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Tuskegee Airmen bring their stories to Rockford

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By Marissa Alter

(ROCKFORD) - More than 60 years ago, a group of American pilots set out for Europe to fight in World War II. In the process, they blazed a trail for civil rights and changed the course of U.S. history. Today, the story of the Tuskegee Airmen continues. Four original members are in Winnebago County this weekend to close out Black History Month. The group was almost stuck in Indiana for the weekend, but a LEAC pilot, Commander Dan Bitton, was able to fly out there and bring them back to RFD this afternoon.



Dr. Welton Taylor

These are the faces of history.

Dr. Welton Taylor: "I've been flying since 1941. That's a while since I'm 90, and I flew last month."

Hilton Joseph: "I joined the national guard when I was 17. I was still in high school when I joined."



Beverly Dunjill

Lt. Colonel Julius Jackson: "I believe I was born--my twin brother and I--to fly."

And Beverly Dunjill: "When I was three years old, I decided I wanted to be a pilot. And I was one of the fortunate people in the world that accomplished that goal."

But it wasn't easy. They broke down racial barriers as the first African-American aviators in the U.S. military. They faced not only the enemy but society.



Lt. Col. Julius Jackson

"They had to do everything perfect, but in the end, they gained the one thing every soldier favors, and that's respect," says Commander Dan Bitton, who flew the pilots in. "Everyone respected them because they did things to a level of perfection that very few pilots can do."

Despite the airmen's distinguished service, many still faced discrimination at home when they returned from the war. It wasn't till later they were recognized

"People call us heroes. We were just like any other young American boy at that time," Jackson explains. "[We wanted] to protect the Constitution. And all people are created equal--that's all. I just happen to be handsome, and I have a permanent tan--that's all."



In 2007 the Tuskegee Airmen got the Congressional Gold Medal. You can meet them at Memorial Hall Saturday and Sunday from 1 pm-4:30 pm.

Hilton Joseph



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