

**Editorial-Saluting the Red Tails**



The World War II African-American fighter pilots known as the Tuskegee Airmen are receiving long-overdue honors and recognition, but none may be as satisfying as a salute from the commander in chief.

Surviving flight and ground crews — and proud widows and their families — gathered at the Capitol Rotunda Thursday to accept the Congressional Gold Medal. President Bush nicely punctuated the moment with a military salute — a courtesy normally returned by a ranking officer, not given. Many fine words could not mean as much. The president's show of respect will be as treasured as the highest award Congress can bestow. In the days of a rigorously segregated army, these black officers and airmen often did not receive even the most elemental acknowledgement of their rank: a salute from the enlisted ranks and junior officers.

The 332nd Fighter Group of the U.S. Army Air Corps became the Tuskegee Airmen from the first units organized at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Four squadrons of pilots and ground crews went on to multiple Distinguished Unit citations for their performance in the North Africa and Italian campaigns.

They fought the war in units physically separated from other air units, but were known for their skills and their record as bomber escorts by the colors on their planes, The Red Tails. Individually, they earned Silver Stars, Distinguished Flying Crosses, Bronze Stars and Air Medals.

Back home, they swapped the pilots' seats for the back of the bus. A short, brutal transition, but their undeniable legacy of skills and contribution helped desegregate the military in 1948.

President Bush called his salute a gesture, but it was a heartfelt display of respect and gratitude on behalf of the nation.