

By Senator Torres

25-01505-24

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1                                   A bill to be entitled  
2           An act relating to Tuskegee Airmen Commemoration Day;  
3           amending s. 683.01, F.S.; designating Tuskegee Airmen  
4           Commemoration Day, which occurs on the fourth Thursday  
5           in March, as a legal holiday; providing an effective  
6           date.  
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8           WHEREAS, before World War II, African Americans had very  
9           limited roles in the defense of the United States and none in  
10          military aviation, and when the nation was drawn into the war,  
11          African Americans aspired to more meaningful jobs in the  
12          military, including flying and maintaining aircraft, and  
13          WHEREAS, as the rapid expansion of aircraft production  
14          during the war created a greater need for military pilots,  
15          public outcry from civil rights groups and black professional  
16          organizations exhorted the United States War Department to begin  
17          training black pilots in the Army Air Corps, and  
18          WHEREAS, the United States War Department's Civilian Pilot  
19          Training Program (CPTP) authorized colleges and universities to  
20          train students in order to increase the number of civilian  
21          pilots and thereby increase the nation's military preparedness,  
22          and  
23          WHEREAS, Alabama's Tuskegee Institute was one of six black  
24          colleges and universities chosen to participate in the CPTP, was  
25          later selected to offer advanced training, and was the primary  
26          flight training facility for the student pilots who would become  
27          the famed Tuskegee Airmen, and  
28          WHEREAS, the 99th Pursuit Squadron, the first black flying  
29          squadron, trained at Dale Mabry Field near Tallahassee to

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30 prepare for combat overseas, and the Eglin Field ranges in  
31 Okaloosa County were used by the first class of advanced  
32 training cadets, as well as pilots in the advanced training  
33 stage, for gunnery and combat tactics, and

34 WHEREAS, the outstanding performance of the Tuskegee Airmen  
35 was unprecedented in military aviation history, and

36 WHEREAS, the month of March is significant to the Tuskegee  
37 Airmen, as it is the month in which the first cadets received  
38 their wings; the first maintenance crew began training at  
39 Chanute Field, Illinois; the first Pursuit Squadron, the 99th,  
40 was activated; Eleanor Roosevelt visited Kennedy Field and flew  
41 with Chief Alfred Anderson, an African American instructor  
42 pilot; and President George W. Bush presented the Tuskegee  
43 Airmen with the Congressional Gold Medal, and

44 WHEREAS, General Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr., born in  
45 Pensacola, became the first African American to achieve the rank  
46 of four-star general in the Armed Forces; Second Lieutenant  
47 Charles P. Bailey, Sr., born in Punta Gorda, was the first  
48 aviator from Florida to become a Tuskegee Airman pilot of the  
49 99th Pursuit Squadron; and Lieutenant Alvin J. Downing, born in  
50 Jacksonville, was a special service officer and renowned  
51 musician and educator in the Army Air Forces Band and in the St.  
52 Petersburg and Clearwater areas, and

53 WHEREAS, Second Lieutenant Alphonso Simmons of the 100th  
54 Fighter Squadron from Jacksonville became a casualty of war on  
55 March 3, 1945; and the first Tuskegee Airman aviator from  
56 Florida to earn his wings and the first Floridian Tuskegee  
57 Airman of the 301st Fighter Squadron, First Lieutenant James  
58 Polkinghorne, Jr., of Pensacola was a casualty lost on a combat

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59 mission over Italy on May 5, 1944, and

60 WHEREAS, Lieutenant Colonel George E. Hardy, residing in  
61 Sarasota County, is a famed "Red Tail" P-51 pilot of the 332nd  
62 Fighter Group; Lieutenant Daniel K. Keel, Jr., residing in Lake  
63 County, is one of only five triple-rated airmen, serving as  
64 pilot, bombardier, and navigator; and Callie Odom Gentry,  
65 residing in Pasco County, is a female Tuskegee Airman who was a  
66 stenographer during the war, and

67 WHEREAS, Tuskegee Airman Chief Master Sergeant Richard R.  
68 Hall, Jr., formerly of Winter Park, was an aircraft mechanic in  
69 the 99th Fighter Pursuit Squadron, served 30 years in the  
70 military, and was one of the first African American Chief Master  
71 Sergeants; Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Hughes, formerly of  
72 Brevard County, was a Caucasian flight instructor; and  
73 Lieutenant Raymond Cassagnol, formerly of Seminole County, was  
74 one of five Haitian-born Tuskegee Airmen, NOW, THEREFORE,

75

76 Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

77

78 Section 1. Present paragraphs (h) through (u) of subsection  
79 (1) of section 683.01, Florida Statutes, are redesignated as  
80 paragraphs (i) through (v), respectively, and a new paragraph  
81 (h) is added to that subsection, to read:

82 683.01 Legal holidays.—

83 (1) The legal holidays, which are also public holidays, are  
84 the following:

85 (h) Tuskegee Airmen Commemoration Day, the fourth Thursday  
86 in March.

87 Section 2. This act shall take effect July 1, 2024.