

## Tuskegee Airmen celebrate squadron formation

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It was 67 years ago today that the squadron that would become the Tuskegee Airmen was created.

The Army Air Corps announced the formation of its first-ever black combat unit, the 99th Pursuit Squadron, which was later changed to the 99th Fighter Squadron, on March 21, 1941.

Earnest Craigwell was one of the Tuskegee Airmen. The Elmore County resident said the Tuskegee Airmen were an experiment, a successful one.

"There's no finer test than the war, and so it happened and as history has shown the test worked out absolutely perfectly," the pilot said.

Retired Lt. Col. Herbert Carter was one of those early aviators. Now he's president of the Tuskegee chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen Inc., a national organization of the aviators. There are about 15 members of the Tuskegee chapter and not all of them are original Tuskegee Airmen.

Carter was studying at Tuskegee Institute with plans to be a veterinarian when he found out he might be drafted into the rear ranks. Instead, the then 23-year-old volunteered, joining the 99th in 1942.

"I felt I could contribute more to the defense of the country by joining Tuskegee Airmen rather than the rear ranks," Carter said.

Plus he thought being a pilot could help him with his plans to work as a vet in Texas so he could fly from farm to farm.

"At that time the military was not on my mind," he said.

But the war changed that. And the Tuskegee Airmen not only had a superior combat record, they changed the culture of the military.

By the end of World War II, the 332nd Fighter Group -- which included the 99th Fighter Squadron and three others -- had shot down 111 enemy aircraft and destroyed another 150 on the ground, according to the Air Force.

Of the 992 pilots trained at Tuskegee, 450 were sent overseas and about 150 were killed in combat or accidents, according to Air Force data.

Carter flew 125 combat hours and 77 combat missions in the European Theater during the 14 months he was stationed overseas.

"They set a standard of performance that very few units have matched, the excellence of their performance is history now and it's in the history books," Carter said.

Today isn't the only important anniversary the group has this month. While today marks the 67th anniversary of the unit's activation, this month marks the 66th anniversary of the first class of pilots who graduated from Tuskegee.

Last March, President Bush awarded the Tuskegee Airmen the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian award.

"No other fighter group in America has received gold medals," Carter said. "History speaks for itself."

In addition to their distinguished combat record, Carter also said the Tuskegee Airmen paved the way for blacks to serve in an integrated military.

"They opened the way that when the peacetime came and our general officers of the new Air Force took a look at segregation, they said it was dehumanizing ... and it should not exist in the military," Carter said. "Had the 99th and the 332nd not performed as effectively as they did, I do not believe that the attitude on the desegregation of the military would have happened."

Craigwell was 18 in 1944, when he left high school in New York to join the Tuskegee Airmen.

He continued to serve in the military until June 1973 and echoed Carter's thoughts on the influence that the Tuskegee Airmen had on the integration of the military.

"Certainly the Tuskegee thing was a very important thing, nationally and politically for our country because for years we had been very, very divided on the issue of black and white," he said.

And in September, one of the famed unit's designations returned to Montgomery.

Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. T. Michael Moseley came to Maxwell Air Force Base to announce that the 160th Fighter Squadron at Dannelly Field would be redesignated as the 100th Fighter Squadron. The squadron is part of the 187th Fighter Wing of the Alabama Air National Guard.

The announcement brought the squadron back to Alabama for the first time since the end of WWII -- complete with the distinctive red tails that were the squadron's trademark.

Retired Lt. Walter Palmer, one of the original Tuskegee Airmen who attended the announcement ceremony, said he was glad to have the squadron back in Alabama.

Carter agreed.

"That was a great honor, we're just so happy that they chose a unit here in Alabama to sort of memorialize the units by reactivating the 100th. We're just so happy and proud the way the 100th has made that transition with the F-16."