



March 2, 2012

## Tuskegee Airman reflects on lifetime of overcoming prejudice

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Retired U.S. Air Force Col. Charles McGee, one of the famed 332nd "Tuskegee Airmen," spoke to more than 500 NAVAIR employees at an event hosted in Patuxent River, Md., and broadcasted to 20 NAVAIR sites via teleconference Feb. 27. McGee, who has seen combat in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, spoke about the "Tuskegee Airman Experience" to help commemorate Black History Month. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. — The famed "Red Tails" didn't just overcome barriers — they soared past them.

Former Red Tail and retired Col. Charles McGee spoke to more than 500 attendees across the Command Feb. 27 about his experiences as one of the 332nd Tuskegee Airmen, America's first black military aviators. McGee and others like him fought racial prejudices to fly and fight for their country during World War II. The event, held at the River's Edge Conference Center and broadcast to 20 NAVAIR sites nationally, served to commemorate Black History Month.

McGee exemplified his motto — "do while you can" — during his 30-year award-winning career.

He holds the record for the highest three-war total of fighter combat missions of any pilot in U.S. Air Force history, having seen combat in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. In 2007, President George W. Bush awarded the Tuskegee



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Airmen, McGee among them, the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor, the nation's highest civilian award.

"Without question, we are in the presence of a living legend," NAVAIR Deputy Assistant Commander for Research and Engineering Jesse McCurdy told event attendees. "Many young people need to understand how they got where they are, what's behind it."

McGee's positive attitude, even in the face of adversity, helped him accomplish his goals.

"Be positive. When you are negative, you are looking the wrong way, looking at the wrong target," he said. McGee cited his faith and precepts he learned from his family and the Boy Scouts as positive influences.

But accomplishing those goals didn't come easy.

Before 1940, the U.S. military prevented blacks from serving as aviators. A 1925 Army War College study concluded that "Negros" lacked the intelligence, ambition or courage to be suitable for military service. The Army used this study to prevent black soldiers from participating in combat and becoming aviators.

The government chose Tuskegee Institute, a black college founded by Booker T. Washington, as a separate facility to train, house and sustain black pilots and support personnel. It was an experiment used in advance of World War II due to the need for increased personnel and qualified pilots to fly combat missions.

The Army established the all-black pursuit squadron in 1941. At the war's end, they had flown 1,578 missions and 15,533 combat sorties, and in the process, destroyed more than 260 German aircraft in the air and on the ground. In addition, they destroyed some 950 railcars, trucks and other vehicles. The squadron earned the nickname "Red Tails" because of the red paint on the tail end of their fighter planes.

By 1948, the U.S. government finally came to "the realization that talent doesn't come with happenstance of birth or color of skin," McGee said. President Harry Truman signed an executive order to integrate the military services and thereby usher in the civil rights movement.

Event attendees said they were impressed with McGee's fortitude. Latisha Durham, E-2D/C-2A/JPALS technical lead, said, "He did not let racial prejudice stop him from completing his goal. The fact that he completed his goal and completed his mission without letting that get to him — I think that's probably my biggest takeaway."

NAVAIR Commander Vice Adm. David Architzel said McGee's point to shun labels and work together was an important



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one. "We're all Americans; we should learn to live as Americans — equal," he said.

Yvonne Davis, Atlantic Test Range Division head, agreed. "The better we work as a team, the better the product and the service is going to be to the country," she said.

Despite ending his military career with 6,308 flying hours, when McGee first joined the military in 1942, he had never flown before. But, he was a natural pilot.

The first plane he flew was the bi-wing open cockpit PT-17 trainer aircraft.

"After that first flight, I just knew I'd made the right decision to get into aviation," he said.

He said his favorite plane was the P-51 Mustang with its "Rolls Royce Merlin engine," citing its range, speed and altitude capability as making it the "premier fighter of its day."

McGee said his joy of flying came from the thrill of not being tethered to the ground. Soaring high above the clouds, at 40,000 feet, leisurely watching the sun set and the stars sprinkle the sky, McGee said he realized, "We human beings are one small aspect in a mighty grand universe."

For more information, [watch the event video](#) or visit the [Tuskegee Airmen website](#).



Tuskegee Airman and retired Col. Charles McGee, left, meets Lt. Marques Jackson, Test Pilot School Class 141, during a lunch honoring McGee Feb. 27 at Mattapan. (U.S. Navy photo)



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Retired Col. Charles McGee, a former “Red Tail,” spoke to more than 500 NAVAIR employees at a Black History Month presentation at Patuxent River Naval Air Station Feb. 27. McGee holds the record for the highest three-war total of fighter combat missions of any pilot in U.S. Air Force history. (U.S. Navy photo)



“Without question, we are in the presence of a living legend,” NAVAIR Deputy Assistant Commander for Research and Engineering Jesse McCurdy, left, said to introduce Tuskegee Airman retired Col. Charles McGee at an event at Patuxent River Naval Air Station Feb. 27. (U.S. Navy photo)



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NAVAIR Commander Vice Adm. David Architzel, left, said one thing he learned from former Red Tail and retired Col. Charles McGee, right, is to “not let adversity take away from achieving your goal.” McGee spoke at a Black History Month event at Patuxent River Naval Air Station Feb. 27. (U.S. Navy photo)