

Local Woman Led Way

Saturday, June 2, 2007

The late Chuck Perazich, longtime Vindicator sports editor, once told me as a young reporter that there is always a Youngstown connection to many significant historical and worldwide events. I thought that was a bit far-fetched in my younger years, but, over time, Chuck's premise has been proved right more times than not.

A case in point deals with the famed Tuskegee Airmen, the first black military aviators, who were trained at the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Ala. The Airmen overcame the obstacles of bigotry, prejudice and segregation to become one of the most respected fighter groups in the Army Air Corps in World War II.

When the Airmen were honored back in March with the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award the U.S. Congress can bestow upon a group or an individual, I began to wonder if there could possibly be a Youngstown connection.

I received several phone calls to assure me there was, and her name was Rose Agnes Rolls Cousins, whose daughter lives in Youngstown.

Making history

I met with Cousins' daughter, E. Nikki Davis, who is a family service staff member and volunteer trainer for Mahoning-Youngstown Community Action Partnership's Head Start segment, who was not at a loss for words explaining her mother's connection with the Airmen.

Cousins was a trailblazer in her own right. Born in Fairmont, W.Va., she eventually became the first black woman to receive a pilot's license and make a solo flight through the nation's Civilian Pilot Training Program. She got hooked on flying when her father took her for a ride in a bi-plane, Davis said.

While at West Virginia State College (now West Virginia State University), she entered the pilot training program in 1939. That program, Davis said, served as the foundation for the Tuskegee Army Airfield training. According to the "Tuskegee Airmen Story" provided by the East Coast Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen Inc., Congress passed a law in 1939 authorizing creation of a school for training black pilots. The CPTP trained blacks at six historically black colleges, including West Virginia State and Tuskegee Institute.

Davis said her mother trained with nine men and one other woman at West Virginia State. One of the trainees was a fellow college classmate and longtime friend George S. "Spanky" Roberts. Roberts ended up being selected to serve as one of the original Tuskegee Airmen.

Never giving up

Cousins never had a chance to fly in combat, but she was allowed to fly over the famed Tuskegee air field, Davis proudly says.

"My mother never gave up," Davis said, adding that her mother went on to support the war effort and fought for civil and women's rights for many years.

For years, Cousins retained a close relationship with Roberts' wife, Edith, who Cousins called Edo. They attended many functions that paid tribute to the airmen, who went on to record many prestigious flying accomplishments, including destroying the last four enemy aircraft shot down in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations on April 26, 1945. Eleven days later, the war in Europe ended.

Cousins was inducted as an honorary member of the airmen in the 1980s because of her flight experiences and training with some of the men who would go on to become Airmen and also because of her tenacity in breaking down racial and gender barriers, Davis said.

Cousins was a guest speaker, along with two Airmen, at the Youngstown Area Urban League dinner in 1994, which paid tribute to the Airmen's trail-blazing accomplishments. Historical records show the Airmen — the 99th, 100th, 301st and 302nd fighter squadrons comprised the 332nd Fighter Group — lost 66 pilots killed in combat and 32 who were shot down and became prisoners of war. They once sank a German destroyer by machine gun fire alone.

The 477th Bombardment Composite Group, activated in 1945, served until 1949.

Cousins, who died last year at 86, spoke at many Youngstown city schools about her joy of flying, becoming a pilot, and her affiliation with the Airmen, Davis said, always impressing upon inner-city youths, especially girls, to pursue their dreams and to make the most of the opportunities that come their way.