

## World War II flying hero speaks at Hammond library

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**BY SUE ELLEN ROSS Post-Tribune correspondent**

HAMMOND -- When Quentin Smith joined the Army Air Corps in World War II, he didn't have high expectations of glory.

But his stint covered much more than the basics, and his service as a Tuskegee Airman was rewarded last year with the Congressional Gold Medal.

"I got into the Air Corps by chance -- my brother was in the Army," the 90-year-old Gary native said. "When my draft number came up, one of my teachers told me to go to Chicago and enlist in the Air Corps."

Smith, a former Gary educator, did just that and lived to tell a unique story.

He recently related his military experiences to a crowd of 25 people in the Community Room at the Howard Branch of the Hammond Public Library.

Books and videos about the Tuskegee Airmen, a group of African-American pilots, were displayed on tables.

Branch librarian Anne Paradise is an acquaintance of Smith's and was happy he decided to make his presentation to area residents.

"Quentin is an amazing man, very sharp," Paradise said. "He has a very interesting story to tell."

And tell it he did.

Smith was teaching at Roosevelt High School when he knew his number for the military draft was coming up. On the advice of another educator, he went to Chicago to sign up with the Air Corps, the predecessor of the U.S. Air Force. The year was 1941.

"I wasn't one of those kids that always wanted to fly," Smith laughed. "I didn't have those kinds of aspirations."

But once in the Army, he took his job seriously and became a fighter pilot, although there was much discrimination against African-Americans at the time.

"Black men were not allowed to fight or to lead," Smith said. "This meant that 99.9 percent of the black men worked in the kitchen, dug ditches and hauled supplies."

But while learning to fly at Tuskegee Air Force Base in Alabama, he became involved with a group of highly disciplined pilots.

"Although we were trained fighter pilots, we weren't allowed to fight in Germany at first," Smith said. "But we did fly in France and Italy."

But the airmen eventually did fly in Germany, "after they lost so many B-17s they decided to give our boys a shot (at escorting the bombers)," Smith said.

The group performed very well, did everything by the book and became an important factor in the war.

Hollywood director George Lucas, of "Star Wars" fame, plans to shoot a movie about the Tuskegee Airmen's exploits. "Red Tails" is in preproduction, according to The Associated Press.

In the library audience was Hammond native Angela Girtman, visiting from Florida. She attended Smith's presentation with her mother, Willie Mae Durr of Hammond.

"I loved it, I'm really into black history movies and books," Girtman said. "It's amazing what these men had to go through."

After his honorable discharge from the Air Force, Smith decided to re-enter academia.

He went on to become a middle school and high school principal and became a force in the Gary school system.

Past accomplishments also included presidency of the Gary/Chicago Airport Authority; presidency of Lake County Development Committee; and presidency of the Urban League of Northwest Indiana, among other community positions.

Now retired, Smith said he spends his days relaxing and working with a youth program at the Gary airport.