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Making history was a 'job'

Washington D. Ross describes service as a Tuskegee Airman

By Crystal Krauskoff
Special to the Daily Tribune

BERKLEY -- A fire engine red plane and a hot shot pilot were all it took for Washington D. Ross to fall in love with flying.

As a child, Ross saw the fancy maneuvers of that plane take off near a vacant Kentucky field by his home and that's all the motivation he needed to embark on a heroic career that landed him in the history books.

The 89-year-old member of the 332nd Tuskegee Airmen shared stories of his life and brave World War II experiences with a full house at the Berkley Public Library Wednesday evening in honor of the Victory in Europe anniversary.

Ross graduated from Hampton Institute -- now Hampton University -- in 1941 and received his draft card about two weeks later.

He headed to Tuskegee for the physical and written exams required for the pilot training program. He received the highest score on the written test despite fighting racial hurdles of the time.

That's when his military time clock officially began.

"I just wanted to fly my missions and come home," said Ross, who became a pilot despite his father's resistance to the idea. "I was not mad at any Germans and I hope they were not mad at me."



Lt. Col. Washington D. Ross demonstrates a model version of the plane he flew during WWII.

Dennis Elliott/Daily Tribune



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Ross flew a total of 63 fighter missions in Europe -- most of which came with the duties as an escort plane to the bombers -- in a P-51 that he named after his wife, "Pearly Baby."

Despite only needing to fire his gun once and exceeding the required 50 flight missions, Ross remains humble about his contributions.

"It's not so much pride," said Ross, who retired in 1984 after teaching math in the Detroit Public Schools for 29 years. "Actually, the way I feel about it, I was doing something that I liked to do, which in doing jobs if you don't like it you better get out of it, and I was getting paid for it."

The Southfield resident served almost four years of active duty in the Air Force after training in Tuskegee, Ala., and 25 total years of service including time as a flight instructor and reservist. He retired from the military in 1981 as a lieutenant colonel.

What was it like to go on that first flight mission?

"One of the questions, especially from the students, they ask, 'Were you afraid? Were you scared?'" Ross said. "I say, 'Not really. You're just a little concerned about the unknown because we figured the P-51 was as good as the Germans had if we had to fight 'em ... well, we had the means to, but then after that initial first flight and you flew several missions, it's a job.'"

His "job" typically had him up in the air for about 4□ hours at a time among about 64 other fighter planes.

"See, we couldn't stay with the bombers the whole time," said Ross, who received a master's degree from the University of Detroit. "We'd meet them in a rendezvous place. That's the reason why we had the different colors (on the plane's tail). We were the red tails. Other outfits had different colors and they (the bombers) could then identify their escorts. We would either take them to the target or pick them up from the target and bring them back. We couldn't stay with them the whole time."

A passion that led to flying to places like Italy, Austria, Germany and France developed during his upbringing in the small town of Ashland, Ky. Ross and his brother often spent childhood days spotting planes near their home and then running toward the empty field where they would land.

The Ross boys picked the brains of the visiting pilots and they were hooked.

"One thing that impressed me one day was Texaco had a particular plane that was fire engine red," said Ross, who became a widower in 2003. "When he took off he put on a show for us. I said, 'Man, one day if I could do that I'm going to do it.' I never got to do that, but I did some other things I wasn't supposed to do.

"But I'll tell you, flying escort work became a job and the excitement soon wore off. Every day you go and you do the same thing."

It was a job that changed history.

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