

Black fliers share their tales



Former Tuskegee airman Quintin Smith, right, speaks Friday to Centennial High School student about his experiences in World War II at the Champaign school's library.

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Though blacks have served in the U.S. military since the Revolutionary War, the heroes known as the Tuskegee Airmen had to struggle to serve.

White leaders were convinced "black men can't fight, black men can't lead and black men most assuredly cannot fly," World War II Tuskegee veteran Quentin Smith told Centennial High School English and social studies students Friday.

More than 90 percent of black men in the military worked in kitchens, buried the dead or toted supplies in the 1930s, he said.

But with the intercession primarily of first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and later of President Roosevelt, 992 men graduated from the Tuskegee program and fought in the skies over Europe and North Africa, and later in Korea, he said.

Tuskegee veterans from the Chicago area were at Centennial along with former local teacher Ben Cox — one of the original 13 Freedom Riders of 1961 — and former teacher Marsha Terry, who has made a short film about the airmen.

In 1941, the Army Air Forces began a program to train black Americans as military pilots at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, founded by Booker T. Washington.

Some of the mechanics and ground crew trained at Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul. Most stayed in Alabama until they joined the 99th Fighter Squadron, which fought in North Africa, and later with the 332d Fighter Group, which flew combat along with the 99th Squadron from bases in Italy.

Black fliers were held to a higher standard than their white counterparts, Smith said. They had to have college degrees, for instance.

But there were perks for being a pilot officer, said Tuskegee airman Robert Martin.

"In World War II, I wanted wings and I wanted the girls," the self-described "pterodactyl" said. "Success was having two girls on each arm."

The honor of being a World War II "ace" was more elusive, Martin said.

In Italy, when his group of fighter pilots protected bombs, "we were given strong orders not to become aces. We were told, 'Do not chase German planes; stay with the bombs,'" he said.

An ace has five or more enemy planes shot down. One of the Tuskegee airmen, Lee Harper, had 4, because superiors split the credit for downing a German fighter.

Martin said the Tuskegee fliers were rotated back to the States to sell war bonds when they neared the mark.

Smith said they had to face two sets of enemies: the Germans and racism.

He told the students they probably hadn't heard a lot about black soldiers in American history.

"You might think that John Wayne or somebody like that won the West," he said. "The history books don't write about the Buffalo Soldiers" – black cavalry heroes.

Beverly Dunjill, the president of the Chicago chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen veterans, noted that he was too young to graduate from Tuskegee before the war ended, but he did fly jets in the Korean War.

He talked about the programs for future fliers in the Chicago area.

The veterans also spoke at Bottenfield School, Foellinger Auditorium and the University YMCA. They were presented with a plaque by University of Illinois interim Provost Jesse Delia.

Among the sponsors of the events were the Martin Luther King Jr. Committee, YMCA, African-American Cultural Center and the NAACP Education Committee.