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Tuskegee Airman recalls history of World War II, KCK neighborhood

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By NICK SLOAN, Kansas Staff Writer

He lives in a 200-year-old Kansas City, Kan., home and he served his country during World War II as a Tuskegee Airman. So perhaps there's no one better to represent the history of the Douglass-Sumner neighborhood than Sgt. Ozell Hawkins.

Along with his daughter, Carolyn Hawkins-Loney, Ozell Hawkins lives on Oakland Street near the Sumner Academy of Arts and Sciences. Born in KCK, Hawkins has lived in the area his entire life.

Proudly wearing his Tuskegee Airmen cap, Hawkins and his daughter sat down with students from Sumner Academy

this week to share their life experiences - including his role as a member of the famous military unit and as a resident of the Douglass-Sumner neighborhood.

The all-black Tuskegee Airmen unit was formed in 1941 by order of the U.S. Congress. Hawkins was assigned as a flight chief to the 100th Fighter Squadron in the 332nd Fighter Group of the Tuskegee Airmen and served in World War II, spending most of his time in Italy during the war.

While the German Luftwaffe provided stiff resistance during combat, the United States War Department may have been the biggest obstacle to the Tuskegee Airmen being formed and used in battle against the German war machine. The War Department initially opposed the program and tried to make it difficult for the black pilots to succeed. Many of them still did.

For Hawkins, the segregated nature of the 1940s U.S. military was not a unique experience.

“It really didn't bother me,” he said. “I saw a lot of it in Wyandotte County



Sgt. Ozell Hawkins showed off his Congressional Gold Medal this week after a group of Sumner Academy of Arts and Sciences students interviewed him for the DASH project. **Kansan photo by NICK SLOAN**

and Kansas City, Kan. I just remembered the saying, "Give me liberty or give me death."

Hawkins said he was never in danger of being shot down or injured during combat, even as the Tuskegee Airmen took on the feared German Luftwaffe across Europe, Africa and the Mediterranean. They often found success against the Germans, and were credited with shooting down over 110 Luftwaffe aircraft. The Germans nicknamed the unit "Schwarze Vogelmenschen" or the Black Birdmen.

"We were the first to shoot those German jets down," Hawkins said. "It had never been done before. We were the best, and we wanted to prove we were the best."

More often than not, the Tuskegee Airmen performed better and lost considerably fewer units than their white counterparts during the war.

Hawkins was one of an estimated 17 members from Kansas, and 30 from the Kansas City area. About 1,000 blacks were trained in Tuskegee, Ala.

Based in part on the success of the program, President Truman integrated the military by executive order in 1948, declaring the "equality of treatment for all persons in the armed services, without regard to race, color, religion or national origin."

Carolyn Hawkins-Loney has written about her father in issues of the Kansas City Call newspaper, and helped maintain memorabilia from the World War II era about the Tuskegee Airmen.

"It's an honor to know my father was a Tuskegee Airman," she said. "I'm just a very proud daughter."

In 2007, the Tuskegee Airmen were honored by President Bush; each member in attendance received the Congressional Gold Medal. About 30 from Kansas and Missouri were honored at a ceremony at the Truman Library last fall.

"I'm just glad he was living when they were honored," Hawkins-Loney said.

While Hawkins' national honor may have come late, that did not tarnish the event for Hawkins.

"I was just really honored and happy we got honored," he said.

Living in a four-generation, 200-year-old home, both are excited about the proposed changes to the neighborhood.

"I'm very excited about it and ready for it," she said. "I was born and raised in this neighborhood. I can't wait until we build more housing and have more neighbors of all colors and nationalities near us."

For those who want a glimpse into the life of Hawkins and the other airmen, he recommends the 1995 film "The Tuskegee Airmen," starring Laurence Fishburne, Cuba Gooding, Jr., Mekhi Phifer and John Lithgow.

"Everything in that movie is 99 percent true," he said. "Tuskegee was hell's kitchen."

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