Note: Discussion questions are available with this review for those subscribing to the *Visual Parables* journal. The journal also includes many extras—book reviews, the use of films for church seasons, a lectionary related column, and more. Hundreds of old reviews are also available in the subscribers; section. Check out the [sample issue](#).