

Honoring the airmen

Exhibit showcasing all-black WWII fighter pilot unit visiting Franklin

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David W. Smith/Daily News

Sharon Taylor, operations manager at the African American Heritage Center, shows 7-year-old Natalia Burton of Franklin a miniature replica fighter plane Friday at the Tuskegee Airmen exhibit, which runs through January 29 at the Brooks-Wright Center in Franklin.

FRANKLIN — During World War II, the Tuskegee Airmen faced hostile enemies in the skies - and combated institutionalized racism at home.

This month, the Simpson County Historical Society and the African American Heritage Center are sponsoring a traveling exhibit that tells the story of the all-black unit of fighter pilots.

Ron Spriggs, a Nicholasville resident and collector of Tuskegee Airmen memorabilia, has brought his exhibit to Simpson County, where it will be housed at the Brooks-Wright Center at 405 John J. Johnson Ave. through Jan. 29.

"It's an honor for us to have this part of African-American history here available for students or anyone else in the community to see and be made aware of what the Tuskegee Airmen had gone through," said Sharon Taylor, operations manager at the heritage center.

Legislation passed in 1941, when the United States sought manpower as it entered World War II, allowed the Tuskegee Airmen to come into being. The Army Air Corps subjected the black airmen to rigorous entrance examinations; most of the airmen were college educated, but still faced frequent bigotry from white officers during the war. Enlisted members who became pilots were then trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Ala.

From 1942 through 1946, 994 pilots graduated at TAAF, while black navigators, bombardiers and gunnery crews were trained at other U.S. military bases.

In combat, the Tuskegee Airmen escorted U.S. bombers over Europe, flying more than 15,000 combat sorties. The squadron's record includes 111 German airplanes destroyed in the air and another 150 on the ground, 744 Air Medals, 14 Bronze Stars and eight Purple Hearts. Sixty-six pilots were killed in action or in accidents.

Spriggs' collection includes replicas of planes that the airmen flew, one of the original uniforms, replicas of patches the airmen wore, medals, pictures and other items. He will be at the Brooks-Wright Center on Jan. 29 to make a presentation to local home-schooled students and will talk to elementary- and middle-schoolers Jan. 30.

The exhibit is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday, closed noon to 1 p.m. daily. Large groups who want to view the exhibit during non-business hours can call the African American Heritage Center at (270) 586-0099.