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# Recognition Long Overdue

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# The Washington

# AFRO



MARCH 31, 2007 - APRIL 6, 2007

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Bishop Blake to succeed  
Patterson at COGIC

## Recognition long overdue

By Michael Higginbotham

The renowned Tuskegee Airmen will receive the highest recognition for service to the country that Congress can bestow, the Congressional Gold Medal, on March 29. While individuals have been recognized for such service, this is the first time a group has been honored. How fitting, for the Tuskegee Airmen are notorious for firsts.

For those unfamiliar, the Tuskegee Airmen are the racially segregated all-Black air force unit that gained fame for outstanding combat during World War II. Named for the air field at Tuskegee University in Alabama where Black army cadets initially trained to become pilots, the Tuskegee Airmen were part of a military experiment, forced on President Roosevelt by civil rights leaders unwilling to allow Blacks to be relegated to

non-combat roles only. Skeptics abounded all the way up to Secretary of War Henry Stimson who believed that the Tuskegee Airmen would fail because Blacks were inferior.

The Tuskegee Airmen passed the test literally with flying colors. Known as "the Red Tail Angels" for the bright red squadron insignia painted on the back of their aircraft and the daring rescues of bomber planes under enemy attack, they were truly the pride of Black Americans whose patriotism and competence were constantly questioned. In flying over 1500 bomber escort missions, the Tuskegee Airmen destroyed 111 enemy planes in the air without ever losing a single plane they were protecting—a record that few other units were able to match.

Some 62 years ago on June 25, 1944, in the midst of heavy enemy fire, Lt. Wendell Pruitt,

of the United States Army Air Corps' 99th Pursuit Squadron, sunk a German Destroyer with a barrage of machine-gun fire from his P-47 Spitfire airplane. This was the first time a ship the size of a destroyer had been disabled solely by bullets from an aircraft.

While the Tuskegee Airmen had numerous combat firsts overseas, fighting Nazi aggres-

sion in Europe, they had the dual role of fighting against discrimination in America. Through sit-ins, boycotts, and other forms of non-violent protest, the Tuskegee Airmen sought a ban on all racial segregation in the military. The biggest protest occurred on April 5, 1945 at Freeman Field, Indiana. Despite a War Department directive against racial discrimination, base commander Colonel Robert Selway attempted to maintain racial segregation of the Officers' Club at Freeman Field in violation of military policy. Colonel Selway's scheme involved the creation of two officers' clubs, one for supervisory personnel and one

for all other officers. All White officers on the base would be designated as supervisors. Responding to this blatant disregard for the military's anti-discrimination policy, 36 Tuskegee Airmen attempted to enter the "White" officers' club. They were promptly arrested. The next afternoon, 21 additional officers requested to be included in the rule. They too were charged with dropping a Tuskegee except that they were acquitted.

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21 additional Tuskegee Airmen attempted to enter the club and also were arrested. Selway's request to all remaining Black officers to abide by the segregated rules was refused. So they too were arrested. While charges were subsequently dropped against all 101 Tuskegee Airmen protesters except three, and two were acquitted at trial; one was pun-

Airmen like Lt. Terry were unjustly punished or penalized for protests in support of racial justice, even when those protests demanded privileges wrongly denied by racist officers.

The Tuskegee Airmen deserve credit not only for serving their country with distinction in battle, but also for their commitment to justice. The price these men paid for their principled patriotism was high; consequently, the debt owed to them is immense. Awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to the Tuskegee Airmen goes a long way toward recognition of that sacrifice.

*Michael Higginbotham is the Wilson Elkins Professor of Law at the University of Baltimore and is the author of "Race Law." His father and uncle are Tuskegee Airmen.*