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This is part of an occasional series by the Sanpete County Travel and Utah Heritage Highway 89 Alliance on the people and places along U.S. Highway 89.

Three Tuskegee Airmen To Kick Off Annual Sanpete County Fly-in

By Lori Smith

For the National Mormon Pioneer Heritage Area

MT. PLEASANT, Sanpete County— You're grounded.

Not welcome words to men who want to soar. Yet such was the experience of African Americans before 1940: They were barred from flying for the U.S. military.

But as the world became more unsettled, the U.S. military wanted more men prepared to fight in the skies. So even at a time when many people thought that black men lacked intelligence, skill, courage and patriotism, U.S. government officials decided to try an experiment. That experiment turned out some of the most highly respected U.S. fighter groups in World War II: the Tuskegee Airmen.

Three pilots from the legendary contingent will be guest speakers at the kickoff event of the Sanpete County Fly-in, Friday, Sept. 12 at 7 p.m. at the Mt. Pleasant North Stake Center, 461 N. 300 West in Mt. Pleasant.

The choir from the Genesis Branch of Salt Lake City, a predominantly African-American branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, will also perform.

The Sanpete County Fly-in is an annual event centered at the tiny Mt. Pleasant Airport located just off U.S. 89 in the National Mormon Pioneer Heritage Area. The event continues Saturday, Sept. 13 with a breakfast, arrival of a variety of sport aircraft, free airplane rides for youngsters 8-17 years old, and helicopter rides for \$25 per person.

The founder and chairman of the fly-in is David Fullmer of Fairview, manager of the airport. Proceeds go Foyer Coin des Cieux, an orphanage in Haiti from which Fullmer and his wife adopted their three children.

The three speakers Friday night will be Lt. Col. Robert Ashby, Lt. Col. Asa Herring and Dr. Thurston Gains. Ashby served in Japan and Korea and later became a commercial pilot. Herring served as an aircraft mechanic and pilot during World War II and then continued in the military for 22 years, including flying 350 combat missions in Vietnam. Gains flew with a fighter group in Europe during World War II and later became a surgeon in Long Island, N.Y.

All three of the airmen trained at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Ala., a black college founded by Booker T. Washington. The college, home to a respected flight program, was chosen by the U.S. military as the center for training African American pilots for the war effort, according to the National Park Service website.

From 1941-1946 the school trained more than 1,000 African American pilots and thousands of additional support staff. The Tuskegee Airmen included pilots, navigators, bombardiers, maintenance and support staff, instructors, and other personnel. The trainees came from all over the country, and most were college graduates or undergraduates.

Many of the airmen trained at Tuskegee became members of the 332nd military flight unit, which flew successful missions over Sicily, the Mediterranean, and North Africa.



According to the National Park Service website, “The (Tuskegee) Airmen completed 15,000 sorties in approximately 1,500 missions, destroyed over 260 enemy aircraft, sank one enemy destroyer, and demolished numerous enemy installations. Several aviators died in combat.”

The Tuskegee Airmen were awarded numerous high honors, including Distinguished Flying Crosses, Legions of Merit, Silver Stars, Purple Hearts, the Croix de Guerre and the Red Star of Yugoslavia. A Distinguished Unit Citation was awarded to the 332nd Fighter Group for “outstanding performance and extraordinary heroism.”

During World War II the military forces were segregated. But in 1948 President Harry Truman enacted Executive Order 9981, which mandated equal opportunity in the U.S. armed forces and eventually led to the end of racial segregation in the military.

According to a website maintained by a group called Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., “The positive experience, the outstanding record of accomplishment and the superb behavior of black airmen during World War II, and after, were important factors in the initiation of the historic social change to achieve racial equality in America.”

Moton Field in Tuskegee, Ala. has been dedicated as the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, a testimony to the soaring spirit of early African American pilots: men who wouldn't be grounded.

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