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Gala hosted during grand weekend honoring Tuskegee Airmen

COLUMN BY DEBORAH HAYES MOORE • SPECIAL TO THE ADVERTISER • OCTOBER 19, 2008

When I think of the Tuskegee Airmen, NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw's book title, "The Greatest Generation," immediately comes to mind. The legends of that generation who trained at Tuskegee's Moton Field were special guests of honor during the recent celebration of the field's transformation and its grand opening and dedication as a National Historic Site.

Years have passed since their "war years," but they came from all over the country for a weekend of fellowship, friendship and tributes. They enjoyed every minute as an opportunity to educate the hundreds who approached them over the course of several days last week.

Most had calling and business cards at the ready when questions were asked by those who listened and learned from the heroes as they shared the details of their service units and fighter squadrons.

News of their contributions were spread as more than 1,200 people gathered at the Renaissance Montgomery Hotel & Spa at the Convention Center for a Saturday evening Gala Reception and Banquet hosted by the Friends of the Tuskegee Airmen Inc.

Guests gathered for the black-tie event before its designated 6 o'clock start and didn't leave until festivities ended just before 11:30 p.m. The night was billed as a teaching experience for everyone, including selected students from Macon and Montgomery County Public Schools. Many of them were essay contest winners, but all learned about the Airmen and the example they set during World War II.

Music to remember

Airmen honorees came from across the nation to be showered with praise during three days of events that included the grand opening of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site at Moton Field in Tuskegee and a "Music Under the Stars" celebration at Tuskegee Square. Hosted by Noah Hopkins, the latter program was attended by thousands who didn't want the night to end as they listened to the swing and big band music of the all-female "Ladies Must Swing" band from Wisconsin.

Many honorees and guests loaded buses and cars to travel to Montgomery early Saturday evening to attend a special tribute gala, and the ladies' band was already set up to entertain them again during an hour-long cocktail reception held outside of the hotel's Exhibit Hall C.

Glenn Miller's "Take the A Train" played as guests walked along red carpet runners to enjoy a scrumptious 3-course dinner inside the grand room. There, all had the opportunity to preview an excerpt from a documentary; and to enjoy an end-of-the-evening celebration featuring Grammy Award winning recording artist and songwriter Lionel Richie, who almost had them "Dancing on the Ceiling."

A Tuskegee native, Richie returned to the area for the special tribute and to rock the house in a room filled with friends, family and national fans who crowded near the stage. They raised digital cameras like paparazzi, or partied at their tables as he sang favorites including "Penny Lover," "Brick House," "Three Times A Lady," "Hello," "Easy" and "All Night Long."

Many of the Tuskegee Airmen had taught Richie to swim and to fly, and were considered a part of the family who raised him in the town where he was born and later kicked off his stellar career. Tuskegee Airman Lt. Col. Herbert Carter and his wife, Mildred, enjoyed the night's tribute banquet with the entertainer and his sister, Deborah Richie of Los Angeles. Long-time friend Brenda Dowdy Robinson of Tuskegee and her husband, Mike Robinson, were there, too.

A little help from friends

The Friends of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site (TANHS), which hosted the gala, was formed in February as an auxiliary to augment and support the programs of the National Historic Site at Moton Field. Friends' board member Charles Thompson, president of the Tuskegee Area Chamber of Commerce, and his wife, Lynn, were among those welcoming original Tuskegee Airmen, their guests, dignitaries, corporate sponsors and local school children throughout the evening.

Milton Davis, chairman of the Friends' Gala Reception and Banquet committee, served as master of ceremonies, opening the event with the declaration, "The eagles have returned to the nest." Those he referred to were seated amid tables as far as the eye could see. Round tables covered in black linens were centered with crystal vases filled with red roses and yellow mums, and accented with the glow of votives reflecting against mirrored tiles.

Guests enjoyed a scrumptious meal that was served to the sounds of "Chattanooga Choo Choo," a popular tune in the WWII days. Their cheesecake dessert was drizzled with strawberry coulis and accented with a white chocolate square embellished with the Friends' insignia.

Tributes to the legends

The Airmen had lived in dormitories on the campus of Tuskegee Institute, where they ate in the school's dining halls and "dated its beautiful women," said Tuskegee University president Benjamin Payton. Payton was among the many paying tribute to the Airmen along with Tuskegee native, syndicated radio host and

philanthropist Tom Joyner, whose father was among the third class of Tuskegee Airmen. Joyner buzzed Moton Field on his way to the area, honoring the heroes from his airplane, whose tail is painted as a replica of an old Red Tail flyer.

Born in Tuskegee, Lt. Gen. Daniel James III, USAF Retired, son of the late Gen. Daniel "Chappie" James Jr., was on hand to extend a military salute to the living legends. Tuskegee native Col. Palmer Sullins, US Army Retired, president of the Black Pilots of America Inc. and Friends board member came from New Orleans to pay tribute to the Airmen. Cmdr. Ernie Taylor represented the Organization of Black Airline Pilots and declared, "they are special not just to Tuskegee, but to the world." Col. Roosevelt Lewis represented Negro American International in his tribute to the Airmen.

Others honoring the Airmen included Tuskegee Airman Theodore Lumpkin Jr. ; Sheron Rose of Hyundai; Milton McGregor of Victoryland; state Rep. Pebblin Warren, D-Tuskegee; Macon County Probate Judge Alfonza Menefee; and Tuskegee Mayor Johnny Ford. Ford and his wife, Judge Joyce London Alexander Ford, enjoyed the night with Union Springs Mayor John McGowan; Judge Yvette Alexander of Louisiana; attorneys Renee Brooks of Texas, Jo Glasco of Maryland, and Jesse Demp of Virginia; Christopher Ford; and Carl Sterling, who had arrived from Haiti for the occasion.

An oral history

As a celebration of the service of many, and the transformation of Moton Field, consistent praise was also heaped on representatives of the National Park Service, including site director Deanna Mitchell, John Whitfield and Carla Graves.

As a special tribute, they were among those in attendance for a preview excerpt of the AMS Production Group's, "Flying for Freedom," which includes the untold stories of Tuskegee Airmen and their surviving family members.

During the event, I caught up with Lt. Gen. Stephen Miller, who represented Maxwell Air Force Base with his wife, Teresa, as they chatted with Col. Charles McGee, USAF Retired of Bethesda, Md., of the Tuskegee Airmen Memorial Fund. McGee was among those seen in the documentary footage, along with Lt. Col. Robert Ashby, also an honored guest of the evening.

Hollywood directors and producers Anthony Hemingway and Charles Johnson were among the guests who received a shout-out from Lionel Richie for their part in continuing the legacy of education with their production of "The Red Tails."

Medals of Honor

Lt. Gen. Russell Davis, USAF Retired of Arlington, Va., and National President of the Tuskegee Airmen and board chairman of the Friends, represented those who came along in the next generation.

Davis had mingled during the reception earlier in the evening, pausing upon the arrival of Malvin Whitfield to present the WWII gunner with a special medal. The honoree was accompanied during the evening by his wife, Nola, his proud daughter, CNN News anchor Fredricka Whitfield, her husband, John Glenn, and their son, John Malvin Glenn.

Several honorees arrived for the event wearing brilliant red and blue jackets bearing Tuskegee Airmen emblems. Most of those wearing red jackets had arrived from a variety of East Coast cities, including Tuskegee Airmen Noel Harris of Merrit Island, Fla., who spent time chatting with Thomas McPherson, Yusuf Mustafa and his sister, former U.S. Magistrate Delores Boyd.

Some blue jacketed-Airmen came from northern and Midwest cities, including Henry Moore of Philadelphia, a crew chief with the 332nd Fighter squadron, who delighted in sharing a bit of history about their missions on B25s.

Other honorees chose tuxedo ensembles that were accented with their Congressional Medals of Honor. The commitment to country and military service was evident as several guests arrived in formal military dress adorned with more medals and war ribbons than you could shake a stick at.

Nancy Lieutenant-Colon, the first woman to hold the presidency of the Tuskegee Airmen, had made history years earlier as the first black member of the Regular Army Nurse Corps. She enjoyed the weekend of events and the reception and dinner with her sister, Amy Lieutenant. Both arrived from New York and chatted with Monica Allen, while the event's local host committee chairman, Harold Boone, and his wife, Wanda, mingled with a host of other arrivals.

Just glad to be there

Pat McGregor, and Brig. Gen. Ed Crowell and his wife, Ernestine, were among those seen there, as were Bobbie Knight of Alabama Power Co.; and Kaye Marie and Michael Briddell, assistant to Montgomery Mayor Bobby Bright. They were excited to be there and to represent the City of Montgomery for the occasion.

Vera Harris and her daughter, Valda Montgomery, said they did not want to miss the chance to honor the Tuskegee Airmen, and arrived proudly to do so in memory of their husband and father, Airman Richard Henry Harris.

Others enjoying the gala included James Earl Massey, dean emeritus, Tuskegee University Chapel; Verlyn and Greg Calhoun of Calhoun Enterprises; Jeff Underwood; Kenneth Thomas; H. Lewis Gillis, his wife,

Gladys, and their daughter, Kendra; Nicole and Robert Simms Thompson; Wanda and William Harris; Lillie Pearl and Charlie Hardy; Montgomery Police Chief Art Baylor and his wife, Denise; Cheryl and Clinton Carter; Tamara and Frank Lee; Janice Franklin; Cameron Martindale and her husband, Elvin Stanton; Bonnie Evans; Tina McManama; Bobby Davis of First Tuskegee Bank; Patricia and Michael Thurman and their son, Jonathan; Father Manuel Williams; Darrell McDonald; WSFA reporter Eileen Jones, who danced the night away; news anchor Tonya Terry from WSFA; Perry Varner, Kevin Sinclair, Rhonda Hargrove, Cedric Varner and many others.

The event was sponsored by Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama, Macon County Greyhound Park, the Utilities Board of Tuskegee, Alfa Insurance, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Boeing Company, the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce, the Tuskegee Area Chamber of Commerce, Thomas, Means, Gillis & Seay P.C., NationView, RBC Bank, McQuick Printing, the National Park Service, Eastern National, Attorney Robert Simms Thompson and the Law Offices of Milton Carver Davis.

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