

## **JOSEPH CLYDE WHITE, SR.**

Age 85

February 9, 2007

Joseph White was born in Alabama in 1921. At the age of six, he and his father moved to Tennessee, following the death of his mother. Despite this tragic beginning, Joseph White was determined to make an important contribution to his community and his country. And he has.

Soon after the U.S. entered World War II, Joseph White entered the United States Army. As an African-American man, Mr. White knew that his opportunities to serve would be limited by regulations in the military at that time that prevented him - and other African-American men - from serving in combat units. But Joseph White did not believe in limitations. He believed in hard work and excellence. When given the opportunity to participate in rigorous training for a special all Black fighter pilot's program created by President Roosevelt, Joseph White did not hesitate. In 1942, he became one of the select few sent to Tuskegee, Alabama for flight training conducted by the Division of Aeronautics of Tuskegee Institute at Moton Field and, later, at Tuskegee Army Air Field.

After nine months of training, Joseph White successfully completed his training. He was immediately assigned to the European theatre. He would serve there for the next three years as one of the now-famous Tuskegee Airmen. Joseph White was one of only 992 men to graduate from pilot training at Tuskegee and he was one of only 450 to be sent overseas for combat assignment.

It may have been more than fifty years ago now, but Joseph White - now Dr. Joseph White - has not forgotten what it meant to be a Tuskegee Airman.

"I recall many challenging things regarding the training received as a Tuskegee Airman," Dr. White said recently. "I clearly remember that the Tuskegee Airmen were not fully accepted because we were negroes (Blacks). As a result, Maxwell Army Airfield refused to accept negroes for pilot training. It was stated that negroes did not have the intelligence nor the dexterity to fly," Dr. White said. "If they did learn to fly, they did not have the courage to fly in combat. Thanks to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Truman, then a Congressman, negroes got a chance to train as fighter pilots. The Tuskegee Airmen became excellent flyers and as a result every bomber assigned to the Tuskegee Airmen was escorted home safely."

According to Dr. White, the record of the Tuskegee Airmen for safely escorting their men home was a well-known fact. "On D-Day, one of the bomber squadrons had already been assigned to a fighter group," Dr. White said. "Knowing the record of the Tuskegee Airmen, the squadron leader requested the Tuskegee Airmen for escort. When asked why he was requesting the Tuskegee Airmen fighter group, the squadron leader replied, 'I want my boys to get home. And they all got home safely.'"

While sixty-six Tuskegee Airmen would lose their lives in combat before World War II was over, the Tuskegee Airmen never lost a single U.S. bomber they were assigned to escort home during the war. They destroyed 251 enemy aircraft and won more than 850 service medals. Inspired by the bravery and skill of the Tuskegee Airmen, President Harry S. Truman ended segregation in the armed forces in 1948.

Following the war, Dr. White earned a master's degree in physics from Tennessee State University and his doctorate from the University of Minnesota. He retired from the Metropolitan Nashville Public School system in 1979 after many years of service. In addition to his commitment to teaching, Dr. White is recognized as an innovator in the field of public education. In 1962, at Pearl High School in Nashville, he established the first electronics curriculum for a public school in Tennessee, creating the model that was to be used by other schools across the state.