



Tuskegee Airman Recounts Struggles

March 29, 2006-James Sheppard knew what he wanted to do the day he entered aviation technical high school in New York City in 1939. He wanted to fly.

The day he walked through the door, Germany invaded Poland, and Sheppard would get a chance to help make history.

Sheppard, 81, was one of the Tuskegee Airmen, whose ranks are growing thinner each year. The performance of the 950 or so segregated black pilots, navigators, bombardiers and mechanics in the Army Air Force during World War II is roundly considered the factor that broke down segregation in the armed services.

Sheppard spoke to the Stall High School Parent Teachers Students Association on Tuesday and is to speak today to ROTC and U.S. history students at the school.

Routinely discriminated against, derided as less skilled than white soldiers, the airmen came to be called "Red Tailed Angels" because they never lost a plane they escorted. The Germans called them Schwartzte Vogelmenschen - "Black Bird Men" - and German pilots turned away rather than tangle with them.

Sheppard became a crew chief mechanic and fought in Italy. Home from the war, he could not get a job with the airlines.

"They'd say, 'There's no doubt you're qualified, well qualified, to work on our planes. But if our passengers see you, they won't fly,'" he said.

Sheppard's own family thought he was just telling tales about the importance of what the 332nd Fighter Group did until a television movie came out in 1995 and made belated national heroes of the airmen. It's weird, he said, finding himself famous. "You figure, there's a 60-year gap there."

But the message he has for the Stall students more subtle than that.

"So many people, including my own people, think the very first black pilots were the Tuskegee Airmen," he said. The first recorded black pilot was a woman, Bessie Coleman, who in 1922 went to France to get her license. In 1940, as World War II broke out, there were 40 black flying clubs in the United States. Black pilots had flown as mercenaries in Ethiopia and Spain. Sheppard said he knew that as a teen walking into the technical school, but most people in the country didn't have a clue.

"Only if you read the black newspapers would you know it," he said.

He became a pilot on his own, fighting white instructors who wouldn't accept his student flight hours when they were logged by black pilots. Working in the Post Office, keeping his aviation skills sharp in the Air Force Reserve, he joined the Federal Aviation Administration in 1957 and retired as a supervisory aviation safety inspector.

He lives in Portland, Maine. He was invited to Stall at the funeral of another airman, when he was introduced to South Carolina ROTC officers.

Nowadays when Sheppard speaks, some of the students don't have a clue about World War II.

"You see the way things are today?" he tells them. "It wasn't like that then. They were fighting the same war across the street from each other and when the sun set they didn't even talk to each other."

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