

Dinner in Overland Park celebrates, honors Tuskegee Airmen

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Vice Adm. Anthony Winns, the U.S. Navy inspector general, was the guest speaker Saturday night at the Heart of America Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen's 18th annual charter dinner, which was held at the Overland Park Marriott.

About 100 people gathered Saturday evening to celebrate the storied Tuskegee Airmen, the contingent of African-American fighter pilots who played a pivotal role in World War II.

But Vice Adm. Anthony Winns of the U.S. Navy, the event's keynote speaker, added a sobering dimension to the evening's festivities: Although

President Harry Truman desegregated the military immediately after World War II by signing Executive Order 9981, a paltry 2.9 percent of aviators now in the U.S. Navy are black.

Not enough African-Americans enter the Naval Academy initially, he said, and not enough of them persist long enough to graduate and complete their flight training.

"We've got to mentor, train and educate," he said.

Kansas City area Airmen included businessman Herman Johnson and Bruce Watkins, for whom the freeway that goes through Kansas City's East Side is named.

About nine Tuskegee Airmen are in the Kansas City area, according to Edward W. King III, president of the Heart of America Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen Inc.

A few of them, including Harvey Bayless, were at the dinner, which was held at the Overland Park Marriott. Bayless was responsible for operating and maintaining communications equipment.

"I was the wind beneath their wings," Bayless said of his colleagues who flew the planes. When Bayless was drafted in the 1940s, African-Americans had only a few options for military service.

Bayless said the people running the U.S. military didn't think African-Americans belonged in the military for the most part. And even when it came to the Tuskegee unit, he said, "a lot of people had misgivings about whether the airmen were smart enough, and could fly in combat.

"They were proven wrong. The Airmen shot down 111 planes in aerial combat and 150 on the ground."

The local chapter of the airmen gathers yearly, supports a scholarship fund and gives presentations "to keep the history of the airmen alive," King said.

