

Tuskegee Airman marks abolition of slavery with inmates at prison

Veteran recounts tales of racism even after WWII

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Tuskegee Airman Charles Feaster speaks about his time in the service during the Black Culture & History Group's A Juneteenth Celebration Thursday afternoon at Chillicothe Correctional Institution. Frank Robertson/Gazette

Chillicothe Correctional Institution's inmates celebrated their freedom with a Tuskegee Airman Thursday afternoon.

The veteran, a member of the renowned all-African American fighter group, joined them during their Juneteenth program, at which the abolition of slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation were

acclaimed.

"We were truly pioneers in aviation for our race," said Charles Feaster, a member of the 99th squadron of the 332nd fighter group.

The airmen were trained in Tuskegee, Ala., beginning in 1941 as part of the Army Air Corps program. They fought in World War II, and received numerous military honors, including the Congressional Gold Medal.

"We did leave our mark during that troubled time in American history," Feaster, of Xenia, said. "We wanted to leave a legacy for others of our race to follow in aviation and technology ... It was a privilege to serve ... while paving the way."

And although the Tuskegee Airmen were formed in the face of war segregation and became a part of the military, coming home to consistent racism was difficult, he said.

"It was very difficult, I cannot express to you," he said. "A lot of times I think about it, it brings tears to my eyes."

However, keeping oneself up in the face of conflict is important, he told inmates.

"There's nothing too tough for you if you try," Feaster said, fostering applause. "Just because you're knocked down one time doesn't mean you don't get back up ... Do your best to overcome ... and keep marching on."

Feaster is a "living legend," said the Rev. Gary Chapman, who introduced the former airman.

"(Feaster was) fighting oppression, resisting segregation and overcoming racism," he said.

The Juneteenth program was put together by the prison's black culture and history group. One of its members is a family friend of Feaster, and he brought the idea to invite him to speak to the attention of Leah Bobb-Itt, deputy warden of special services.

"We wanted the inmates to hear him because they don't know about that history," she said.

The program's theme this year was "The Continuous Struggle for Freedom."

"Juneteenth is a freedom celebration," said William Hunter, chair of the black culture and history group, adding many people approached him and asked what the day meant. "We all know about Juneteenth. We just don't know we know about it."