

Vet keeps alive the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen

By Blair Anthony Robertson | McClatchy/Tribune newspapers
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SACRAMENTO - George Porter flew to Louisiana recently to tell the story he has been telling and retelling for years -- how he and 17,000 other African-Americans made history and forever altered its course when they served as Tuskegee Airmen during World War II.

He is a member of a living history team whose ranks continue to dwindle as old age and illness take their toll on men and women now well into their 80s. Porter doesn't want his piece of history to be forgotten.

"I'm declining a lot, but I stay busy," said Porter, 86, before the trip as he walked past his kitchen table, where a pill dispenser sat next to stacks of papers and a box containing the replica of the Congressional Gold Medal awarded to the Tuskegee Airmen.

At this stage in his life, Porter feels a sense of urgency to talk about who and what he was during the war, not for the glory but to underscore what it says about the country, its struggles and its ongoing quest to be better.

He wants people to know how eager he and other African-Americans were to fight for America even though it would continue to accord them only second-class status for another two decades. He wants people to know how proud he is, how he has never been bitter.

'It's my country too'

The first thing visitors notice upon entering Porter's three-bedroom home in South Land Park, in the Sacramento area, is the large American flag next to the front door.

Asked why someone who grew up in small-town Louisiana under the indignity of Jim Crow laws would risk his life for his country, Porter didn't hesitate.

"It's my country, too," he said.

Formed in 1942 amid controversy, the Tuskegee Airmen was the highly regarded all-black group that gave African-Americans a major stake in the war and led to the gradual integration of the military six years later. The Tuskegee Airmen showed the nation its black citizens were as skilled and devoted as their white counterparts. Its nearly 1,000 pilots flew 15,000 sorties during World War II, shooting down 150 enemy aircraft and destroying another 250 enemy planes on the ground.

After Porter was drafted in 1942, he set out to be a pilot but was told a medical exam found he had a restriction in his nostrils that would prevent him from flying at altitude.

"They were just eliminating any blacks they could," he said, noting he has never experienced breathing problems. "I was feeling cheated at the time because they wouldn't let me into the pilot-training program."

But Porter didn't dwell on it. He trained to be a mechanic with what would eventually be known as the Tuskegee Airmen -- a reference to the airfield in Tuskegee, Ala., where most of the African-American pilots were trained.

Born and raised outside Slidell, La., Porter remembers how black and white children played together only to grow up under the edict of "separate but equal."

As a young African-American in the military, Porter was aware he and other Tuskegee Airmen were making history by proving themselves. He says history has shown how the integration of the military helped spur on the modern civil rights era that began with the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott of 1955.

"We were before Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks," Porter said.

Because he ranked among the best mechanics, Porter was selected to train others. For that reason, he remained in America during the war and did not see combat.

He was a flight engineer on B-25 bombers, as well as a crew chief and then a squadron inspector.

Knew he deserved respect

Porter says blacks in the military were often given menial tasks and, when the war was over, he struggled to command the respect he knew he deserved.

"In 1949, I was a tech sergeant and they wanted me to wash airplanes. I said a tech sergeant doesn't wash airplanes," he said. "They gave me another assignment."

Also in 1949, Porter got married, and the couple had one daughter.

Porter's wife, Pauline, a longtime schoolteacher, died of congestive heart failure in 2002.

The couple moved to Sacramento in 1964, buying their home for \$24,500 and becoming the second black family to move into their neighborhood.

When the Tuskegee Airmen were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in March, Porter says his only regret "was that my wife wasn't here to see all the accolades."

During the White House ceremony, which Porter did not attend, President Bush said: "The Tuskegee Airmen helped win a war, and you helped change our nation. And the medal that we confer today means that we're doing a small part to ensure that your story will be told and honored for generations to come."

Porter's daughter, Linda Porter-Winston, 53, says that for years she took her father's historic role for granted.

"Sometimes, I'm at a loss for words. It was only when I was 40 that I realized how much history I had heard growing up," said Porter-Winston.