

Real heroes don't take phonies lightly

Tuskegee Airmen unhappy over false claims by New Castle man, 82

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By Torsten Ove, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Robin Rombach/Post-Gazette

T. Rafael Lee, 82, salutes the crowd June 29 as he is honored during the rededication ceremony of the Boulevard of the Allies.

Ed Sorace, a wounded Vietnam veteran and retired Pittsburgh police sergeant, knew immediately that something wasn't right.

At the June 29 rededication ceremony of the Boulevard of the Allies, Downtown, he watched as a short, elderly man sporting a fancy blue uniform and a chest full of medals maneuvered through the crowd "like a dignitary."

T. Rafael Lee wore the Air Medal, Combat Infantryman Badge, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal and some other decorations, including the Navy SEAL trident commonly called the "Budweiser."

"That's the one that got my attention," said Mr. Sorace, 60, of Brookline. "I thought, 'Wait a second. How ... could he have been all these things?'"

Mr. Sorace then watched as Mr. Lee took the stage, where Brig. Gen. William Waff of the 99th Regional Readiness Command in Coraopolis honored him as a World War II fighter pilot with the famous all-black Tuskegee Airmen.

Afterward, Mr. Lee approached and started talking about the military.

"I said, 'I got shot twice in Vietnam, I don't want to hear your stories,'" said Mr. Sorace. "I just walked away."

Mr. Lee, 82, of New Castle, moved on to regale others of his exploits, just as he'd done just a few days before at the Senior Men's Club at the Sewickley YMCA.

There, he appeared in uniform and talked for 45 minutes about his missions with the 99th Fighter Squadron, saying, according to a newspaper account, he was "just happy that I'm breathing and alive." That's a bit less dramatic than it sounds, however, because Mr. Lee was never a combat pilot. He was never an airman of any kind. In fact, records show he never even served in World War II.

By charm and sheer brazenness, he's been able to trick everyone from the University of Pittsburgh to the Senator John Heinz History Center and the Post-Gazette into thinking he's a Tuskegee hero.

That's something the real Tuskegee Airmen, black pilots who trained at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama when the armed services were still segregated, don't take lightly. At least 66 of them died in combat.

"It really infuriates us when we see people like this trying to rob us of our heritage," said Ron Brewington, public relations officer for Tuskegee Airmen Inc., which held its annual convention last weekend in Philadelphia.

Among various claims of military service in four wars, Mr. Lee insists he shot down two German fighters. In fact, he wasn't even 18 by the time the war ended in 1945.

"I'm not trying to boast anything," he said last week, sitting on the porch of his trash-strewn house and poring over his medals. "If they don't want to recognize me, fine. I did a job that I'm proud of."

The Tuskegee Airmen keep a list of every pilot who shot down German planes. Mr. Lee isn't on it. Nor is he on any other list of Tuskegee Airmen, which, in addition to the pilots, included thousands of ground support personnel.

"He's full of [it]," said William Holloman, 83, of Seattle, the historian for Tuskegee Airmen Inc. "I know every pilot that graduated from Tuskegee. He's not one of them. I do not like liars and wannabes. Ever since we got the Congressional Gold Medal [in 2007], these guys have been coming out of the woodwork."

Mr. Lee's motive for masquerading isn't clear, but military impostors tend to favor branches of the service with a certain élan.

The elite Navy SEALs are a prime example. So many men have passed themselves off as SEALs that a group of real ones created an outfit called VeriSEAL to expose fakers. They say they've outed 10,000 or so since 1992.

Mr. Lee says he's also a SEAL. But Steve Waterman, who works with VeriSEAL, said he's lying and could be prosecuted for wearing the Budweiser.

Recent fame for fliers

The Tuskegee Airmen have gained fame in recent years, not only for their heroism in the skies over Europe but also because they disproved the 1940s perception that black pilots were inferior.

Their story hit the mainstream with "The Tuskegee Airmen," a 1995 HBO movie. Last year's Congressional Gold Medal, presented by President Bush, raised their profile even more. Interest will surely peak again with the release of "Red Tails," a big-budget George Lucas movie in the works.

Locally, WQED produced "Fly Boys: Western Pennsylvania's Tuskegee Airmen," which aired in February. Mr. Lee attended two events announcing the release of the film.

"Unfortunately, there are folks who do this. It's an ego trip," said Charles McGee, 88, of Bethesda, Md., a Tuskegee fighter pilot who also flew in Korea and Vietnam.

Like the SEALs, the airmen try to keep track of pretenders. At last year's convention in Dallas, they added to their bylaws a requirement that members present documentation to be considered a "DOTA," or Documented Original Tuskegee Airman.

When he became head of public relations four years ago, Mr. Brewington scoured the list of 2,000 members and said he found quite a few impostors. He said he can usually pick out a phony.

"I always ask them the same question: 'Excuse me, sir, what is Chehaw?' If you can't answer that, you weren't an airman."

Airmen headed to Tuskegee Army Air Field disembarked at the train station in Chehaw, Ala.

Asked about the name, Mr. Lee hesitated at first, saying he'd heard the name, and then did identify it as a rail depot.

But the airmen also say anyone can study Tuskegee history and arm themselves with enough history to sound credible.

Tuskegee impostors pop up everywhere. Last year, the Buffalo News wrote about John Elias, 83, who told some black city high school students about his experiences.

"If I can do it, so can you," he said in encouraging them to overcome low expectations facing young black people.

Mr. Brewington saw the story and searched the airmen lists.

"I didn't find the guy," he said. "As Marvin Gaye would say, 'What's goin' on?' "

Mr. Brewington called the paper to say the man was a fake and then confronted Mr. Elias, who, he said, "stuttered and stammered but didn't have an explanation." The reporter who wrote the story said last week his paper chose not to do anything because Mr. Elias was old, possibly senile and hadn't been running around bragging.

A few authentic airmen agree that's sometimes the best approach. If a pretender isn't making money from the ruse, why not let him enjoy his fantasy?

But most consider fakers an insult to their legacy.

"I ask them, 'Why are you trying to rob the honor of these men?' You never get an answer," said Mr. Brewington. "They need to stop telling people they're heroes. It really makes us sick to see it."

It's also a crime. Under the Stolen Valor Act, signed by President Bush in 2006, impostors can be prosecuted for wearing medals they didn't earn or bragging about having won decorations.

Even before the law was passed, the FBI went after posers. The U.S. attorney's office in Pittsburgh in recent years has prosecuted two men for impersonating an officer. Both received probation.

Now phonies can end up in prison.

Mr. Lee has appeared in at least two uniforms covered with medals, campaign ribbons and badges. At the men's club speech in Sewickley, he wore the same blue outfit that he wore at the Boulevard of the Allies event, complete with a beret featuring a lieutenant colonel's silver oak leaf.

"He came across as being real, that's for sure. He was convincing," said Ryan Burdick, 60, of Franklin Park, whose father was a B-17 pilot.

'Not good with dates'

Mr. Lee has made numerous claims over the years and continued to do so in a lengthy interview last week. At various times he's presented himself as a lieutenant colonel, a captain, a major, a sergeant and a military attache for the U.S. State Department.

He said he started training to fly at an air base in New York "before Hitler did his thing" in launching the blitzkrieg in 1939, although that means he would have been 11 or 12 years old. As a Tuskegee pilot, he said, he had to compensate for his lack of height. He stands about 5 feet 5 inches.

"I was the littlest thing there," he said. "I had to get an extra little cushion to set on the seat so I could see out the cockpit."

He said he later served in Korea, and as a Special Forces adviser in Vietnam and as an officer in the invasion of Panama in 1989, when he would have been in his 60s.

Two fingers on his right hand are missing. He said he lost them to rounds from an AK-47 while trying to pull someone else from the line of fire during the Panama campaign.

Yet he told the men's club in Sewickley that he lost the fingers in World War II. He could only recall the Panama mission as "Operation something-or-other" and he couldn't remember the year.

"I'm not good with dates," he said.

Records from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis show that Mr. Lee is indeed a veteran. He was a private in the Army from 1948 to 1956 and served in Korea. At the time of his discharge, he was assigned to the Signal Corps.

More detailed records were destroyed in a 1973 fire at the center, a fact that others have relied on to bolster false claims. But center officials said that while many records are incomplete, basic information about military service remains.

Mr. Lee has presented several documents to make his case, including a purported honorable discharge certificate and two documents called "certification of military service."

Yet the papers contain misspellings, handwritten corrections and dates that don't match various resumes he has also prepared.

For example, on one resume he said he served in the military from 1946 to 1990. On another, he said he served as an attache with the State Department "Special Action Force" from 1990 to 1997, overseeing a "16-man tent hospital" at U.S. embassies around the world. There is no such thing as the Special Action Force.

Red flags

Mr. Lee says he was born on Guadeloupe in the French West Indies and has no family in the area beyond his 97-year-old mother. His neighbors say he keeps to himself. He changes his stories so often it's hard to pin him down.

"I'm trying to stay low-key," he said. "I'm not trying to exploit anything. I'm not trying to pretend anything. I am an airman. I am a pilot."

He seems to have fooled many people mainly because of his relationship with Regis Bobonis Sr., a former editor of the Pittsburgh Courier and reporter for the Post-Gazette who is vice president of the Daniel B. Matthews Historical Society in Sewickley.

Five years ago, the society announced that it was looking for airmen from Western Pennsylvania to be featured in a WQED documentary.

"He contacted me and said, 'I'm one, too, I'm for real,' " said Mr. Bobonis. "So I got out my pilots' list. He's not on there. So I said, 'Show me some documentation.' "

Mr. Bobonis also checked with the U.S. Park Service, which runs the Tuskegee museum. The service said it had no record of Mr. Lee but also said its records aren't complete and that officials would have to do more research.

Mr. Lee gave Mr. Bobonis three pieces of "evidence" he said proved he was an airman: a picture of himself in an Army uniform bedecked with medals; a picture of two airmen, apparently from a book, one of whom Mr. Lee said is him; and a picture of a plane under which Mr. Lee had written his name. He also presented some medals, including the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Mr. Bobonis said there were enough "red flags" about Mr. Lee that he didn't recommend to WQED that he be included in "Fly Boys." But Mr. Bobonis did put him on a master list of Western Pennsylvania airmen.

At two high-profile events announcing the film in February -- a screening organized by the University of Pittsburgh at Soldiers & Sailors National Military Museum and Memorial and a program called "A Gathering of Eagles" at the Heinz History Center -- Mr. Lee was listed in the official programs.

He showed up as a guest, had his picture taken with real airmen and sat at a table with them.

None recognized him, but they said that was not unusual at airmen gatherings.

"There were a lot of people you wouldn't know," said William Hicks, 87, of Homewood, an airman who stood near Mr. Lee for a photo that ran in the Pitt Chronicle, a university publication, and in the Post-Gazette. "You could be standing right next to someone and not know them."

Mr. Bobonis, whose Sewickley condo features ceramic statues of Tuskegee airmen that Mr. Lee gave him, also presented Mr. Lee as a guest speaker at the Sewickley men's club.

And he was the source of a biography on Mr. Lee which the organizers of the Boulevard of the Allies event gave to Gen. Waff before the general paid tribute to the airman who never was.

"I'm shocked and disappointed," said Mr. Bobonis. "What does he get out of this? He's kind of a Walter Mitty. There's never an excuse for lying. It's always pointless."