

Tuskegee pilot airborne again

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He is 86 years old now, a little slower, a little grayer and perhaps a tad less sharp-eyed than he was on a fateful day in the skies over Berlin in March of 1945.

But when the American Airpower Museum at Republic Airport invited Roscoe Brown to fly again in a P-51 Mustang fighter plane, the World War II veteran and part-time Sag Harbor resident did not hesitate to say yes.

"They asked me if I would like to fly and I said of course," said Brown, moments before climbing into the cockpit Friday and powering into the skies over Farmingdale. "It's nice to be recognized like this. It is a changed world."

Brown, who helped make history as one of the first African-American pilots to break the color bar in the U.S. military, was the featured guest yesterday as the museum kicked off its Labor Day weekend.

Brown began flying P-51 fighter planes in 1944, after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People successfully lobbied against a U.S. military ban on black pilots. Last year, he and other black pilots who trained at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama - and who are known as the Tuskegee Airmen - were collectively awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Brown earned personal distinction on March 24, 1945, when, while escorting a flight of American bombers on a mission over Berlin, and flying the propeller-driven P-51, he became the first pilot of the 15th Air Force to shoot down a German jet.

Now the director of the Center for Urban Education Policy at the CUNY Graduate Center, Brown said he is mindful of the arc of history, which took him from the cusp of the civil rights movement in the 1940s to bearing witness to an African-American becoming the presidential nominee of a major political party for the first time.

"We were fighting two wars then, one war against the enemy overseas and another war against segregation and discrimination at home," said Brown, who said he and his fellow black pilots had to overcome the skepticism of white flying instructors.

"Hopefully we are getting closer to the point where people realize that race is not a factor in

achievement, that people of any race can do anything," said Brown, who in 1984 and 1988 was a Democratic Party delegate pledged to the Rev. Jesse Jackson. "We sent that message years ago. Today, Barack Obama is sending that same message."

But politics seemed a faraway concept as Brown, smiling broadly, emerged from the P-51's cockpit after yesterday's 20-minute flight.

"The movement, the excitement, the thrill of being in a fighter plane," said Brown, whose love of aviation was inspired by Charles Lindbergh's first-ever solo transatlantic flight. "It's like going back to your childhood and playing baseball again."