

St. Louis ceremony honors Tuskegee Airmen

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ST. LOUIS -- Christopher Newman flew 84 missions as a fighter pilot in World War II with the Tuskegee Airmen.

When his plane got shot down over the Adriatic Sea, he bailed out with a parachute, a can of yellow dye and a dinghy the size of a bathtub. British rescuers plucked him out of the sea six hours later.

After two weeks' rest, the 22-year-old Newman was at it again, flying high in 1944 in a hand-me-down P51 Mustang plane with the distinctive red tail marking.

Now, 63 years later, Newman's hometown is giving him and other local members of the all-black Tuskegee Airmen a heroes' salute.

At a ceremony Saturday at Lambert Field, five men who were among the original Tuskegee fighter pilots received a bronze replica of a Congressional Gold Medal. Survivors of eight other airmen also got the honor.

In March, the White House bestowed the Congressional Gold Medal on the Tuskegee Airmen. The gold medal is on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

"I guess I'm sentimental," Newman, 85, said later. "I'm glad the experiment turned out. I'm glad we are known as good, patriotic Americans."

The "Tuskegee Experiment" was formed shortly before America entered World War II, despite strong objection from those who didn't want blacks to be pilots. The graduates of Tuskegee were the only black Americans to fly in combat for the Army Air Forces in World War II.

At the airport Saturday, dignitaries read proclamations. The retired airmen and

widows signed autographs for more than an hour. The crowd of about 100 people cheered when officials said a city street may be named after the Tuskegee Airmen.

One woman, Vanessa Denton of St. Louis, said, "It should've happened way before now, the prestige they're getting."

Amid all the good cheer, Newman couldn't help but think about the men who died before getting the honor.

"When somebody starts singing out praise, they generally settle on one who's alive and can take a bow," Newman said in an interview. "They forget to think about the others who didn't make it."

The Tuskegee Airmen, the black fighter pilots and support personnel of the segregated Army Air Forces trained at the Tuskegee Institute (now university) in Alabama. They fought from bases in Italy during World War II.

Their success in downing 109 enemy aircraft helped to inspire President Truman's order in 1948 ending segregation in the armed forces.

Of the 933 Tuskegee pilots, about 140 survive.