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Good as gold

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Tuskegee pilots finally get the recognition they so richly deserved.

If only Whittie English of Teaneck had stuck around another six months, he could have shared one more triumphant moment with his fellow Tuskegee Airmen.

English died at 89 last September before the group got the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest recognition Congress offers.

Last week, 300 surviving Tuskegee Airmen, a well-trained unit of nearly 1,000 black fighter pilots, got together in the Capitol Rotunda to receive the medals and praise from President Bush.

The medal was an official "thank you" from a nation that took far too much time to recognize these men for their service, courage under fire and dedication to the American war effort during World War II.

In spite of a stellar combat record as bomber pilots, they were callously ignored by the government and national media. They were, however, cherished in the African-American community as living examples of the high performance America was missing out on by denying blacks access to jobs, training and education. Most Tuskegee Airmen never got a chance later to try their wings as commercial pilots or executives in the ballooning aviation industry because of entrenched discrimination.

Homegrown heroes

Calvin Spann and English, two homegrown heroes from Bergen County, returned from their adventure after the war. English settled in Teaneck and worked in real estate. Spann worked for a drug company and later also sold real estate.

Both raised families here in Bergen. Spann, 83, moved out to Allen, Texas, about a year ago. He continues to keep alive the spirit of the Tuskegee Experiment, which was a wartime decision to send black servicemen to Tuskegee, Ala., for training as pilots and ground crew.

From 1941 to 1946, 925 pilots managed to graduate from the program. Several thousands more were trained elsewhere as officers.

They fended off offensive characterizations about their courage, their tractability and about resourcefulness under pressure. White officers had been spreading untrue characterizations about black soldiers being cowardly and lacking talent as fighters.

But the airmen proved their mettle. Tuskegee crews brought down more than 400 enemy planes, while escorting bombing missions over Europe and North Africa. Defying racial stereotypes, they courageously went on 15,000 missions, and were reported to never have lost any of the planes they were assigned to escort.

The legend of invincibility made them sought after by white pilots headed out for bombing missions. What they earned in popular mythology was finally acknowledged belatedly last week with the award ceremony.

Waiting since the Forties

Joanne English Rollieson, English's daughter unable to attend the award ceremony on her father's behalf, said: "I only wish that they had done it some years ago when he was here to appreciate it."

The Airmen had waited since the mid-Forties for an official recognition of their valiant service. Adding insult to injury, they'd faced the same blatant rejection and racism as the rest of black America in their search for housing, loans, jobs and education.

They had reason for bitterness, but troopered on as teachers, postal workers and ordinary Joes for the most part. "The thing about taking so long to award the medal is that several good friends of mine who were personally deserving of the medal have passed on and were unable to be there," Spann said.

The actual Medal of Honor was issued for them to share collectively, and will be placed in the Smithsonian. They all got copies. Not gold.

Something else tarnished the occasion. A former bomber pilot from Old Tappan seemed to corroborate recent military historians' reports that pin 25 downed bombers to failures of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Spann defends the Tuskegee record. Planes that went down, he said, were hit by ground fire. Whatever the outcome of the controversy, it doesn't matter whether they had a perfect record or nearly perfect. But it's a curious coincidence that it took 60 years for this allegation to surface, casting a shadow on the good names of valiant men. Some things never change.