

## Tuskegee Airman reflects on Sheppard

By Stacy Horany

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Sheppard Air Force Base was a much different place more than 60 years ago, according to Donald E. Elder.

"As I walked around today I feel I've done my term in Purgatory and have come to Heaven," Elder said about Sheppard. He was guest speaker Monday at the base's annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Observance Luncheon.

"There is no comparison — it's a new world now."

Elder said he spent just about a week of what was to be a six- to eight-week basic training stint at Sheppard in 1946. He said it was his first encounter with the South after growing up in Columbus, Ohio.

"As a young teen in 1946 I was to do my basic training at Sheppard Air Force Base with the Army Air Corps, and on the Sunday after we got here we got into a confrontation with persons of another persuasion and we had to leave early," Elder said. He said they were shipped out on a troop train at midnight after the incident.

Elder went on to finish his training and served as a crew chief in the 99th Fighter Squadron, working as an aircraft mechanic on P-47 Thunderbolts. The 99th Fighter Squadron has a more well-known name — Tuskegee Airmen.

The next time Elder visited Sheppard was during the air show in October 2007 with the Dallas-Fort Worth Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen.

What impressed him most about Sheppard today, Elder said, is the respect he sees now among personnel.

"When I just looked out there I saw the youth of today ... and I'm impressed because of the way they respect each other."

Elder said he was proud to serve as a foundation of sorts to the civil rights movement of the 1960's, led by Dr. King.

"We were part of the foundation and it was because we were recognized by those pilots because of those bombers that we saved — many of the pilots respected that those bombers that were never lost were escorted by African-American airmen," Elder said.

Elder and 300 of his fellow Tuskegee Airmen were honored in March 2007 with the United States Congressional Gold Medal by President Bush. Getting that recognition shows in part how far the country has come, Elder said.

"I think with the presentation (of the medal) 60 years later, not just Tuskegee, but our nation is moving forward," Elder said.

Brig. Gen. Richard Devereaux, 82nd Training Wing commander, said Elder's visit was perfect for celebrating Dr. King's legacy.

"What a great way to celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King than to have a Tuskegee Airman here today," Devereaux said. "Dr. King certainly would smile down on our Air Force today and what we've accomplished."

And for Airman 1st Class Charles Johnigan, a member of the 982nd Training Group, getting to hear Elder speak was inspirational.