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Recognition Long Overdue

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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.

The Tuskegee Airmen, a racially segregated all-Black air force unit that gained fame for outstanding combat during World War II. Named for the airfield 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 shunned 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 fiats overseas, fighting Nazi aggression 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.

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