

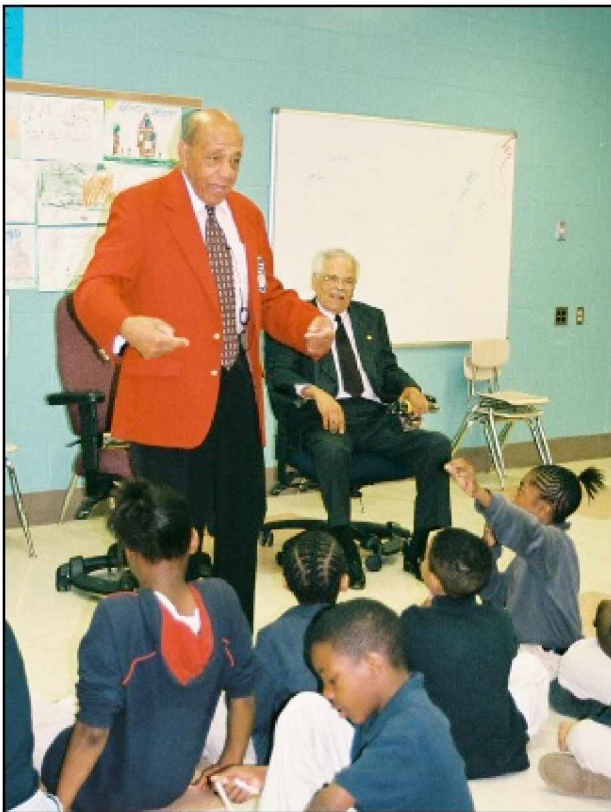
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Cityview students learn about World War II...from the experts

Written by Gail Olson

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Harold Brown (standing) and his brother Larry Brown, tell Cityview students about their World War II experiences. Harold Brown was a Tuskegee Airman. (Photo by Gail Olson)

"I do still fly, occasionally," said 82-year old retired Tuskegee Airman Harold Brown. "I have friends in Minneapolis who are silly enough to let me fly their planes."

Brown and his brother, Larry Brown, who was also in the service during World War II, visited Cityview School June 6 to talk to students about what it was like to be African American in the U.S. military in the 1940s.

Harold said he was shot down over Austria; he'd been strafing a railroad line near a small village and was flying at about 1,000 feet up. "I bailed out of my aircraft and landed in snow up to my knees. I got picked up by a couple of policemen and brought right back to the little village I'd been strafing. Here comes a mob of people, making motions to shoot me or hang me. They actually took me over to a tree. One of the officers held his rifle on them, though, and held them off. He saved my life. I never had a chance to say thank you to him."

Harold ended up in a prison camp in Nuremberg, Germany. When one of the students asked, "Did you come face to face with Hitler?" he answered, "No, and I didn't want to. He stayed in one place and I stayed in another."

Larry said he spent 30 months in combat and was seriously wounded, spending more than a year in the hospital.

In answer to one student's question about segregation in the military, Harold said, "There was no difference in the military than there was other places. I was born and raised right here in Minneapolis and we went to North High School. We didn't see too much segregation, although if you wanted to go to

a nice hotel--which we didn't have any money to go to in the first place—someone might have told us 'No.'"

Larry said that segregation was more visible in the South, where there were different water fountains marked for "colored" and "white." He added that the only place in the military where there was no segregation was the hospital.

In answer to a student's question, "Who told you to go to war?" Harold said, "I told myself. When I was 10, I had a love affair with an airplane. I decided I was going to be a pilot. I got a book from the Sumner Library, *The Life of an Army Air Corps Cadet*, and I read it 100 times, almost memorizing it. Guys used to tease me, they'd say, 'Hey Lindbergh, they wouldn't even let you wash those airplanes, let alone fly them.' But I took some tests and I got into the Tuskegee Airmen."

The Tuskegee Airmen

The Tuskegee Airmen were the United State's first black combat unit, founded near Tuskegee, Alabama.

Many of today's historians and writers agree that the Tuskegee story is a discouraging page in history. As Time Magazine writer Christopher John Farley put it, "the lack of recognition of the black Americans who first struggled for the right to train as pilots, then for the right to fly in combat, is one of the saddest lapses in U.S. military history.

According to the 1998 African American Almanac, the military went to great lengths to keep the black fliers grounded, saying they were "not of fighting caliber." When the group took their military aptitude tests, they scored so high that the white officers accused them of cheating, and made them take them again. (Time Magazine, Aug. 28, 1995.)

But President Franklin Roosevelt, urged to take action by his wife, social activist Eleanor Roosevelt, overrode public objection and backed the black pilots.

The 99th Squadron, the first unit Harold flew with, shot down 16 enemy planes and damaged or destroyed 10 more, in the first nine months they were airborne. When the 99th joined the 332nd squadron, a larger all-black unit, they flew 1,578 missions, earned 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses and 744 air medals.

NorthNews previously interviewed Harold (Jan. 5, 1999); in that interview, he said he flew 30 missions, with two serious mishaps. During a dogfight with a German in an ME-262 twin engine jet, he got hit by found fire and crash landed in friendly territory in Italy. The second time he got hit, he was shot down over Austria, where he was captured.

Larry, also interviewed in 1999, said he had enlisted in the Air Force and was seriously injured when a truck transporting troops went off a bridge. "Our parents got two telegrams, one 'wounded in action,' and one 'missing in action,' in the same week," he said.

The Tuskegee Airmen flew P-51-C Mustangs, known as Red Tail planes. Harold is active in the Red Tail Project, a group whose mission is to education people, especially young people, about the sacrifices

and accomplishments of the Tuskegee Airmen. Project members have restored one of the only two flying "C" models still in existence. The Red Tail Project sponsored the Browns' Cityview visit.

"Stay in school"

Larry has been a school volunteer for many years; he worked as a volunteer football coach at North High School and most recently has been helping third graders at NorthStar school. He told the audience that he and his brother attended Minneapolis Public Schools. They both went to college: he has a bachelor's degree and Harold has a PhD. Harold taught at Columbia State College for 22 years and served as vice president of academic affairs for 13 years.

"We were taught to get an education. You need to stay in school. Guys like us were guys like you," Larry said.

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