

# Tuskegee Airman wants kids to learn from the past

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KALAMAZOO -- World War II was over, and there was a rush to resume normalcy. But for Alexander Jefferson, a black man from Detroit, "normal" was not what he wanted. When World War II ended in 1945, Jefferson, a fighter pilot in a segregated U.S. Army Air Corps, returned to the Motor City bursting with pride about his years of service.

He said he quickly found not much had changed regarding race relations while he was gone. No one would hire him as a chemist, although he held a bachelor's degree in chemistry and biology from Clark Atlanta University. He believes his skin color was his liability.

"Before the war, I wanted to become a chemist, work in a lab," said Jefferson, now 86. "But when I came home to Detroit, I was told I was 'over qualified.' That's what (whites) said when you were a black man with an education."

Jefferson never received the job he long studied for. He would become an elementary-school science teacher and retire after more than 30 years.

Today however, retired Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson knows his country does remember and care that he and nearly 1,000 other black men made history during WWII as the Tuskegee Airmen. Jefferson will be keynote speaker during the Metropolitan Kalamazoo Branch of the NAACP's 28th Freedom Fund Banquet on Saturday at Western Michigan University's Bernhard Center.

"This man is a part of our history, and we have an opportunity to hear him, firsthand, share what it was like to be a Tuskegee Airman," said Romeo Phillips, of the local NAACP chapter, who will introduce his longtime friend at the banquet. "Not many of these men are alive to share their stories, and what he has to share needs to be heard."

## The beginning

Jefferson's parents moved to Detroit about 1915, during the Great Migration era when blacks left the South for better lives in the North. He remembers having a love for planes since age 2, and was a World War I buff, devouring any magazines he could get his hands on that chronicled the stories of bravery and protecting their country.

He attended Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta majoring in chemistry and biology, and minoring in math and physics. While attending the historically black college, he remembered what his parents told him about the South and heeded their words of how to conduct himself as a black man.

He'd dutifully buy his movie tickets at the front booth, like the white customers, then take his ticket around to the side of the theater, through an alley, to enter the balcony where blacks sat. He also rode in the back of streetcars, and he did not eat in restaurants.

"When we talk in schools today and black kids say, 'Man, I wouldn't put up with that. I'd sit where I want.' But, they are 'Monday-morning quarterbacking.' Yeah, it hurt when a policeman said, 'Nigger, get off the sidewalk.' But we tucked in our gut. It hurt like hell, but we survived in order to fight a better fight later on," Jefferson said.

## The war

When the draft was instituted, Jefferson feared he would face the same fate he had heard other black service personnel had -- relegated to cooking and cleaning duties, to the tune of \$21 a month. Jefferson's hopes were raised when military recruiters came to black colleges to recruit pilots.

"If we passed the test, after nine months we would become 2nd lieutenants, and earn \$150 a month. We would be officers and pilots in the military," Jefferson said he was told. "It was a dream come true." He graduated from college in June 1942, went home to Detroit to take the exam to become a pilot and passed. He was working toward a master's degree at Howard University when he received the call in April 1943 that would later make him one of the first 32 black men to complete the Army Air Corps training at Tuskegee Army Airfield in Alabama. He would be a member of the 332nd Fighter Group, under Col. Benjamin O. Davis, who later became America's first black general.

Their assignment was bittersweet, as it is common knowledge they weren't expected to succeed. The military then believed that black servicemen were mentally incapable of combat aviation. The outstanding performances of the Tuskegee Airmen proved blacks could handle the same roles as whites. So, finally, in 1946, the Tuskegee base was closed.

"We were glad," Jefferson said of Morton Field, which will become a historic site in October. "We proved we could fly, and could now serve and train in an integrated military." Getting their just due

It would be more than 15 years after the war when Jefferson and other black pilots who had trained in Tuskegee and now lived in Detroit would unite to honor their past. Soon others who lived across the country would follow and, in 1972, they would be incorporated nationally and become forever known as the Tuskegee Airmen. It would be the pilots who named themselves the Tuskegee Airmen. Before that, they were simply known as "black pilots," according to Jefferson.

The Tuskegee Airmen have gained worldwide fame. Movies starring Laurence Fishburne and statues erected in their honor now help hold their places in history. They talk to kids across the country about their experiences and lead weekend flying opportunities and summer aviation programs.

In 2007, President Bush presented them with Congressional Gold Medals for their parts in World War II. The medal was made possible through legislation by Sen. Carl Levin, D-Michigan, and Rep. Charles Rangel, D-New York.

Jefferson could talk for hours about his experiences in the military and as a POW in a German prison camp. He has captured many of his memories in "Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free: The Memoirs of a Tuskegee Airman and POW," released in 2005. Lewis H. Carlson, a WMU professor emeritus of history, helped him write it. The book will be available at the banquet.

He said what he, and others went through as a Tuskegee Airmen, helped catapult other civil rights-era changes.

"In 1948, President Harry S. Truman integrated the military. And six years later, Brown vs. the Board of Education led to the schools being integrated," Jefferson said. "And this is what the kids today are benefiting from, and they don't even know their history. We did this for them, and it's up to us to make sure they know how they have what they have today."