



## Tuskegee Airmen, once disgraced, now embraced

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Woodie Spears, Clyde Grimes, and Burl Smith (left to right), Tuskegee Airmen, America's first African American pilots in World War II will be honored on Veterans Day, Sunday, November 11, 2007 with a presentation of Congressional Gold Medal Bronze Replicas in Marin County. Photo taken on Friday, November 02, 2007 at the home of Clyde Grimes in Oakland, Calif. (Karna Kurata/The Oakland Tribune)

Once segregated, now celebrated, the Tuskegee Airmen are striving to understand this sudden altering of perspective and the unexpected outpouring of affection that has them somewhat mystified, yet gratified.

"We're probably the hottest group in the country," said Woodie Spears of Hayward, his voice a mixture of excitement and bewilderment.

Spears, 83, and his fellow Tuskegee Airmen persevered through discrimination on the ground below them and in the unforgiving sky around them to become unnoticed heroes during World War II. These African-American aviators then endured 60-plus years of basic anonymity until last March, when President Bush awarded them the Congressional Gold Medal — the nation's highest civilian honor — at the White House. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger then honored them in Sacramento in July.

These overdue tributes continue this weekend in Marin County. On Sunday, fittingly Veterans Day, Tuskegee Airmen will receive bronze replicas of their Congressional Gold Medals at 3 p.m. at the College of Marin in Kentfield. Monday, there will be a noon parade in their honor in Marin City.

Many Tuskegee Airmen died before this reversal of recognition. Spears and two other survivors, Clyde Grimes Sr., 82, and Burl Smith, 84, who both live in Oakland, discussed the turnabout recently at Grimes' hillside home.

"I would say you have to move on," said Grimes. "You can't live in the past."

"I feel we're progressing a little bit (as a society)," said Smith. "I hope it turns out better before I leave here."

The very moment the congressional medal was placed around Spears' neck, he buried the past.

"It was a feeling for completion for me," he said.

The Tuskegee Airmen became a nearly invisible part of World War II, separated by skin color from other Army Air Corps units. The Tuskegee pilots distinguished themselves, though, by flying 1,578 missions, destroying 261 enemy aircraft, and earning more than 850 medals — 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 744 Air Medals, eight Purple Hearts and 14 Bronze Stars.

Most Americans weren't cognizant of their impressive numbers until March, when President Bush not only presented them the congressional medals, he saluted them.

"Even the Nazis asked why African-American men would fight for a country that treated them so unfairly," the president said at the ceremony, which Grimes and Spears attended, but Smith could not.

Bush then added that he hoped this long-overdue recognition would "help atone for all the unreturned salutes and unforgivable indignities."

Spears flew 51 missions during World War II. He was shot down over Berlin, landed his plane in Poland and was rescued several days later by Russians. Then it took him 65 days of walking, mostly, to locate freedom.

Recalled during the Korean conflict, he flew 17 more missions.

However, flight school in Tuskegee, Ala., left an equally indelible impression on him. His instructors were white Southerners whose nonstop racial epithets left him nighty in tears as he tried to control his fury.

"The 'n' word flew out of their mouths like bread and butter," he said. "Back in those days, you couldn't even act as though you resisted their treatment."

Flying was Spears' ultimate dream, so he bit his tongue for two years — as Jackie Robinson was about to do in baseball — until the day his most vitriolic instructor took him on a training flight.

"He'd tell me how black I was, how dumb I was," said Spears. "Then while we were in the air, he said, 'I don't think you'll ever learn to fly. In fact, after we land, I'm going to beat flying into you.'"

Fearful that fighting his red-neck instructor would end his flying ambitions, Spears nevertheless grabbed a stick from the cockpit and held it defiantly over his head on the ground, sobbing all the while.

Seeing that, the instructor had a change of heart. When the time came to pin Spears' wings on, and with his family in Colorado, that same instructor asked if he could have the honor. Spears swallowed hard, then agreed.

"After he pinned them on," he recalled, "he put his arms around me and hugged me. Quivering, he said, 'I'm too old to go over there. You're a damn good pilot, and I'm sending you.'"

The irony in all this? Spears' childhood chums also wanted to become war-time pilots. Spears was the only black among the pals — and the only one of them to earn his wings. He spent 20 years, including reserve time, in the Air Force, retiring as captain. He then put in another 20 years at the U.S. Post Office as a railway mail clerk.

Grimes was a sergeant in the military, an intelligence specialist. He graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with a degree in architecture in 1950. He entered private practice before becoming California deputy state architect and Oakland city architect. He earned his private pilot's license in 1977.

Smith was a second lieutenant as the Army Air Corps morphed into the Air Force. He became an Oakland fireman in 1949, launching a 35-year career.

As late-in-life attention comes, at last, to the Tuskegee Airmen, America is again at war. How different does war seem now to these old men?

"Wars today don't make sense," said Grimes. "Korean War, Vietnam War should have been the last wars. Now we have a mixed reason for going to war, almost done as a business venture rather than a mandatory need to protect the country."

Smith said of Iraq: "It seems that we're getting into wars for other reasons than defending ourselves, especially this one. I don't think it was a good idea to start with. No war is, really. We just have to try to get along."

"War is the most useless thing a man can perpetuate on another man," said Spears. "I've never seen war result in anything good. I'm really very anti-war. What's going on now is the craziest thing I've seen in my life."

Tuskegee, located between Montgomery and Auburn in eastern Alabama, has impacted American history twice, each time negatively.

The Tuskegee Airmen's training coincided with a 40-year U.S. Public Health Service study in Tuskegee, in which nearly 400 black men with syphilis were tested to see what the disease did to their bodies.

Penicillin had become the standard cure for syphilis in 1947, 15 years into the study. However, the diseased men weren't treated medically and dozens of them died. This cruel, inhuman study was made public in 1972. But not until 1997 did the government apologize, when President Clinton said, "What the United States government did was shameful."

The stain hasn't washed away, though.

"It's a terrible thing what the minds of men can do," said Grimes. "It's a quirk in some people that they can use people as guinea pigs."

"We hope that nothing of that sort ever happens again," said Smith.

Spears mentioned that Tuskegee isn't altogether outrageous. He noted George Washington Carver's agricultural experiments in Tuskegee. He could have added that Tuskegee University was the brainchild of Booker T. Washington.

"When that happened at Tuskegee," Spears said, sadly, of the syphilis scandal, "I couldn't believe it."

Smith and Spears haven't ever returned to Tuskegee. But Grimes belongs to the Bay Area Black Pilots Association and goes back regularly, in part, to pay tribute to Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of president Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Mrs. Roosevelt, a civil rights proponent when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was just a child, was inspecting the Tuskegee air strip in 1941 when a white pilot offered to take her up.

She instead chose a black pilot while her Secret Service entourage watched in shock. After the black pilot landed her safely, she returned to Washington and shortly thereafter, the Tuskegee Airmen were formed.

"If it wasn't for her," said Grimes, "there would no Tuskegee Airmen."

It still took another 60 years to make things right.

Once disgraced, now embraced, the Tuskegee Airmen tell themselves it's payment in full.