

The road to glory

I-75 stretch honors Tuskegee Airmen

By Jim Warren



Frank Weaver of Louisville, also a Tuskegee veteran, was present. **Photo by Pablo Alcalá | Staff**

Frank Douglas Walker didn't get much credit around his hometown of Richmond when he returned from World War II, after flying 50 combat missions as a member of the now famous Tuskegee Airmen.

Back then, Walker said, few people had any idea who or what the Tuskegee Airmen were.

So it was a particularly special moment for Walker yesterday, when the 23-mile stretch of Interstate 75 in Fayette County was dedicated as the "Tuskegee Airmen Memorial Trail."

During ceremonies at the Aviation Museum of Kentucky at Blue Grass Airport, Walker and fellow Tuskegee Airmen Julius Calloway of Louisville and John Lehr of Cincinnati helped unveil one of the signs that will mark the trail. Some signs already are up on the highway.

"It means a whole lot," Walker, 88, said. "I'm proud of it."

Kentucky thus becomes the first state to officially name a roadway honoring the black fliers who made history more than 60 years ago, said state Rep. Reginald Meeks, D-Louisville, who sponsored legislation in the Kentucky General Assembly to make the highway naming possible.

Meeks said the stretch of I-75 in Fayette County was selected because the state aviation museum is here and because several of the airmen were from Central Kentucky. Another factor: Noel Parrish, a white Army officer from Versailles, was the first commander of the base at Tuskegee, Ala., where the black fliers trained. Parrish's widow sent flowers for yesterday's ceremonies.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, responding to pleas by civil rights groups, authorized an "experimental program" to train blacks as military pilots at the Tuskegee Institute starting in 1941. Eventually, almost 1,000 black pilots won their wings.

The Tuskegee Airmen went on to become one of the most decorated American air outfits of the war, overcoming not only attacks by enemy planes but racial discrimination in the military and at home. This year, the airmen were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award Congress can give.

Ron Spriggs of Nicholasville, who researches and prepares historical exhibits about the program, said that all those who served at Tuskegee, including pilots, ground crews and support personnel, are considered members of the airmen.

It's unclear just how many came from Kentucky. But Spriggs said that, in addition to Walker and Calloway, these at least are known:

Frank Weaver of Louisville, William Cornish of Lexington, Morris Washington of Prospect, Washington Ross of Ashland (now living in Detroit), Harold Alston of Paducah and Alvin LaRue of Louisville. Herbert Glenn of Paducah died recently, Spriggs said.

"We are here to celebrate, to honor and pay our respects to our Kentucky sons ... who so well represented the best ideals of this country in its darkest days," Meeks said.

"We owe you so much," he told the three airmen on hand yesterday, "far more than we could ever repay."
