

Tuskegee Airmen to receive Congressional Gold Medal

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Nearly 400 black World War II pilots, including several from the metropolitan area, will receive the nation's highest civilian honor March 29 when the Congressional Gold Medal will be bestowed upon them.

Last April, Congress passed legislation approving the citation honoring the Tuskegee Airmen, black aviators whose flying skills in the skies over Africa and Europe helped persuade President Harry S. Truman to end segregation in the U.S. military in 1948.

But design disputes stalled the release of the medal for almost a year, prompting some of the aviators -- many of them in their 80s -- to worry that the delay might allow death to cheat some of them of the recognition they deserved.

Those issues now resolved, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi sent out letters last week inviting surviving airmen to a ceremony in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda in Washington.

"I've been living for this day," said Spann Watson, 90, a Westbury resident and former P-51 Mustang pilot. Watson, who was in the first platoon of black pilots sent overseas, flew 30 missions over North Africa and Europe before returning to the United States to train other pilots.

"This is it, this is the big deal now," Watson said.

The Tuskegee Airmen were best known for flying fighter escorts for Allied bombers over Europe. The group is said never to have lost a bomber.

They received scant historical recognition until 1995, when "The Tuskegee Airmen," a film starring Laurence Fishburne, told of their accomplishments. In the 1950s, as white pilots took jobs in the booming commercial airline industry, black pilots were mostly turned away.

Lee Archer, 87, of New Rochelle, is America's first black flying ace.

"It shows the country is trying to right an old wrong," Archer said. "I never thought we would get it, but we would have done it without any recognition My family is very excited. I am, too."

Of the 994 black aviators who got their training at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama beginning in 1942, fewer than 385 are still alive. On March 4, Edgar L. Bolden, 85, who trained at Tuskegee and flew P-47s, died in Portland, Ore.

Bill Wheeler, 83, of Hempstead, flew six bomber escort missions from Ramitelli Field in southern Italy before a chronic sinus condition caused him to black out at 37,000 feet, ending his career as a pilot.

"I'm very excited about this because it shows we are finally being recognized to the maximum possible," Wheeler said. "Up until about ten years ago, before the movie, we were hardly recognized at all. The movie opened the door."

The medal, which has been cast by the U.S. Mint, will be housed in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. Replicas will be made for the fliers.

"There were guys who were anxious that they would pass away before this day came," Wheeler said. "But I wasn't among them. I knew I would live to see this."

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