

Tuskegee Airman Tells His Story

By Charles Roberts, Editor, Highland Community News

"So many of our friends have passed on. I don't feel like I did anything heroic," observed former Tuskegee Airman Buford Johnson in an interview at the Highland Community News.

Johnson is practically a neighbor of the newspaper, a resident of Highland for many years after being assigned to the former Norton Air Force Base as a civilian after retiring from the Air Force.

He was one of those receiving his Congressional Gold Medal at Arrowhead Credit Union Stadium July 12. The medals had been awarded by President Bush in March, but Johnson was one of those unable to travel to Washington for the ceremony there.

Friendly, intelligent and straightforward, Johnson talked about his humble beginnings as a native Texan from Longview to his eventual draft into service at Tuskegee, Ala. where he served as mechanic for the all-Black section of the Air Force in 1945.

After 21 years in the Air Force, he retired to Oxnard where he worked for Lockheed, and then on to Sperry-Univac where he was a computer engineer for 17 years, which brought him the assignment to Norton Air Force Base.



Tuskegee Airman Buford Johnson

While in the Air Force, he met and married Helen in Massachusetts in 1953, and they're still honeymooning.

"When you're in the service and single, you go to a lot of places," he smiled. "But I met her through a friend and we dated about a year before I decided it was time to settle down."

The Sperry-Univac job brought him to Highland, and when Norton closed, he decided to stay.

"Sometimes I wish I would have moved," he mused. "It's just getting too crowded."

His mother was a school teacher, giving him an educational base to work from, which provided him with new opportunities in the Air Force and in civilian life.

As the Air Force integrated, Johnson's unit moved to Nellis Air Force Base. By then, the Tuskegee Airmen had earned the respect for fellow Air Force personnel.

"We were glad to be there and they were glad to have us," he recalled.

His affiliation with the Tuskegee Airmen Association has been very rewarding for him. The members get together and exchange stories and memories.

The national organization will have a convention in Dallas this year, and Johnson hopes to attend.

"I don't think I did anything special," he says shyly. "I just went where they told me to, just like everybody else."

But Johnson was part of something much larger: the integration of the services and earned the respect and admiration of fellow service members in and beyond the Air Force.

Another Highlander, Col. Paul Green, was also a Tuskegee Airman, and rose to become commander of Norton Air Force Base.

As Johnson observed: "If you wait long enough, they'll see things your way. You just have to be patient."