

CHAPTER 2024-83

House Bill No. 1227

An act relating to Tuskegee Airmen Commemoration Day; amending s. 683.01, F.S.; designating Tuskegee Airmen Commemoration Day, which occurs on the fourth Thursday in March, as a legal holiday; providing an effective date.

WHEREAS, before World War II, African Americans had very limited roles in the defense of the United States and none in military aviation, and when the nation was drawn into the war, African Americans aspired to more meaningful jobs in the military, including flying and maintaining aircraft, and

WHEREAS, as the rapid expansion of aircraft production during the war created a greater need for military pilots, public outcry from civil rights groups and black professional organizations exhorted the United States War Department to begin training black pilots in the Army Air Corps, and

WHEREAS, the United States War Department's Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) authorized colleges and universities to train students in order to increase the number of civilian pilots and thereby increase the nation's military preparedness, and

WHEREAS, Alabama's Tuskegee Institute was one of six black colleges and universities chosen to participate in the CPTP, was later selected to offer advanced training, and was the primary flight training facility for the student pilots who would become the famed Tuskegee Airmen, and

WHEREAS, the 99th Fighter Pursuit Squadron, the first black flying squadron, trained at Dale Mabry Field near Tallahassee to prepare for combat overseas, and the Eglin Field ranges in Okaloosa County were used by the first class of advanced training cadets, as well as pilots in the advanced training stage, for gunnery and combat tactics, and

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

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

WHEREAS, General Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr., born in Pensacola, became the first African American to achieve the rank of four-star general in the Armed Forces; Second Lieutenant Charles P. Bailey, Sr., born in Punta

Gorda, was the first aviator from Florida to become a Tuskegee Airman pilot of the 99th Fighter Pursuit Squadron; and Lieutenant Alvin J. Downing, born in Jacksonville, was a Special Service Officer and renowned musician and educator in the Army Air Forces Band and in the St. Petersburg and Clearwater areas, and

WHEREAS, Second Lieutenant Alphonso Simmons of the 100th Fighter Squadron from Jacksonville became a casualty of war on March 3, 1945; and the first Tuskegee Airman aviator from Florida to earn his wings and the first Floridian Tuskegee Airman of the 301st Fighter Squadron, First Lieutenant James Polkinghorne, Jr., of Pensacola was a casualty lost on a combat mission over Italy on May 5, 1944, and

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

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

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

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

683.01 Legal holidays.—

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

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

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

Approved by the Governor April 11, 2024.

Filed in Office Secretary of State April 11, 2024.