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Airman Remembers

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13-06-2008



When his Nazi captors interrogated American air-force pilot Walter McCreary, shortly after he was shot down over Budapest, Hungary in 1941, he was questioned as to why he would risk his life for a country that treated African-Americans so poorly. He answered, simply, "It is our home and we want to be part of it."

Mr McCreary was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, an Army fighter-pilot corps based in Tuskegee, Alabama, made up exclusively of African-Americans. At the time of its inception, most institutions in the southern United States were segregated based on race and this remained true of the American armed services for all of World War Two. Mr McCreary remembers the Tuskegee airfield, set apart from white military facilities.

"The war department built Tuskegee Army Airfield. It was all African-American. Apart from a few white instructors everything was black. Even the birds were black that flew over."

The young men who signed up for the thousand-strong Tuskegee force had to contend with a great deal of racism and scepticism. The corps was originally termed 'an experiment' by the United States government and some felt that this unit was destined for failure. Mr McCreary:

"There were members of Congress that said that African-American youth did not have the intelligence, did not have the coordination, could not follow orders and did not have the potential to become leaders."

Segregation

Despite the racism and restrictions that the young African-American soldiers faced, the Tuskegee Airmen chose to fight for the United States and when they were sent to Europe, performed valiantly. Their mission was to escort bombers as they attacked Nazi targets in Europe. Historians often note that the Tuskegee Airmen was the only American fighter group never to

lose a bomber to enemy planes. They quickly established a reputation as one of the best air-force corps in the European theatre. White bomber pilots began asking to be escorted by the 'red-tails', a nickname for the Tuskegee Airmen after they painted a red stripe on their planes' rudder.

63 years after the war ended and one month before the 60th anniversary of President Harry S. Truman's declaration ending segregation of the American military, the heroics of the Tuskegee Airmen are still celebrated. By choosing to fight for a country where they were not treated equally, the airmen changed many people's mind about segregation. Mr McCreary is proud of this accomplishment.

"We proved that segregation was not necessary and that we could be integrated based on our merits and our accomplishments. This was in contrast to what the congressmen had said and it proved that in combat, we were equal. As a result of the military becoming integrated, then the country became integrated."
