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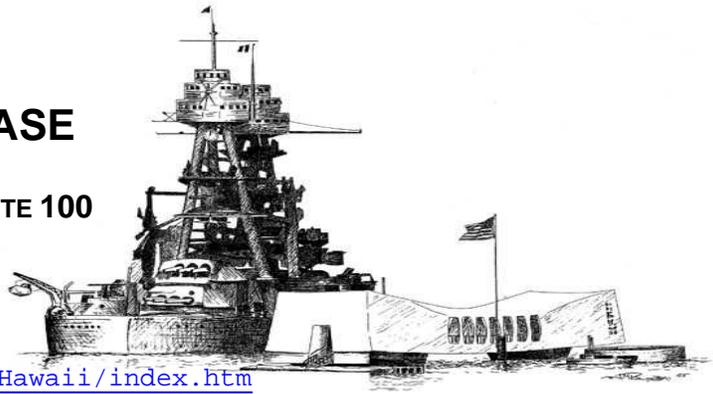
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**POC: Chief David Rush**

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## **Pioneer pilot recalls his days as a Tuskegee Airman**

Story and photos by Blair Martin, Navy Region Hawai'i Public Affairs

(Pearl Harbor, HI) -- During the 1940s, a “whites only” sign not only kept African-Americans out of restrooms and restaurants, but also out of the cockpits of U.S. military aircraft.

Thanks to an election promise made by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, nearly 1,000 African-Americans were granted their pilot training at Tuskegee Flight School from 1942 to 1946, eventually changing the face of America's military.

Retired Lt. Col. Bill Holloman, a former Tuskegee Airman, spoke of his personal experience as a black pilot during WWII during a Feb. 1 lecture at the Pacific Aviation Museum.

According to Holloman, all African-American trainees, unlike their white counterparts, were sent to Tuskegee Army Air Field near Montgomery, Ala. for all of their primary, basic and other specialized training. However, the segregated efforts only further bonded Holloman and his comrades.

“One of the [upsides] of segregation was that all of us had to go through our whole [flight school] training together,” he explained. “It really made us close. We trained together, we fought together, we died together. When the war ended, we were a family,” he added.

A child of the Great Depression era, Holloman said he refused to allow the social prejudices of his day to deter him from his early dreams of becoming a pilot.

“I knew I wanted to be a pilot at four years old when I saw Charles Lindbergh come back to town for a tickertape parade after he had crossed the Atlantic,” remembered the St. Louis native. “I told my dad at that moment that I wanted to be just like [Lindbergh] when I grew up. [But] my dad didn't believe we lived in a world where that was possible,” he added.

Eager to prove his father wrong, Holloman said he saved up his money from a local newspaper route until he was 16 years old and able to pay for beginner flight lessons at the local airport.

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## TUSKEGEE 2-2-2

At 18 years old, Holloman signed up to take an exam administered by the U.S. Army Corps, equivalent to two years of college. Out of 350 applicants, he was one of only 30 people who passed the initial test and immediately enlisted in the Tuskegee Flight School in Alabama.

“[Tuskegee] was the only school of its kind in the country,” he said. “They [initially] had a sight set in California, but in order to maintain segregation, they picked a place in the south that would keep us in our place.”

Upon his September 1944 graduation from Tuskegee Flight School, Holloman joined the elite group of African-American military pilots, serving in the 332nd Fighter Group of the U.S. Army Air Corps. The group would eventually include 994 African-American pilots as well as navigators, bombardiers and maintenance and support staff that serviced all of the planes. The men were responsible for a variety of assignments, including escort and strafing missions.

Though the men are now referred to as “Tuskegee Airmen,” Holloman insists that moniker did not come until many years later.

“Back then we were not known as the Tuskegee Airmen,” he explained. “We were either called ‘colored’ pilots or ‘negro’ pilots. The term ‘Tuskegee Airmen’ wasn’t given to us until 1972,” he added.

In his 19 missions during WWII, Holloman said he flew multiple aircrafts, including P-40 Warhawks, P-39 Airacobras and P-47 Thunderbolts, but primarily the P-51 Mustang that Tuskegee men are most commonly identified with, featuring a trademark “red tail.”

“After we started flying these [planes], we became known as ‘red tails’,” he said. “I don’t think the government was trying to mark us in any way, but once we had those red tails that was it. The Germans used to say they could see those red tails coming from a mile away,” he added.

Despite fulfilling his dream of becoming a fighter pilot, Holloman admits that the dream came with a hefty price. On two occasions, Holloman was arrested for “impersonating an officer” by local officials when he returned to his hometown, dressed in uniform. Holloman said another rude awakening came in 1948, when he and his family were stationed in Biloxi, Miss.

“I remember being a captain [in the Army Air Corps] and realizing I couldn’t even walk on the sidewalk in Biloxi,” he recalled. “If you so much as put your foot on the water [of the beach], you would be arrested. From then on, I tried to avoid places where I thought I would be embarrassed,” he added.

Holloman’s distinguished flying career spanned several decades, also serving time in both the Korean and Vietnam wars. When he lived in Europe in the late 1960s, Holloman became the first black helicopter pilot in the U.S. Air Force.

Now in his twilight years, the 85-year-old pioneer reflected on why flying has served him so well through most of his life.

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### **TUSKEGEE 3-3-3**

“The thing I love most about flying is the freedom,” he said. “You can go as high as you want and it is so quiet and peaceful. I’ve had a very lucky life,” he added.

In 2007, Holloman was one of 350 Tuskegee Airmen and widows who were collectively awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for their heroic efforts during WWII.

But despite his many accolades, Holloman insists his “proudest day” came when he and 300 other Tuskegee Airmen were honored guests at the inauguration of 44th President Barack Obama this past January.

“I came from a time where they were still lynching black military members in uniform in the south after WWII,” he recalled. “I never thought I would see the day when we would have a black elected official. [In my career] I’ve fought in three wars. That day made all those years worth it,” he said tearfully.

Just like his father so many years before, Holloman said his country has made him a real believer, no matter how impossible the dream may seem.

**-USN-**