

SSGT LESLIE EDWARDS

# Essay Contest

 NATIONAL TUSKEGEE AIRMEN DAY  
March 28, 2026

## Aviation Law, Legacy, and Leadership

Open to Mid-South Students • Ages 11–14

**\$250**

### First Place

Essay read at the  
National Tuskegee Airmen Day  
Ceremony

Second Place – **\$150**

Third Place – **\$100**

### Submission Deadline

March 18, 2026

Submit essays to  
[freemanbd@scsk12.org](mailto:freemanbd@scsk12.org)

### Recognition Ceremony

March 28, 2026 • 4:00 PM

Church of the River  
292 Virginia Ave  
Memphis, TN

### Essay Requirements

- 500–800 words
- Typed and double-spaced
- Must answer the required questions

### Scan to Enter



Sponsors: Taste of Aviation • Memphis Chapter Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. • Team Memphis

Email to: [freemanbd@scsk12.org](mailto:freemanbd@scsk12.org) by midnight March 18, 2026

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# SSGT LESLIE EDWARDS

## ESSAY CONTEST

National Tuskegee Airmen Day - March 28, 2026

Theme: "Aviation Law, Legacy, and Leadership"

**In honor of SSGT Leslie Edwards, a documented Original Tuskegee Airman from Memphis who served as an aircraft technician, students are invited to reflect on the meaning of leadership, aviation history, and the legacy of those who served our country.**

### Eligibility

**Mid-South Students - Ages 11–14**

Length - 500–800 words - Typed and double-spaced

Must answer ALL four required questions.

### First Prize – \$250

Read essay at March 28 4 pm event

Recognition at Wings Over the Branch (Sep 2026)

### Second Prize – \$150

Recognition at March 28 4pm event

Recognition at Wings Over the Branch (Sep 2026)

### Third Prize – \$100

Recognition at March 28 4pm event

Recognition at Wings Over the Branch (Sep 2026)

### Important Dates

**Submission Deadline: March 18, 2026**

**Email: [freemanbd@scsk12.org](mailto:freemanbd@scsk12.org)**

**Winners Announced: March 21, 2026**

### Recognition Ceremony:

**March 28, 2026 – 4:00 PM**

Winners will be honored at the National Tuskegee Airmen Day program at Church of the River.

## Respond To All of These Questions



*“Our ‘excellence’ is proof that those who believed in Black inferiority were fools.”*

~SSgt/Flight Chief  
Leslie Edwards, Jr.

### 1 Aviation & Leadership

How did SSGT Leslie Edwards demonstrate leadership during his time as a Tuskegee Airman?  
Why is leadership important in aviation safety?

### 2 Law & Conflict Resolution

How did Edwards use research, knowledge, and persistence to solve the Valley Homes housing crisis?

Why is understanding the law important in resolving conflicts?

### 3 Goal Setting & Perseverance

What does Edwards’ return to school teach us about not giving up?

How can education strengthen leadership?

### 4 Legacy & Inspiration

How does his life inspire you personally?

How will you apply Aviation Law, Legacy, and Leadership in your own goals? Will you dance when you are 93 years old?

**Be specific about your dreams and how you will overcome challenges.**

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## Background Reading for Students

Before writing your essay, carefully read the information below. This will help you understand how one man's life connects aviation law, leadership, and legacy.

### Who Was SSGT Leslie Edwards?

**Leslie Edwards, Jr.** (August 9, 1924 – September 23, 2019) was a Documented Original Tuskegee Airman.



He was born in Memphis, TN, but his family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio to escape the racial violence in the South. His father died when Leslie was only five years

old. As a teenager, he had to leave school in the 10th grade to help support his mother and sisters.

Even with hardship, he never gave up on becoming something greater.

Throughout his life, he reminded young people: ***“You must know your history, set your goals, and never let obstacles define your future.”*** — SSGT Leslie Edwards

### Aviation & Leadership in World War II

In 1943, Edwards was drafted into the U.S. Army Air Forces. He trained at Sheppard Field in Texas as an aircraft engine technician. Later, he became a Flight Chief in the 477th Bomb Group, part of the Tuskegee

Airmen and earned the rank of Staff Sergeant (SSGT).

### What is a Flight Chief?

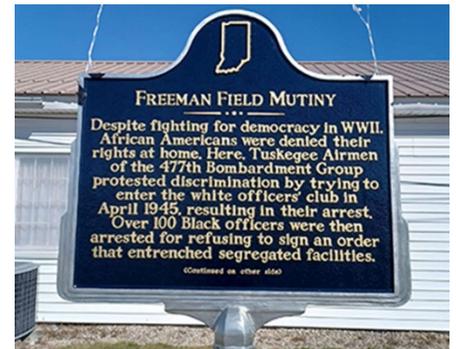
A Flight Chief:

- Supervised aircraft maintenance crews
- Ensured engines were safe and mission-ready
- Maintained strict inspection standards
- Protected pilots' lives

In aviation, leadership is about responsibility. If a plane is not safe, lives are at risk. Edwards' role required discipline, technical knowledge, and integrity. Aviation depends on rules, safety standards, and accountability — this is where aviation law begins.

### Law, Courage, and the Freeman Field Mutiny

In 1945, Edwards witnessed the historic Freeman Field Mutiny in Indiana. Black officers were denied access to the officers' club because of segregation policies. In peaceful protest, they entered the club in violation of discriminatory orders. At that time in the 1940s, racial segregation existed in the U.S. military. The higher enlisted rank of Master Sergeant (MSGT) was typically reserved for white service members only.



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Even though Edwards performed leadership duties and had the skills to advance, discriminatory policies limited promotions for Black servicemen. This reminds us that leadership is not just about rank — it is about responsibility, integrity, and excellence.

More than 100 Black officers were arrested.

Although Edwards was not among those arrested, he witnessed how:

- Law can be used unfairly
- Courage can challenge injustice
- Peaceful action can change policy

The Freeman Field protest helped expose unfair military policies. Just three years later, in 1948, President Harry Truman signed an order desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces.

*Leadership means understanding the law — and sometimes working to change unjust laws.*

## **Civilian Leadership & Housing Justice**

After the war, Edwards continued to lead — not in uniform, but in his community. In Lincoln Heights, Ohio, residents of Valley Homes were facing foreclosure. Edwards began a two-year investigation into federal housing loans.

He discovered families had been overcharged for decades. Because of his persistence:

- A \$540,000 federal mortgage debt was eliminated

- Families kept their homes and Justice prevailed

In 1981, he received the 1st Annual Citizen Awareness of Law Award.

He demonstrated that knowledge of the law can protect communities. Leadership is not only flying aircraft — it is also standing up for fairness.

## **Education, Perseverance & Personal Legacy**

Though he dropped out of school as a teenager, Edwards returned in 1961 — finishing high school alongside his wife. He later earned a bachelor's degree in commerce. His life proves that setbacks do not define your future.

He encouraged young people to:

- Set goals
- Learn their history
- Serve with integrity
- Resolve conflict peacefully

Even in his 90s, he inspired others with energy and joy — famously dancing the “Tuskegee Airmen Hustle.”



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## Judging Criteria (100 Points Total)

	Category Points
Understanding of Aviation Leadership	20
Understanding of Law & Conflict Resolution	20
Goal Setting & Perseverance	20
Personal Reflection & Inspiration	25
Organization, Grammar & Clarity	15



### SSGT Leslie Edwards proved that leadership is not about titles —

#### It is about:

- *Responsibility.*
- *Knowing the law.*
- *Protecting your community*
- *Finishing what you start*
- *Inspiring others to rise.*

## Vocabulary Words

**Aviation** – The science or activity of flying airplanes.

**Tuskegee Airmen** – The first African American military aviators in U.S. history.

**Documented Original Tuskegee Airman** – A verified member who served during World War II.

**Flight Chief** – A leader responsible for supervising aircraft maintenance crews.

**Staff Sergeant (SSGT)** – A non-commissioned officer rank responsible for supervising others.

**Master Sergeant (MSGT)** – A higher enlisted rank that was often denied to Black servicemen during segregation.

**Segregation** – The separation of people based on race or other characteristic.

**Discrimination** – Unfair treatment based on race or other characteristics.

**Freeman Army Airfield** – A military base in Seymour, Indiana, where Black officers protested racial segregation in 1945.

**Mutiny** – A protest against unfair authority.

**Foreclosure** – When a bank takes property because payments are not made.

**Investigation** – A careful search for facts.

**Persistence** – Continuing to work toward a goal even when it is difficult.

**Legacy** – Something important passed down to future generations.

**Conflict Resolution** – Solving disagreements in a peaceful and fair way.

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