

## Thomas F. Lambert: Tuskegee Airmen are important part of equality fight

Feb 19, 2008 @ 11:56 PM

### The Herald-Dispatch

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Tuskegee Airman Earl B. Rudisill speaks after receiving the Congressional Gold Medal from Rep. Nick J. Rahall during an awards ceremony at Spring Hill Elementary on Nov. 3, 2007.

February is Black History Month, and a part of this history that many may not be aware of is the Tuskegee Airmen.

The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of black American pilots who flew with distinction during World War II as the 332nd Fighter Group of the United States Air Corps. They were dedicated, determined young men from every section of our country who enlisted to become America's first black military airmen at a time

when many people thought black men lacked intelligence, skill and patriotism.

The United States Congress in 1941 forced the Army Air Corps to form an all-black combat unit, much to the War Department's chagrin. The War Department set the qualifications of experience and education so high they didn't expect any of the blacks applicants would qualify. This form of discrimination backfired, as the Air Corps received many black applicants who met all of the requirements. The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black pilots in the military.

In July 1941, the first aviation cadet class began at Tuskegee Army Field in Tuskegee, Ala., and completed its training in March 1942. Thirteen started the class, with five successfully completing the training. From 1942 to 1946, 994 pilots graduated from Tuskegee, receiving commissions and their pilot wings; 150 of these airmen lost their lives in training or combat.

In 1948, President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981 directing equality of treatment and opportunity in all of the United States armed forces, which in time led to the end of racial segregation in the U.S. military forces.

The Tuskegee Airmen were credited with shooting down 109 Luftwaffe aircraft, running a patrol boat aground by machine-gun fire and destruction of numerous fuels dumps, trucks and trains. The 332nd Fighter Group flew more than 15,000 sorties on 1,500 missions.

The outstanding record of black airmen in World War II was accomplished by men whose names will forever live in hallowed memory. Each one accepted the challenge while suppressing internal rage from humiliation and indignation caused by frequent experiences of racism and bigotry at home and overseas. These airmen fought two wars -- one against the enemy in Europe and the other against racism at home and abroad.

On March 29, 2007, about 350 Tuskegee Airmen and their widows were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in a ceremony in the United States Capitol rotunda.

Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., presented the Congressional Gold Medal to Lelia Hill Cooper, sister of William Lee "Dubie" Hill. Mr. Hill did not live long enough to receive this long overdue recognition. He was a 22-year career military man who was shot down twice as a Tuskegee pilot during World War II.

Rep. Rahall also presented the Congressional Gold Medal to Earl B. Rudisill, 91, of Huntington. He served in the military for four years, two of which were in Italy.

Rep. Rahall said in making the presentations, "Honor delayed is honor denied. Today, we finally present two American heroes with the recognition they deserve."

On behalf of a grateful nation, I salute Mr. Rudisill and his fellow airmen for their accomplishments.