

Famed black WWII pilots to get belated congressional honor

by John Wilkens

Waiting has often been part of the equation for the pioneering black aviators known as the Tuskegee Airmen. They're nothing if not patient.

When World War II was brewing and they wanted to become pilots, they were told no: We don't take your kind.

Then, when legal and political pressure forced open the door, and they walked through it with spectacular results, they still came home to a land of inequality, of separate drinking fountains and seats at the back of the bus.

So it doesn't strike many of them as surprising that they've had to wait 60 years for a formal thank-you from Congress. Wrong, maybe, but not surprising.

Their moment arrives Thursday at a ceremony in Washington, D.C., for presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal. First awarded to George Washington in 1776, it's the legislative body's highest expression of national appreciation.

AIRMEN - George Mitchell, a radio expert, taught at the ground school that trained the Tuskegee Airmen, who flew P-51 Mustangs, shown in the model. Photo by Scott Linnett.

"It's late payment, but it's nice," said Lee Archer, a Tuskegee fighter pilot who shot down five German planes during the war. "Congress speaks for the American people, and this is their way of saying, 'OK, we didn't recognize it back then, but we do now.'"

About 300 of the airmen are expected to attend, including three from San Diego County. One of the locals, George Mitchell, a radio expert who taught at the ground school, said: "For so many years, no one ever heard of the Tuskegee Airmen. That's changing, and maybe the medal will make even more people aware."

Blacks, described in a 1925 Army War College report as "cowards and poor technicians and fighters," were barred from training as military pilots until 1941. Faced with a federal lawsuit and mounting criticism from African-American leaders, the Roosevelt administration ordered an aviation school opened at the Tuskegee Institute, a black college in Alabama.

Standards were high - the pilot candidates had to have college experience - because the stakes were, too. "The world looked at us as second-class citizens," Mitchell said. "We knew we were in a fishbowl. We knew we couldn't fail."

They didn't.

About 450 Tuskegee fighter pilots flew more than 15,000 sorties over North Africa and Europe during the war. Nicknamed the "Red Tails" because of the distinctive paint on their planes, they shot down more than 110 enemy aircraft and destroyed hundreds more on the ground, along with dozens of railroad cars, boats and barges.

Impressed by their skill, bomber crews asked for them as escorts. The Tuskegee Airmen believe they never lost a bomber to enemy fire in more than 200 missions, a record some historians have begun to question.

The fliers collectively earned close to 1,000 medals, including Distinguished Flying Crosses, Presidential Unit Citations, Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts. More than 60 pilots were killed in action, and 30 more were shot down and captured. Their commander, Benjamin O. Davis Jr., later became a four-star general.

Archer, whose aerial exploits included shooting down three German planes in one day, said he and the others succeeded in part because they wanted so much to defy the skeptics.

"I was an arrogant young man, and so were most of the other pilots, because we had to be," said Archer, who spent 29 years in the military, retired as a colonel and then was a business executive. He lives now in New Rochelle, N.Y.

"For one thing, I wanted to fly, and I wasn't going to let other people's expectations stop me from doing it," he said. "For another, it's my country, too, whether or not other people believed that. I love my country, and we were at war. So, in your face. That's how I felt about it."

Alfonso Harris, who lives in Oceanside, Calif., graduated as a fighter pilot from the aviation school at Tuskegee in 1945, just as the war was ending.

When he and the others returned to civilian life, "we had expectations of people being aware of what we had done, that there would be an impetus toward moving us up in the world as Americans - not black Americans, just Americans. It was disappointing that that kind of recognition didn't come right away."

Archer remembers seeing German war prisoners at U.S. bases who enjoyed more privileges than he did. When it was time to come home after the war, he had to wait until all the whites had boarded the ship first.

But change eventually came. The success of the black aviators helped persuade President Truman to sign an order in 1948 eliminating segregation in the armed forces.

For those who were part of it, it's not much of a stretch to draw a line connecting Tuskegee to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and on into the present.

"We opened a lot of doors," said Robert Maxwell, also of Oceanside, who trained as a bomber pilot at Tuskegee and was preparing for deployment to the Pacific when the war ended. "In time, there were more opportunities, and not just in the military." He later became an aerospace engineer.

In 1975, the Tuskegee Airmen, who had gone on to careers in just about every field imaginable, began wondering about their legacy. They created a national association to preserve their history and inspire young people to follow their path.

The group has about 50 chapters nationwide, including one in San Diego that's named after Davis, the Tuskegee Airmen commander. Members give speeches at military facilities and schools, and award annual scholarships.

Maxwell, president of the local chapter, said they regularly meet students who not only know nothing about the Airmen but are skeptical that the government ever discriminated against black aviators.

"It's always a little bit of an education for them," he said.

About 1,000 black men were trained as pilots, bombardiers and navigators during the war, but the term "Tuskegee Airmen" doesn't apply just to them. It also includes instructors, mechanics and other support personnel.

All who were involved in the operations during the 1940s are considered "original" Tuskegee Airmen, and all

are part of the group being honored Thursday with the Congressional Gold Medal.

The medal has been awarded about 130 times since 1776. Through the early 1900s, the recipients were usually military heroes, but subsequent honorees have included Irving Berlin, Walt Disney, John Wayne, Jesse Owens, Billy Graham, Rosa Parks and Pope John Paul II.

San Diego County has six living "original" Airmen, according to records at the national association, and three of them - Mitchell, Harris and Maxwell - said they will attend the medal ceremony. The other locals are John Curtis and Louis Murray, both fighter pilots, and Nelson Robinson, an aircraft mechanic.

Two-thirds of Congress must sponsor legislation approving the medal, and there is some bitterness among the Airmen that it has taken so long. "It's very, very late for Congress to get around to thinking of who we are," Harris said. "HBO was ahead of Congress." The cable channel released a movie about the Tuskegee Airmen starring Laurence Fishburne in 1995.

But Mitchell said it's better late than never.

"The Tuskegee Airmen helped turn things around," he said. "People no longer looked at the color of your skin; they looked at your ability. It's nice to see that being recognized and remembered."

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