

# Project honors work of Tuskegee Airmen

By Starla Vaughns Cherin  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (NNPA) - Segregation was on the verge of easing in 1941 when the first 13 of a quota of 33 Black pilots began segregated training at the Tuskegee Army Air Field Flying School in Alabama. Denied entry into the U.S. Air Corps in World War I, it would be almost 25 years later when the first began their training.

Once the first group was trained, the men spent a year and a half landlocked, unable to utilize their newfound skill as Jim Crow's 'Whites only' reigned in America. The 1944 Presidential Executive Order to integrate facilities at military bases was the same year the Tuskegee Airmen began their first mission to patrol over Naples Harbor.

A year later, 101 Black officers were arrested for attempting to enter a Whites-only Officers Club in Indiana. Of that group, three were court martialed and one convicted.

That same year, the 332nd Fighter Group received the Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation for a mission that destroyed German bomber jets.

Later, they would have the enviable position of zero casualties as they escorted bomber missions in World War II. In the air, their planes were easily identified by the painted Red Tail on their P-51C Mustangs.

Fourteen of the 1,000 men that broke the color barrier in the U.S. Army Air Corps were honored in a community celebration at the African-American Research Library and Cultural Center, a prelude to the McDonald's Air and Sea Show and Fleet Week and marked the second launching of the Red Tail Project.

A restoration of the Tuskegee Airmen's Red Tail P-51C Mustang will be part of a mobile museum that travels around the country telling their story. Project coordinators hope to raise an additional \$2 million to complete the restoration and buy a 50-foot trailer for the mobile museum.

"We have the wings to finish and it's an absolutely doable project. The Red Tail Project marks an important chapter in American history. It is an educational tool that teaches an understanding of the obstacles they had to overcome. Finally their history is recognized and they will receive the justice and honor they deserve for their work in WWII," said Red

Tail Project leader Doug Rozendaal.

Lauderdale Lakes Commissioner LeVoyd Williams, Fort Lauderdale Commissioner Carlton Moore and other local leaders collected \$5,000 to contribute to the project.

Congressman Alcee Hastings helped secure the Congressional Gold Medal for the Airmen. "It is the highest honor bestowed upon U.S. citizens and was passed

by a unanimous resolution April 11. They will be awarded the medal on the floor of the House of Representatives later this month," said Hastings' Chief of Staff, Art Kennedy.

In 1945 the 332nd Tuskegee Airmen Fighter Group destroyed more than 25 German bomber jets in a plane that traveled maximum 505 miles per hour. To Lieutenant Kevin Granville, executive officer to Broward

Sheriff Ken Jenne, that was the ultimate act of bravery and what makes him a fan of the airmen and their aircraft since he was eight years old.

"Americans were using propeller planes at that time. They were shooting down planes that were much faster and remember, they were only 19 or 20 years old at the time. I've known their story since I was in third grade. I've seen the Tuskegee Airmen movie at least 20

times," Granville said.

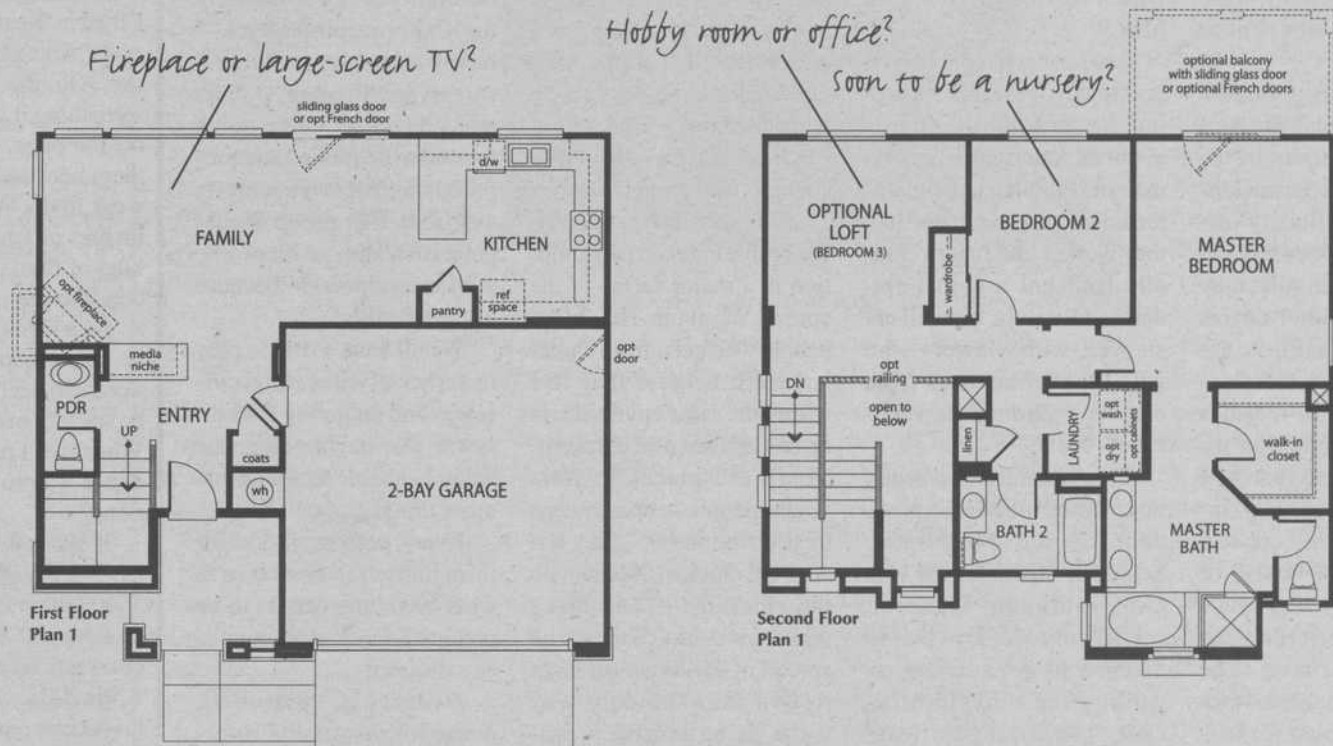
The Airmen's story inspired youth from Walker Elementary and Dillard, Stranahan and Boyd Anderson High Schools. Andre Thorpe and Mariah Sutton said they were motivated by the story.

"I was impressed they never lost a bomber and it inspired me to do better," said Thorpe. "I was amazed at how much they went through," added Sutton.

The Airmen were each given personalized original bronze sculptures by world-renowned sculpture George Gadson, who also donated a larger version to the research and cultural center's Special Collection.

"I'm overwhelmed," said Tuskegee Airman Lieutenant Colonel Leo Gray, who resides in Broward County.

Starla Vaughns Cherin writes for the Westside Gazette.



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