

Contra Costa Times

Tuskegee Airmen honored with historic site in Ala.

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TUSKEGEE, Ala.—Lt. Col. John Mulzac stood on the asphalt at Moton Field—the same grounds where he trained decades ago to become one of the country's first black military pilots—and wept.

Mulzac and hundreds of his fellow Tuskegee Airmen and their representatives reunited Friday where their World War II service eventually led to desegregation in the U.S. armed forces. The field was named a National Historic Site.

An interpretive center was also opened in a hangar at the site. In a surprise announcement, Gov. Bob Riley unveiled a huge green and white sign designating part of I-85 as the "Tuskegee Airmen Memorial Highway."

"When I think about what we went through, this just brings tears to my eyes," said Mulzac, 84.

Thousands of people from across the country attended the opening ceremony Friday afternoon, which launched a weekend of festivities celebrating the fruition of a dream turned reality.

"The Tuskegee Airmen had their beginning here at Moton Field and dared to make a difference," the Rev. William C. Lennard said. "They did it for God, for themselves and for every citizen of the United States of America. Their persistence, dedication and fortitude enabled them to overcome all manner of challenges."

The airmen fought Adolf Hitler overseas and Jim Crow on American soil, being degraded as second-class citizens and watching as German prisoners of war were treated better than them.

At first called the "Tuskegee Experiment," the first aviation cadet class began in July 1941 with 13 students at the Tuskegee Army Air Field, about 40 miles east of Montgomery. Black people weren't allowed to fly in the military at the time, and the "experiment" was to see whether they could pilot airplanes and handle heavy machinery.

The airmen went on more than 15,000 combat trips throughout Europe, the Mediterranean and North Africa.

Nearly 1,000 pilots were trained at the Tuskegee Army Air Field before it closed in 1946. After that, the all-black units were sent to an Ohio air base. President Truman's 1948 order to desegregate the country's armed forces eventually led to a military in which blacks served alongside their white counterparts.

Servicemen and women of all races and ages milled around the field Friday, taking in a taste of the airmen's' daily lives in the museum.

Lt. Cmdr. Eric Bush traveled from Pensacola, Fla., along with four fellow U.S. Navy pilots and one of their flight students "to see history and where it was made."

"Their legacy will be here for generations to come and for others to see," Bush said.