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Veteran, author added to NWI Wall of Legends

Tuskegee Airman tells of struggle against segregation after war

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HAMMOND | Quentin Smith served his nation honorably during World War II, but he was scared, thinking that he could be killed by the American military.

It was 1945.

Smith had just refused to sign a paper promising to not enter the officers' club, tennis courts or swimming pool at Freeman Field in Seymour, Ind. He was asked to sign the pledge because he was African-American and the U.S. armed forces were segregated.

Smith could have been shot for disobeying an order.

But a few weeks after 101 Tuskegee Airmen who refused to sign the pledge were sentenced to 20 years in prison, future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall negotiated their honorable discharge.

Smith, 90, recounted his experience Thursday night as he was admitted to the Northwest Indiana Wall of Legends at the Indiana Welcome Center.

There were 944 Tuskegee Airmen. All were African-American. The seven Lake County airmen are now South Shore Legends. Only three are alive, and only Smith, of Gary, was at Thursday's event.

Today, the airmen are considered heroes.

"We knew we had to do well because people would judge the race by what we did," Smith said.

There are nine plaques on the Wall of Legends.

Three were unveiled Thursday, with only Hammond native Jean Parker Shepherd, who died in 1999, earning a solo award. He wrote "A Christmas Story," was inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame, and was a comedian, actor and newspaper columnist.

Shepherd was inducted to the South Shore Legends by Times Executive Editor Bill Nangle.

"He was a great humorist," Nangle said.

The airmen plaque includes the names of Smith, Rixie McCarroll, Gordon Rapier, Carl Ellis, Lloyd McKeethen, Sylvester Hurd and Louis Murray.

The third plaque honors 10 steelworkers who were killed by Chicago police May 30, 1937.

The steelworkers were celebrating some steel companies' decisions to recognize their union, but picketing Republic Steel, which didn't recognize them. Killed were Indiana residents Earl Handley, Sam Popovich, Kenneth Reed, and Alfred Causey and Illinois residents Lee Tisdale, Leo Francisco, Otis Jones, Joseph Rothmund, Anthony Tagliori and Hilding Anderson.