

## Local Tuskegee airmen share World War II stories

By Joan Aragone, CORRESPONDENT,,

Tues. Feb. 14, 2006

AS a fighter pilot and later a bomber pilot during World War II, Leslie Williams, 86, of Belmont flew scores of training missions at U.S. bases around the country.

Soaring over Florida, landing on islands off California to simulate conditions in the South Pacific, he and fellow pilots put in grueling hours mastering the controls and operations of planes designed for combat in around the world.

But when Williams and his comrades — all of whom had completed Army Air Corps training and received officer's commissions — returned to their U.S. bases at the end of the work day, they were refused admittance to officers' clubs, assigned separate tables in the mess and housed in buildings isolated from the other men. Their officer status was ignored. They were outcasts.

Why? Williams and his comrades were black. They were members of the Tuskegee Airmen, a group of almost 1,000 black airmen who had graduated during World War II from pilot training at the Division of Aeronautics at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and destined for combat overseas. But the U.S. military was segregated, and black and white troops were prohibited from living or fighting together.

During the war, 450 Tuskegee Airmen flew as fighter pilots in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. One hundred fifty died. The all-black crews escorted all-white crews on bombers — and never lost a bomber they escorted.

"The fighters did everything in the thick of the battle that the white pilots did except earn promotions," Williams said.

But who knows about them?

"People are unaware of us. We're not in the history books," Williams said. "But the HBO movie 'Tuskegee Airmen' (released in 1995) started to change things. During the war, we were always isolated, always discriminated against. After the war, we returned to the status quo. We dropped out of sight for 50 years."

Now, as part of Black History Month, Williams, a five-year Air Corps veteran, and fellow Tuskegee Airman Woodie Spears, 82, of Hayward will share their memories and experiences of the Airmen, the group's accomplishments during the war overseas and the challenges and difficulties they met at home, at 10:30 a.m. Saturday at Hiller Aviation Museum, 601 Skyway Road, San Carlos.

Williams, born in San Francisco but reared in San Mateo, graduate of San Mateo High School and former student at San Mateo Junior College, had always wanted to be an airman. So when the war started, he and his friends, who were white, took the Air Corps entrance exam. He passed. His friends soon received notices of acceptance, but he never did.

Instead, as he expected, he was drafted into the Quartermaster Corps, where most black men were sent, and assigned as a truck driver. Using his teenage experience as a tap dancer, he soon formed an entertainment troupe, performing for visiting VIPs. A visiting general, impressed with the young man who dreamed of being an airman, interceded for him, and eventually Williams was admitted to the Tuskegee program.

"I got into the Air Corps through the Tuskegee Airmen," he said. "I would never have gotten there based on applications. I had top grades, but I had the wrong skin color."

As a married officer living off base, Williams was a witness in 1945 to what has been called "the Freeman Field mutiny," when 103 black officers living on base tried to enter the Officers' Club at Freeman Field, Indiana, after direct orders not to do so. They refused to sign a paper agreeing that the treatment they received was acceptable, Williams said. All were arrested, charged with insubordination and ordered to face court martial.

"It was blatant discrimination," he said.

Charges were dropped against 102, but one was convicted of a felony. Not until 50 years later was his military record cleared.

After the war, Williams and his wife, Elsie, returned to the Bay Area. He received his bachelor's degree from Stanford University on the

G.I. Bill and, for 25 years, ran a dance studio in San Mateo. At age 55, he decided to move from dance to the law and attended Stanford Law School. He still practices.

The stories of Williams' life and that of fellow speaker Spears could fill hours, but Saturday they will focus on WWII and the Tuskegee Airmen.

"There has been such a void about the Airmen for at least 50 years," Williams said. "At times, I wondered if it had all been a dream."

After their talk Saturday, Williams and Spears, among the last survivors of the Tuskegee Airmen, will take questions from the audience; bring your children and grandchildren.

The event is presented by Terri Gorman of Los Gatos, an avid flyer who recently received her pilot's license at age 66. She wants the story of the Tuskegee Airmen to be told.

For information, call the Museum, 654-0200. The museum opens at 10 a.m.; adjacent parking is limited. Charge is \$9 adults, \$6 seniors; children accompanied by a paying adult receive a discount.

MEDICARE PART D CLINIC SCHEDULED FOR SAN CARLOS — Legal Aid Society of San Mateo County will assist anyone needing help in completing an application for the new Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit (Medicare Part D), by appointment only, from 10 to 11:30 a.m. Friday, Feb. 17, at San Carlos Adult Community Center, 601 Chestnut St. Please come with information on income, assets and current health insurance. Make an appointment at the reception desk. For information call the center at 802-4382.

Senior Journal appears every Friday with news and information about senior life in San Mateo County. To submit items of interest to Joan Aragone, call 348-4332, or write to Senior Journal, San Mateo County Times, P.O. Box 5400, San Mateo, CA 94402. You can e-mail items to [fogbelt2@aol.com](mailto:fogbelt2@aol.com).