

Tuskegee Airmen receive overdue honor

*By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice*
WASHINGTON (NNPA) - The crowd, the cheers and the applause in the United States Capitol Rotunda belied the segregationist homecoming that the Tuskegee Airmen received 60 years ago. The bestowing of the Congressional Gold Medal upon the Black air corps was viewed as a 21st century stride for racial progress and an inspiration to fight for justice.

"Today we give the Tuskegee Airmen the heroes' welcome they have so long deserved," said Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

"In 1942, the African-American paper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, called for a double victory campaign: victory in the fight against fascism abroad, and victory in the fight against racism at home. Today, we come together to pay tribute to the Tuskegee Airmen, who with planes and the power of their example, fought against both of these foes, foreign and domestic. And as we honor them with the Gold Medal today, we take another in a long series of steps toward victory at home."

That victory is hastened by their example, said Congressional Black Caucus Chairwoman Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick (D-Mich.).

"We will fight with the courage that you displayed," she said. "And we promise that we will never let you down."

The Congressional Gold Medal is the highest civilian award bestowed by the U.S. Congress. Emotions ran high during and after the ceremony, packed with family members, supporters and members of Congress. Dozens of people were turned away because of a lack of space.

Tears streaking her face, Robin Roberts, co-anchor for

ABC Good Morning America, recalled her father, Lawrence Roberts, a Tuskegee Airman who died three years ago.

"He was one of the originals," said the Tuskegee native in an interview with the NNPA News Service. "But, I didn't know until later because they were such proud men. They would let others speak for them. He didn't get on a soapbox. It was many years later in my teens and in my 20s that I found out exactly what they had accomplished."

Roberts recalled going with him to the training field in 2003, flying one of the planes that he flew, "and fully experienced what it was that they experienced."

Not everything. Humiliating segregationist laws caused the fighter group to fly laudatory missions in which they are believed never to have lost a bomber that they escorted. Yet, on the ground, they were not even allowed to eat in the same cafeteria with White pilots. They had to eat in the kitchen with the cooks.

President George Bush's father, former President George Herbert Walker Bush, was one of those White pilots. Preparing to award the medal, President Bush recalled the difference in his father's experience.

"He flew with a group of brave young men who endured difficult times in the defense of our country. Yet for all they sacrificed and all they lost, in a way, they were very fortunate, because they never had the burden of having their every mission, their every success, their every failure viewed through the color of their skin," Bush said.

"Nobody told them they were a credit to their race. Nobody refused to return their salutes. Nobody expected them to bear the daily humiliations while wearing the uniform of their country."

He continued, "It was different for the men in this room. When America entered World War II, it might have been easy for them to do little for our country. After all, the country didn't do much for them. Even the Nazis asked why African-American men would fight for a country that treated them so unfairly." Bush concluded the presentation with a salute after saying, "I would like to offer a gesture to help atone for all the unreturned salutes and

unforgivable indignities. And so, on behalf of the office I hold, and a country that honors you, I salute you for the service to the United States of America."

The bill to honor the Airmen was co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.).

Rangel said the story of the Tuskegee Airmen is synonymous with the story of Black people.

"A nation that rejected

you because of your color, said you couldn't fight, said you couldn't fly. And then you had to go out there and prove them how wrong they were," said Rangel.

"You showed them that all we need is a chance... As a high school drop out who turned around and went back, if I can become chair of Ways and Means, then every one of us can do something, too. You remember, slaves built this building," Rangel said to thunderous applause.

Little was nationally known about the Tuskegee Airmen until a 1995 HBO film, "The Tuskegee Airmen." The Moton Field, Tuskegee, where the Black airmen trained, has been the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site since 1998. Many accomplishments of African-Americans during enslavement and throughout history have been omitted from history books and museums.

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Gibbons

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President Clinton maneuver through the impeachment proceedings.

"You can bet Lowell will be a frequent public speaker (on Gibbons' behalf) — verbally on sidewalk or in print," said Douglas Kmiec, a former White House counsel in the Reagan and first Bush administrations.

Gibbons' wife, Dawn, has said she's applying for a second mortgage on their home to help cover legal costs stemming from the FBI probe.

Last week, she said she did nothing wrong in working in 2004 as a paid consultant for another defense company that got a federal contract with help of her husband, then a congressman. He took office as governor on Jan. 1.