

Tuskegee Airmen shine light on history

Jesuit High School students get a close look at WWII from the view of African-American pilots

By Ray Pitz

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Tuskegee Airmen Bill Terry, Alex Jefferson and Bill Holloman discussed their WWII experiences with Jesuit students during the high school's "Crusade for Respect," a program designed to show the effect individuals have on society.

On Nov. 7, three members of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, representing the African American pilots who flew with distinction during World War II, paid a visit to Jesuit High School. The visit by Bill Holloman, Alex Jefferson and Bill Terry, was not only to commemorate Veteran's Day Monday but was part of the school's continuing "Crusade for Respect." The visit was made possible in part by Jeff Dulcich, a 1971 graduate, who helped arrange their appearance. Here's what they said.

Bill Holloman told students that there were no blacks in the U.S. Army Air Corps at the beginning of World War II, making it impossible for African Americans to fly.

However, training at Alabama's Tuskegee Air Field changed all that.

"It was the only flying school of its kind in the world," he said. "At Tuskegee, we had all phases of training at the same location; therefore we got to know each other."

The eventual result was the training of nearly 1,000 airmen – including pilots, bombardiers, and navigators – giving African Americans the right to serve their country in the air.

But that didn't stop discrimination, said Holloman, pointing out that as soon as they left their base, they were subject to rules of the day, including having to stand or ride in the back of the bus on trips to nearby communities.

Although the Tuskegee Airmen were ready to go into combat by September 1942, Holloman said no one would let them despite the fact they had more than 250 hours of fighter training compared to other squadrons who only had 50 hours.

They also had a group of quickly trained but highly qualified mechanics.

"The Army Air Corp did not think you could train mechanics in six months," said Holloman. "They said 10 years. Well, we proved them wrong."

When they eventually were allowed to fly, Holloman said they were reminded of the importance of what they would do next.

"When the guys graduated, they said, 'the eyes of America are on you. You have to do your best,'" recalled Holloman.

Before the war was over, the Tuskegee Airmen were credited with destroying 251 enemy aircraft including being the first pilots to ever sink a German destroyer by the use of machine gun fire coming from a Thunderbolt airplane.

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"I am not an African American," Alex Jefferson told students, "I am an American, period."

A member of the Red Tail 332nd fighter Group, Jefferson flew 18 long-range escort missions for B-17 and B-24 bombers.

But it wasn't an easy road for him or other black men, he said.

The Army War College in 1925 held that blacks were physically unqualified for combat, were mentally inferior and susceptible to "Kraut" psychology, said Jefferson.

He said as late as 1921, the Ku Klux Klan was allowed to march up Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.

In August 1944, Jefferson was part of a squadron (16 planes) sent to knock out radar stations in southern France when they came under attack by enemy ground fire.

He said everyone avoided the fire except his plane, the final one in the squadron.

"A doggone shell came up through the floor," he said.

After pulling the plane up another 800 feet, he bailed out and pulled his parachute, which didn't immediately open, causing him to think he just "bought the farm."

"I looked at it and bang, the parachute popped and I'm in the trees," he said. "I landed right in the middle of the Germans."

He ended up as a prisoner of war in a Luftwaffe prison, placed in Stalag 3.

"We were there for five months," he said.

He was later sent to Stalag 7 before being liberated by General George Patton's 3rd Army.

After the war, Jefferson returned to the United States to deal with issues of racism and segregation.

The recipient of a Purple Heart and an Air Medal, Jefferson urged students to stand up against injustice.

"It's up to you, the future. Hell, in 10 years, I'll be gone," he said.

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Before joining the Tuskegee Airmen, Bill Terry was a basketball player for UCLA in the late 1930s. His roommate and best friend was Jackie Robinson.

As a Tuskegee Airmen, Terry said the world was a fine place as long as he was up in the air but when he came down, he had to face issues of segregation and degradation.

"We wanted to fight and yet they wouldn't let us fight because we were black," said Terry.

Terry said he had to keep many of his feelings inside.

When he joined the Tuskegee Airmen all the trainers were black but the instructors were white.

Terry later became one of the airmen who tried to break those racial barriers by entering a white-officers-only club.

He recalls he was the 60th black man to enter the club and soon was taken into custody on charges he said were false.

"They say I hit (an officer) but I didn't," he said. "But they arrested me."

In all, 160 airmen were arrested for entering the officers' club, said Terry.

Convicted and court marshaled for treason, Terry was deemed a felon, a charge that would haunt him for years when he applied for a variety of jobs.

"And I was a felon for 50 years, one month and two days," he said.

In 1996, he was pardoned by the U.S. Congress. He also received pardons from the president, secretary of defense and the head of the U.S. Air Force.

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