

Bryants connect Dowagiac to Tuskegee Airmen

By JOHN EBY / Dowagiac Daily News
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Two Dowagiac World War II veterans who flew with the famous Tuskegee Airmen received Congressional Gold Medals last year.

Jack D. Bryant graduated from Dowagiac High School in 1945.

His brother Joseph C. Bryant Jr., who was honored posthumously, graduated from DHS in 1943 and died in 1969.

Jack Bryant, of Cohasset, Mass., is among 300 survivors from 996 Tuskegee Airmen whom President Bush and congressional leaders honored for defending their country in wartime.

It was bittersweet for Bryant, 80, because his older brother, a B-25 pilot, wasn't around to share the accolade given to the legendary black aviators.

One of the nation's highest honors, Congressional Gold Medal replicas were given to the Bryants and the other Tuskegee Airmen, who rose above the racism they faced at home to serve their country bravely during World War II.

"It was quite an experience," said Bryant. "I was more than excited about the award after so many years."

"I can't express enough the gratitude for the ceremony," Bryant said. "It was overwhelming. It was special to be honoring my brother, as well."

Tuskegee Army Air Field, at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, was the training center for all black fighter pilots during World War II.

American Road and Transportation Builders Association director and Bryant Associates founder Jack Bryant stood in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda with tears in his eyes to receive one of the highest honors bestowed on U.S. civilians.

As the nation's first wartime squadron of black aviators, the Tuskegee Airmen overcame prejudice and discrimination while amassing a brilliant World War II fighting record.

"To receive the medal, it was just overwhelming," said Bryant.

President George W. Bush saluted the airmen, offering the gesture of respect to "help atone for all the unreturned salutes and unforgivable indignities."

Like so many from the "Greatest Generation," Bryan is quick to minimize his own involvement.

He was drafted in June of 1945 and in pre-flight training when the war ended in August that year.

"All the credit should go to my brother and the Tuskegee Airmen," Bryant said.

Before 1940, the military, like much of the United States, was segregated.

African Americans were not permitted to fly and were denied leadership positions and training.

They could not serve in combat beyond service and support roles.

Mounting political pressure to expand the role of African Americans in the military, however, brought about the "Tuskegee Experiment" - a program to train black pilots and crews for combat military duty.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered establishment of the program over the objection of top military leaders.

Admission standards were high. The "experiment" was expected to fail.

When the first class began in July 1941, cadets were required to hold engineering degrees.

News of the opportunity spread through black newspapers, such as The Pittsburgh Courier.

Some draft boards, however, would not let blacks take the necessary tests.

Bryant traveled more than 100 miles to Chicago to complete his pilot's exam. He was 17 when accepted into the program.

Joseph Bryant helped his younger brother prepare for rigors of the program, but nothing could prepare him for the harsh realities of the segregated South.

"If you were from the North and you went to the South for the first time, it was devastating," Bryant said. "You knew there was segregation, but you didn't know it was that bad. If you're walking down the street and there is white woman on the sidewalk, you step off into the gutter."

The 332nd Fighter Group, known as the Red Tails for their aircraft paint scheme, never lost a single bomber while escorting them on combat missions over Europe.

"They wanted to be good," Bryant said. "They weren't going to let the program fail."

In 1945, 103 members of the 477th Medium Bombardment Group were arrested for refusing to leave a white officers club at Freeman Field, Ind., charged with insubordination and ordered to face court martial.

While most charges were dropped, one officer was convicted and the court martial was not overturned until 1995.

The courage of the Tuskegee Airmen in the face of prejudice combined with their sterling military achievements are credited with being important factors when President Harry Truman ended racial segregation in the military in 1948.

Speaking at the ceremony, former Secretary of State Colin Powell thanked the airmen who paved the way for his own career in a post-segregation military.

"But I know, to the depth of my heart, that the only reason I'm able to stand proudly before you today is you stood proudly for America 60 years ago," Powell said.

Bryant's Tuskegee experience taught him the persistence needed to overcome obstacles.

"If you have a mission," he said, "don't let anyone stop you from achieving your objective."

After the war, Bryant earned an engineering degree from the University of Michigan and graduate degree from Northeastern University in Boston.

In 1976, he founded Boston-based Bryant Associates, a civil engineering firm.

Today, Bryant Associates supports minorities through the New England chapter of Tuskegee Airmen Inc., as well as the Society of American Military Engineers.

Bryant was still working fulltime, but planned to lighten his workload and turn over running the company to his son, Jeffrey.

Daughter Saadia Bryant directed marketing and communications for Reebok.

He has been married to his wife, Vernita, a retired pharmacist, for 40 years.

Bryant has lived in Cohasset, Mass., for 20 years.

He said it was easy to set aside bigotry because his country needed him for the war effort.

"When you are 18 or 19, you want to get involved," Bryant said. "It was a maximum effort. We were glad we could be a part of it."

The Tuskegee Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group flew more than 15,000 combat missions during World War II.

About 150 perished in training or combat.