

Post-Tribune

Smith shared in Tuskegee Airmen history

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In World War II there were 995 Tuskegee Airmen, our country's first black military airmen. An estimated 200 are still living, ranging in age from 87 to 93. Gary resident Quentin Smith is one.

Smith was born in 1918 in Huntsville, Texas. A few of his stories are related here that reflect the spirit of this man.

"In 1922 my daddy got in some difficulty with a deputy sheriff and broke (the deputy's) arm so he had to get the first thing smoking out of town," Smith said. His father made his way to East Chicago to work in the mills. "After 17 years he sent for all God's children -- five children and Mama."

Smith described himself as a tough kid. "In my new grade school I got picked on once." At Washington High School, "because of segregation I couldn't be on the teams, so I joined band and learned to play the clarinet." Eugene Kreitz, his band teacher, submitted Smith's name to be a participant in the "In and About Chicago Band/Orchestra." He was selected and performed at the World's Fair in 1933 and 1934.

After high school, Smith said, "I had no money, an empty feeling, and I didn't know what to do." He began work at the brickyard to be a crusher operator until a man asked him what he was doing there. "In three weeks I saw this man go from 260 pounds to 150. I quit."

In 1940, his senior year at Indiana State in Terre Haute, the "university paid us \$5,000 not to come to the prom, and gave us two letters of reference to the finest stores in town so we could have a fashion show and make money to have a fine black prom."

The school has asked Smith twice to be on its board, "but I haven't been a participant," he said.

After college, Smith became an English teacher at Roosevelt High School. In 1942 he enlisted in the Army Air Force.

Willa Brown had a flying school at 87th and Harlem in Chicago. He initially was written up to be washed out. "Willa told me flying is coordination. Get your parachute and get in. I got to be good," Smith said. He went to Tuskegee as an instructor, as blacks could only teach primary flying.

"We were set up to fail," Smith said. "Forty percent of Tuskegee class (members) graduated; 60 percent were washed out. The policy of the Air Force whether written or spoken was: blacks can't lead, can't fight, most certainly can't fly complicated aircraft."

Eleanor Roosevelt went to Tuskegee and asked to fly with one of the guys.

"In three weeks a squadron was overseas," Smith said.

Five-hundred-forty officers were shipped to Fort Knox. Smith said 101 of those would not obey the order to segregate themselves and were placed in stockades with barbed wire and dogs.

"The guys left behind pooled their money and hired a young lawyer named Thurgood Marshall from NAACP. He got too big for the colonel, got too big for the general, and went to President Truman." On the eleventh

day, Truman said to turn them loose. After a two-year study, Truman abolished segregation in the armed forces in 1948.

Smith said, "Thurgood said to us, 'You can get an honorable discharge, but if you stay in you will probably never get promoted because there is a letter in your 201 file that says you are the worst officers that ever enlisted. You can make your choice.' I chose to get out. I had a job teaching at Roosevelt."

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