

Tuskegee Airmen share story of perseverance

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DAVENPORT -- They didn't lecture. Instead, the two men who fought for the country's freedoms during a time of discrimination and segregation quietly told their stories to hundreds of students Friday, opening their lives to be examples of perseverance.

Beverly L. Dunjill and Quentin Smith, of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, gave a presentation about their experiences Friday morning at J.B. Young Intermediate School.



Photo: Paul Colletti
Beverly Dunjill and Quentin Smith, two of the Tuskegee Airmen, watch a video about their squadron with students at J.B. Young in Davenport. Mr. Dunjill was a fighter pilot and Mr. Smith was a bomber pilot.

The Tuskegee Airmen, so named because they trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Ala., were the first black aviators in the segregated Army of World War II.

At the time of their training, many thought blacks lacked the skill and intelligence to be airmen. Once trained, the airmen joined segregated units that served with distinction.

On March 29, 2007, Congress awarded the Congressional Gold Medal to the surviving Tuskegee Airmen. It is the highest civilian honor the nation can bestow.

Mr. Dunjill entered training as the war was ending, but flew 100 combat missions as a jet fighter pilot in the 334 Fighter Squadron and the 4th Fighter Group during the Korean War. He told the students that he has flown almost his entire life. He began when he was 16 -- at that time, not legally old enough to drive yet -- and has flown ever since.

"This is something I wanted to do, and I did it," he said. "I had the opportunity to join the military and fly for my country and help win World War II and in Korea."

"Follow your dreams," he told the students. "If you want to do it, do it. Whatever you want to do, you can do it."

One student asked him how hard was it to survive World War II. "World War II was very difficult," Mr. Dunjill said. "When I was training at Tuskegee, there was something called discrimination and segregation," he said, adding that both made it difficult to learn, difficult to live.

"We weathered this, and today discrimination does not exist legally as it did then," he said.

Mr. Smith flew bombers during World War II. He told the students he didn't always want to be a pilot. He told them every pilot has a close call sooner or later. "If you try to be bold and go against nature, things will happen to you and they are not going to be good."

During his presentation, Mr. Smith had four students stand up -- three were black and one was white. He gave each black student a quarter and the white student a penny, then asked the crowd what was it that he had just done.

"Racism," called out one student.

"Discrimination," answered another.

"That's right; I discriminated against him," Mr. Smith said.

Then Mr. Smith turned the boy around so his back faced the crowd and moved him away from the three black students. Then he again asked the students what he had just done.

"Segregated him," a student called out.

Mr. Smith explained that those two things happened to the Tuskegee Airmen during their time in the military, as well as when they weren't fighting for the country.

He told the students a story about how he and other black soldiers refused to follow discriminatory rules at a base in the United States, rules that said they couldn't go into the officers club, play tennis or swim after dark.

They defied the rules and were arrested.

"On one hand we fought overseas and on the other hand we fought over here," he said, adding that they did so so everyone could participate in the military and government.

The visit was sponsored by the Davenport chapter of 100 Black Men Inc., in partnership with Quad City Aviators, Davenport Police Department, Davenport School District, Rock Island School District and the Rock Island Elks Esquire Lodge 1648 Elite Temple 1265.

Mike Cole, a Davenport Police detective who is in charge of security for the school district and president of the Davenport chapter of 100 Black Men, said there were several reasons the group wanted to bring the Tuskegee Airmen to the Quad-Cities.

"The whole mission of the 100 Black Men is to enlighten young people to history, to people who have gone before them and who have done good things," said Mr. Cole.

"These men faced some of the strongest adversity and they succeeded. These men were American airmen who fought for our country during a time of segregation. They fought for the rights of people who did not see them as whole human beings -- these were the people they were fighting for freedom for," he said.

"We just want to show kids that they will face some adversity and obstacles in what they want to achieve, but, if they stay steadfast in their outcome, they'll be OK. We want to tell kids that they can make it; they can persevere."