

## Tuskegee Airmen Honored At Opening

TUSKEGEE - Hundreds of former Tuskegee Airmen got their place in the sun Friday -- basking in the glow of praise from a grateful state and nation.

"We will never be able to fully repay you for what you have done," Gov. Bob Riley told them at the dedication ceremony of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site. "You have changed the nation. You have changed it for good."

More than 3,000 spectators gathered outside a hangar used during pilot training for the first group of black pilots in U.S. history.

The ranks of the aging Airmen are dwindling fast, but about 350 of them arrived from around the country to reminisce about what it was like during training, give interviews and, most of all, sign lots of autographs.

They are in their 80s, but just as proud today as they were when they were young and represented their country at a time when they were seen as second-class citizens and not allowed to serve with white troops during World War II.

The event continues today and into Sunday as the National Park Service, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee Airmen Inc., and other groups pull out all the stops to honor them.

The project is still a few years from completion, but the restored hangar and other facilities have given Moton Field a new look -- one that is expected to attract tourists from around the country.

Retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. Russell Davis, who is president of the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., said his military successes can be traced back directly to the accomplishments of the elderly men sitting in front of him.

"You set a high bar, but were an outstanding example for those of us who came behind you," said Davis, a combat veteran of Vietnam. "I am so proud to be a part of the Tuskegee Airmen enterprise."

The booming voice of Tuskegee University President Benjamin Payton set the tone for the program, especially when he recounted a common belief from the dark days of World War II when America was reeling from losses at Pearl Harbor.

Black Americans quickly responded to the national emergency, but Payton noted that those who wanted to fly received little support from many people in positions of power.

"The Tuskegee Airmen grew out of the struggle and pain and hard-fought battles of a people who had to go up against some of the strongest pillars of power and influence in our country," Payton said.

They had to prove themselves not only during rigorous training in Alabama, but also in aerial combat with skilled German pilots and ground crews intent on shooting them down.

"Many wanted us to fail," said Payton. "People didn't want African Americans to fight for America because it meant turning over the whole concept that African Americans were not human."

Today's program includes aircraft displays, tours, a panel discussion and other events highlighted by a gala at the Renaissance Montgomery Hotel and Spa at the Convention Center featuring Tuskegee native Lionel Richie.

Friday's dedication was as much a celebration as a carefully planned event with descendants of the Airmen watching in awe as praise was heaped on their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers.

A name on the lips of many Airmen was the late Daniel "Chappie" James, who helped lead the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II and, just before his death in 1978, became the first black to reach the rank of four-star general.

"People often ask me to describe my father and the best way to do that is to say he was the quintessential American patriot," said his son, Daniel James III, a retired three-star general in the Air Force.

James said, when he was growing up, his father rarely talked to him about tactics and other aspects of combat, so he found a somewhat surreptitious way to learn when his dad's friends came to visit.

"I'd sneak down to the landing and listen to them talk about those days," said James. "I've never forgotten that."

It was an era of rationing at home and of dreaded visits from mailmen and those who delivered telegrams telling families that their loved ones had been wounded or killed in combat.

It was also a time of uplifting music, and this week a group of women musicians drove all the way from Wisconsin to Tuskegee to take part in the program.

They call themselves "Ladies Must Swing" and even dressed the part, wearing the kind of outfits and hairdos that were popular during World War II when "Don't Sit Under The Apple Tree (With Anyone Else But Me)" was all the rage.