

## AN UPDRAFT OF HOPE

### Toledo Tuskegee Airman savors symbolism of inauguration

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At a time when America was divided into black and white, Irving Green saw things in terms of nuts and bolts.

When some leaders were convinced that African-Americans didn't have the smarts to fly and maintain airplanes, Mr. Green helped prove them wrong with a wrench and a screwdriver.

This was during World War II, and the central city Toledoan was a mechanic with the Tuskegee Airmen, a segregated group of the country's first black military pilots and crewmen who found themselves facing off against prejudice as well as foreign enemies. On Tuesday, its surviving members will be honored as invitees to the swearing-in of this country's first African-American president, Barack Obama.

Mr. Green, now 84, won't be among them. He doesn't feel up to making the trip, but he said the invitation symbolizes how much progress Americans have made since his military days.

"They're acting like they've got some sense in this country, that everyone ought to be treated equally," he said.

No one knows exactly how many of the airmen survive, but as with all members of the World War II generation, their numbers are dwindling rapidly. Nearly 1,000 pilots trained in Tuskegee, Ala., and about 15,000 more served as support staff. Only about 200 are expected to make the trek to Washington, according to the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies.

Mr. Green's personal narrative intersected with history in 1943 when he was drafted at the age of 18 after attending Scott High School. Having grown up working on cars with his uncle, he was happy to be trained as a mechanic for B-25 Mitchells and P-47 Thunderbolts.

#### VIDEO

[Irving Green talks about the airmen](#)

Segregation and second-class treatment were commonplace then, and Mr. Green gave little thought that it continued in the military, where desegregation wasn't ordered until 1948. Looking back, though, it's heartbreaking for him to think about a relative killed in Italy during the war.

"To think my poor cousin got killed over there and there were places here he couldn't even get a hamburger downtown," Mr. Green said. "We had to fight for America and die for America and there were places we couldn't go in America."

More than 100 African-American officers were arrested in 1945 at Freeman Field in Indiana, where Mr. Green spent time, because they tried to enter the all-white officers club. What a reversal of fortune it will be for one of those men, Edward R. Lunda, of Akron, when he attends the inauguration.

"The fact that an African-American now will be president of the United States is something that people didn't think was going to happen this quickly," he said.

"Back in the 1940s, it was felt by the War Department and [others] that African-Americans did not have the mental or physical capacity to operate sophisticated machinery like aircraft and that we would end up killing ourselves," said Mr. Lunda, 85.

To the contrary, the Tuskegee Airmen's fighter pilots distinguished themselves during combat in Europe and



Irving Green was a mechanic in the segregated World War II unit. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

North Africa, compiling an outstanding record protecting bomber aircraft on missions.

Mr. Lunda and Mr. Green never served abroad during the war - they were preparing to leave when it ended - but there were plenty who did honorably despite the way they were treated before, during, and after the war. Alexander Jefferson of Detroit still has vivid memories of a segregated society and military.

"Everybody asks how you felt. ... There was no feeling," he said. "You survived. You survived segregation, discrimination. You hated it. You fought against it. You endured, unwillingly, but you survived."

The fiery 87-year-old, who spent nine months as a prisoner of war after he was shot down over southern France, will be in Washington when Mr. Obama is sworn in, and he's happy about the recognition the airmen are receiving.

For too many of his compatriots, however, it came too late.

"[Most] of the Tuskegee Airmen are dead," he said. "Why ... didn't it happen 60 years ago?"

Herbert Glenn, Sr., an airman from Toledo, is one of those veterans who didn't live to see this day.

He died in 2007, leaving his wife to make the trip to Washington in his place.

"My husband would want me to go," said Gladys V. Glenn, 84. "[For] such an event like this, you can't say no."

"It was terrible what they had to go through," she said. "It was inhuman."

Mr. Glenn was part of the 332nd Fighter Group and, just months before he died, he was present at the ceremony with President Bush where the Tuskegee Airmen received the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Mr. Obama recognized his own debt to the airmen at that time, saying in a statement, "My career in public service was made possible by the path heroes like the Tuskegee Airmen trail-blazed."

The hope among many survivors and their supporters is that a new generation can learn something from their legacy.

"They proved the doubters wrong," said Jennifer Myers, national historian for Tuskegee Airmen Inc., an organization that perpetuates the veterans' history. "What it goes to show is that given any situation, if you truly believe that you have the commitment to yourself and to your country or to whatever, you can rise to the occasion."

To Roger Cram, the group is a model of how we all should behave when faced with adversity. He teaches courses at Hiram College in northeast Ohio that he crafted around the airmen - one is titled "Modeling Future Heroes: A Practical Application of Human Values" - after he realized that he'd never learned about them in school.

"They have left a legacy that the United States should pay very close attention to because it teaches us how to solve our problems peacefully," he said.

And to Mr. Green, happy sitting on a comfortable chair in his Toledo home, Tuesday's honor will simply be a validation of what he's known all along.

"Everybody is equal. There is no such thing as one man is better than another," he said. "Their skin might be different but in your heart and in your mind, you're all the same."

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#### **TUSKEGEE AIRMEN: AT A GLANCE**

The Tuskegee Airmen were America's first black military pilots. Formed as a segregated unit for World War II, they:

- Began training in Tuskegee, Ala., in 1941.
- Eventually totaled nearly 1,000 pilots and about 15,000 support staff.
- Faced discrimination and doubts about whether they had the smarts, courage, and patriotism to do the job.
- Flew more than 15,000 combat missions in Europe and North Africa.
- Received the Congressional Gold Medal in 2007.

