

Tuskegee Airmen film inspires Robertsville Middle School 5th graders

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 2, 2016)

I had another awesome encounter with true greatness recently when Steve Jones arranged for Tuskegee Airman, Lt. Col. (Ret.) George Hardy, to visit Oak Ridge. Steve, who is the chairperson of the Y-12 Community Relations Council, found out that George would like to visit Y-12 while he was here. I was delighted we could make that happen for him. What a treat it was to explain to him that all the nation's nuclear weapons used components from Y-12 and to show him the weapons trainers we have on display in the tour route of Building 9731.

He already had a great appreciation for the nation's nuclear weapons program and fully understood that we have gone 70 plus years without a global war primarily because of nuclear weapons. The drop from 60 million deaths in World War II to less than two million per year since is proof of the fact.

The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki made it clear to all that the destructive power of nuclear weapons made global war completely unacceptable. We now possessed the ability to destroy much of the earth with just a few nuclear weapons.

There was also a great traveling exhibit that was brought to Knoxville, Clinton and Oak Ridge along with Lt. Col. Hardy, the Tuskegee Airman's "Rise Above, The Red Tail Squadron."

Carolyn Krause joined a group of students at that Tuskegee Airmen traveling exhibit at the American Museum of Science and Energy recently. Enjoy her reflections on that experience and see what she learned about these iconic aviators.

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Aim high. Believe in yourself. Use your brain. Never quit. Be ready to go. Expect to win.

Those six principles grace the dog tag that fifth-grade students at Robertsville Middle School each received for writing a paragraph on the "Rise Above" movie they saw last Friday on the Tuskegee Airmen.

The movie was shown in a traveling exhibit, or mobile theater, that was parked last Friday and Saturday behind the American Museum of Science and Energy. Previously it was at the Smoky Mountain Air Show at McGhee Tyson Airport and at Clinton Green McAdoo Cultural Center where a reception was held for George Hardy, one of the Tuskegee Airmen.

The RMS fifth-graders have been studying the history of Oak Ridge, the Manhattan Project and World War II, so the Tuskegee Airmen show fit right in. On Friday morning I sat with 34 students and two teachers on metal bleachers inside the long trailer to watch the panoramic movie.

Who were the Tuskegee Airmen?

They were mostly African American men who were trained to be pilots, navigators, bombardiers, instructors and mechanics. However, some of the flying instructors were white pilots, and African American women, I was told, were part of the 14,000 support staff, working as cooks, secretaries, mechanics and other support jobs.

For two decades following World War I, blacks had been advocating that they be allowed to fly military aircraft. They wanted to help the U.S. Air Force win the war that the U.S. entered against Japan, Germany and its allies at the end of 1941.

A significant person in the history of the Tuskegee Airmen was Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1941, the First Lady flew with one of America's first black pilots, Charles Alfred Anderson, over Tuskegee, Ala.

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Mrs. Roosevelt's half-hour flight in a Piper J-3 Cub trainer airplane was well publicized. The photo of her in the airplane with Anderson was seen around the world. It demonstrated to the public and the military that African Americans could be competent pilots. Her flight occurred about five months after the segregated Tuskegee flight-training program for black pilots was established.

When many of these Tuskegee Airmen were children, according to the movie, they were told they wouldn't amount to much in life. Blacks were considered inferior to whites. African Americans could join the military but were relegated to service jobs.

One pilot said in the movie: "Black people were viewed not only as inferior but also incapable of being taught the arts of war, indeed, the arts of civilization. They were told they weren't fit to fly airplanes."

The Tuskegee program was competitive. Black men joined it to prove their worth, but they found it challenging. Because of its 65% elimination rate, the men who survived cuts were tense and uncomfortable as they continued their training.

Many of the pilots did not go overseas, but a few units engaged in combat in North Africa, Sicily and Italy.

As the white pilots came to trust and respect black pilots, the Tuskegee Airmen were asked to protect the U.S. bomber jets from enemy fighters. Over Berlin the Airmen, flying P51 Mustang planes with red tails, shot down three German fighter jets, according to Wikipedia.

One black pilot who had one of the best escort records of World War II was Benjamin Davis Jr., who graduated at the top of his class at West Point. Because he was one of the few black students at West Point, he had no roommates and ate alone. "He was special to have to stand what he had to take," said another black pilot in the movie.

According to Wikipedia, of the 996 pilots trained at Tuskegee from 1941 to 1946, 355 were deployed overseas and 84 lost their lives in accidents or combat. The Airmen flew 1,578 combat missions, destroyed 112 enemy aircraft in the air and another 150 on the ground, and heavily damaged numerous rail cars, trucks, boats and barges. The Airmen received numerous awards and decorations for their service.

The heroic actions of the Tuskegee Airmen prompted the integration of the Armed Forces and paved the way for the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

When the war was over, the black pilots who had flown in combat in Europe were disappointed when they returned to America. Not much had changed. Blacks and whites still had separate restrooms and drinking fountains. The Tuskegee Airmen found that very few people were "willing to embrace their heroism."

One of the black pilots boarded a bus to get a ride home. He sat in the middle of the bus. He heard someone say, "Go to the back of the bus." He realized that the speaker did not recognize that he was an airplane pilot and war hero.

"Did you hear what I said?" The black pilot looked up and "saw a scrawny, little white guy. I laughed at him. I didn't know what the situation was.

"It was sort of a dehumanizing experience. You've come back from fighting for your country. You've lost some of your buddies and you encounter this. It's not right."

In 1948 the U.S. military ended discrimination against African American men. Many blacks stayed in the military because the pay and the social conditions were better than in civilian life.

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In the 1980s the Commemorative Air Force (CAF) was formed and dedicated to restoring historical aircraft, especially in Minnesota and North Dakota. Don Hines, a high-energy visionary who was fun to be around, led the restoration of a red-tail Mustang and flew it in air shows as he toured the country and told one million people about the heroism of the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II.

Tragically, in 2004 Hines died of his injuries after the red-tail Mustang he was piloting lost power and crashed. However, the CAF managed to restore the badly damaged airplane. In 2009, after funds were raised, the restored red-tail Mustang was ready to take off again. Hines' son Ben saw Brad Lang, pilot and leader of the Red Tail Squadron, fly the resurrected plane in its first air show in years.

In 2007 President George W. Bush bestowed the prestigious Congressional Gold Medal on the Tuskegee Airmen for their service in World War II. And in 2008 they were invited to the inauguration of President Barack Obama, America's first black president.

At the end of the movie, an African American asked his young son what he wants to be when he grows up. "I want to be an astronaut," the kid said. His father replied, "Nobody can stop you but you yourself."
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Thank you Carolyn, for agreeing to my suggestion that we feature this exhibit in Historically Speaking. I think your ability to capture the essence of events is once again demonstrated here. I was caused to suggest it to you by the time I was able to spend with Tuskegee Airman Lt. Col. (Ret.) George Hardy. He is such a gracious person and amazingly agile for a 90 year old. Amazing is all I can say! And the exhibit was also amazing as evidenced by your experience there.



The Rise Above – Red Tail Squadron traveling exhibit at the American Museum of Science and Energy

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The six principles are displayed on the side of the traveling exhibit trailer



Tuskegee Airmen's Red Tail Squadron souvenirs for sale

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The traveling exhibit is a double wide trailer where a movie, "Rise Above" is shown