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Ceremony at Quonset honors 7 Tuskegee Airmen

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By Richard C. Dujardin



Tuskegee Airman Herman Wells, a Rhode Island native, shakes hands with Rhode Island Air National Guard Col. Peter Sepe, of Warwick, after signing a book for him at Thursday's event. The Providence Journal / Glenn Osmundson

NORTH KINGSTOWN — Even now, they proudly identify themselves as Tuskegee Airmen, part of a historic cadre of black aviators, pilots and support crew who helped prove to a skeptical nation during World War II that “black men can fly” and carry the fight to the enemy with impressive results.

As former B-25 bomber pilot Charles W. Diggs put it Thursday, when he and six others black veterans came as invited guests at a reception in their honor on the grounds of the Rhode Island Air National Guard at Quonset Point: “It feels good to have been a pioneer.”

But if the truth be told, being known as a pioneer was the last thing on their minds, they acknowledged. All they really wanted to do was fly.

“I think that’s the attitude of a lot of these men,” said Willie Shellman, a former autopilot design engineer who is now the president of the Tuskegee Airmen’s New England chapter and executive director of Black Archives at the YMCA of Greater Boston. “They didn’t know they were making history. They were training to be the best person they could be, to get the best education they could and to be the best person and soldier they could be. And as a result of that, they made history.”

Of the more than 900 black military men who were trained at Tuskegee, Ala., as part of a “noble experiment” that began in January 1941, there were 7 New Englanders who were honored at the event sponsored by the Rhode Island Air Force Association and the Black Air Foundation.

They included three native Rhode Islanders — former state representative and union leader George Lima of East Providence, Victor Butler of North Providence, and Herman Wells, who after his discharge as a communications specialist at Godman Field in Kentucky studied at the University of Rhode Island and became chief of the civil rights staff for the former Civil Aeronautics Administration.

Of the other four New Englanders, two received certification as B-25 bomber pilots only to be discharged without going into combat because Japan surrendered before they could be deployed: Diggs, who went on to a 31-year career as a mechanical engineer in the Jet Engine Design Group for General Electric in Lynn, Mass., and Jack Bryant, a Chicago native who is CEO of Bryant Engineering of Boston.

Rounding out the group were Harvey F. Sanford, who was an air inspector at the Tuskegee Army Air Field until his discharge in 1946, and became an FAA inspector at Boston’s Logan Airport; and Willie Saunders, who was part of the 615th Ground Support Unit at Army Air fields in Texas and Florida and who is now a retired deputy superintendent of the Boston police.

Despite their historic breakthrough as members the nation’s first black aviation unit — which at the time was known only to readers of black newspapers and magazines, but became more known by the impressive number of German planes they shot down — the airmen were not able to entirely escape the racism of the times.

Lima noted how on a visit to an Officers Club in Indiana for which he had paid dues, he was denied access because of his color. After he returned to the barracks and informed his fellow black officers what had happened, 100 descended on the club and were arrested for refusing to leave. (Those arrests remained on their records until President Bill Clinton met with the airmen and had the charges expunged in the 1990s.)

Asked by one young man how he felt then to be “mixed together with Caucasians” after years of segregation, Lima remarked he couldn’t speak to that because the Air Force didn’t become integrated until six years after he was discharged.

Saunders said some of the most painful moments for him were when he joined the Boston Police Department in 1956.

“I said, ‘Here we go again.’ [The black officers] weren’t allowed to drive in cruisers and we walked the street all night long. What helped me was my family and my memory of what went on when I was in the service. It hurt. My family didn’t know why I wanted to be a policeman, and I didn’t know either.”

When the first wave of black airman arrived in Africa, said Sanford, the blacks were assigned planes rejected by white pilots, but eventually were given planes with Rolls-Royce engines that proved more useful in combat.

Then, too, he said, stories abounded at how German prisoners of war seemed to get better treatment by the Americans than the black airmen got at their bases.

But one thing they all could take comfort in, Sanford said. “As the colonel used to say, when you have your hands on the controls, the plane doesn’t know what color you are.”