

## Tuskegee Airmen paved way for King's legacy

by John Ingle  
82nd Training Wing Public Affairs

1/17/2008 - **SHEPPARD AIR FORCE BASE, Texas (AFPN)** -- There are two types of people in this world, according to Tuskegee Airman Don Elder: thermometers and thermostats.

The Congressional Gold Medal recipient and guest speaker at the Jan. 14 Martin Luther King Jr., luncheon said he and his fellow Tuskegee Airmen were thermostats because they effected change; thermometers merely state the status quo.

The Tuskegee Airmen broke the color barrier for black men in aviation-related career fields in the early 1940s. Mr. Elder said the Air Force, too, has been a thermostat throughout the years as a leader in civic reform.

"I think the contributions from the Tuskegee Airmen helped the Air Force make the transition because (the Tuskegee Airmen) proved, in spite of it all, that they did their job well," Mr. Elder said.

Before Dr. King made his famous marches in the South and to the nation's capital, the all-black fighter and pursuit squadrons began breaking down the racial walls that kept them from choosing how to defend the country they loved.

For Mr. Elder, that began in 1941 as a brand new recruit arriving at Sheppard for basic military training. As he told it, he and others arrived in the early part of the week for their eight weeks of instruction. Little did the group know they would spend only a fraction of the scheduled time at Sheppard.

A group of black men were on the drill field one Sunday afternoon killing time by striking up a conversation with a few females -- white females. A fight ensued when white soldiers saw the conversation and confronted the group of black men.

By the time midnight struck, they were all on a train headed toward Scott Field, Ill.

Despite the early brush with racial intolerance, Mr. Elder said he chalked it up to just another experience he had. He moved on to become a P-47 Thunderbolt mechanic with



Don Elder speaks to guests at the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jan. 14 at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas.

photo/Sandy Wassenmiller)

the 99th Fighter Squadron during World War II and a mechanic for North American Aviation in Ohio following the war.

Mr. Elder admitted he didn't experience some of the hardships other African-American men have described, partly because it wasn't as prevalent in Ohio. But, that doesn't dismiss the impact black aviators and aircraft mechanics had on the fledgling civil rights movement at the time.

"We were definitely part of that foundation," the Tuskegee Airman said. "It was because we were recognized by the pilots of those bombers" the all-black unit escorted.

Mr. Elder visited the training grounds of today's crew chiefs: the 82nd Training Group. Col. Steven Morani, the group's commander, presented him with a master aircraft maintenance and munitions badge, inducting him into the fraternity of maintainers.

The colonel said the honor was bestowed because of Mr. Elder's lifelong dedication to aviation and because he was a pioneer for all. The result can be seen in the Air Force's Aircraft Maintenance University.

"We really are a model of integration, diversity and excellence," Colonel Morani said.

In many ways, today's Air Force has taken on the persona of the Tuskegee Airmen, especially in its core values of integrity first, service before self and excellence in all we do.

"The Tuskegee Airmen selected from 'the cream-of-the-crop,'" Mr. Elder said. "We made certain our standards weren't lower. We expected to do as well or better than our white peers."

Because of their drive and determination to serve and protect their country, he said they began a movement for civil rights that could only be equaled or bested by one man -- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.