

Tuskegee Airman recalls war missions

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Tuskegee Airman Roy Richardson addresses members of the West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church as part of its "Dialogues in Diversity" series. (West Life photo by Larry Bennet)

West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church had living history within its walls last Saturday with the visit of Tuskegee Airman Roy Richardson. He appeared at the church as part of its "Dialogues in Diversity" program.

Richardson was one of the many black men to fly in this historic group during World War II. The airmen tangled with the Luftwaffe as well as with racism within the military and back home.

The Tuskegee Airmen, named after the Alabama town where they trained as pilots, were part of a U.S. military "experiment" that, as Richardson explained, was designed to fail, with white superior officers instructed to be harder on the black pilots and make sure they never passed flight school.

Despite these struggles, the airmen racked up an impressive record, particularly in their missions escorting Allied bombers. They were so good bomber pilots specifically requested the "Red Tails," so called for the distinctive red paint coating the tails of the Tuskegee pilots' fighters.

A big reason the Tuskegee pilots were so successful, as was mentioned by both Richardson as well as pilots in a documentary Richardson brought along, was that the Tuskegee pilots were continually withheld from flying missions by their superior officers, and thus had no choice but to perpetually practice their flying.

Richardson told the group, "There's a lot of history there that people know nothing about." He pointed out not everybody in the Tuskegee Airmen was black, as white men served as officers and in various support roles, and women worked for the unit as well.

Richardson said his most vivid memory was that of seeing a squadron make its return to base flying in formation.

"This in my mind is a sight to behold," Richardson said.

Even with the racism of Richardson's day, he has very positive memories of his time in the military.

"I enjoyed being in the Air Force," Richardson said. "I miss it."

He spoke of the camaraderie of the airmen: "We were a very close-knit group."

Richardson continues to be active even as he is "pushing 80," as he put it. He is involved in various Tuskegee-related organizations, and at Saturday's event accepted a check for the Tuskegee Airmen National Scholarship Fund.

Interest in the airmen has been high of late, as Congress recently awarded the group a collective Congressional Gold Medal at a March 29 ceremony at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. The actual medal will go on display at the Smithsonian Institution, while the airmen and their widows received bronze replicas. Richardson brought his to the church and passed it around for everyone to look at. Richardson himself was late to the Saturday event because he had another engagement he was coming from in Lorain.

Even with all the attention focused on the airmen, Richardson seems to take it in stride.

"I don't know, I'm just glad to be around," Richardson said.