

Tuskegee Airmen Get Congressional Medal

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE, Associated Press Writer Thu Mar 29, 5:13 PM ET

AP PHOTO-President Bush, right, greets Tuskegee Airmen Dr. Roscoe Brown, center, and Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson, left, in the Capitol Rotunda during the Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony on March 29, 2007.



WASHINGTON -

President Bush saluted the Tuskegee airmen on Thursday, six decades after they completed their World War II mission and returned home to a country that discriminated against them because they were black.

"Even the Nazis asked why African-American men would fight for a country that treated them so unfairly," Bush told the group of legendary black aviators, who received a Congressional Gold Medal — the most prestigious Congress has to offer.

"These men in our presence felt a special sense of urgency. They were fighting two wars. One was in Europe and the other took place in the hearts and minds of our citizens," he said.

Bush then saluted the airmen, saying he offered the gesture to "help atone for all the unreturned salutes and unforgivable indignities" they endured.

"We are so overjoyed," said Roscoe Brown Jr., after he and five other Tuskegee Airmen accepted the medal on behalf of the group. "We are so proud today and I think America is proud today."

Bush, members of Congress and other dignitaries joined some 300 airmen, widows and other relatives in the sun-splashed Capitol Rotunda for the ceremony recognizing the Tuskegee Airmen — some of them walking with the aid of canes, others being pushed in wheelchairs — for their long-ago heroism.

"It's never too late for your country to say that you've done a great job for us," retired Col. Elmer D. Jones, 89, of Arlington, Va., said in an interview this week. Jones was a maintenance officer during the war.

Retired Lt. Col. Walter L. McCreary, shot from the sky during a mission in October 1944 and held prisoner for nine months in Germany, said it hurt that the group's accomplishments had not been honored years earlier.

"We took it in stride. It's a recognition long overdue," said McCreary, also 89, of Burke, Va.

House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., the highest-ranking black member of Congress, echoed McCreary's sentiment. Many of the Tuskegee Airmen also trained at Walterboro Army Airfield in his congressional district.

"People are now beginning to come to grips with our history," Clyburn said Thursday in an interview. "Our history is what it is. It's never going to change." The Tuskegee Airmen were recruited into an Army Air Corps program that trained blacks to fly and maintain combat aircraft. President Roosevelt had overruled his top generals and ordered that such a program be created. But even after they were admitted, many commanders continued to believe the Tuskegee Airmen didn't have the smarts, courage and patriotism to do what was being asked of them.

Nearly 1,000 fighter pilots trained as a segregated unit at an air base in Tuskegee, Ala. Not allowed to practice or fight with their white counterparts, the Tuskegee Airmen distinguished themselves from the rest by painting the tails of their airplanes red, which led to them becoming known as the "Red Tails." Hundreds saw combat throughout Europe, the Mediterranean and North Africa, escorting bomber aircraft on missions and protecting them from the enemy. Dozens died in the fighting; others were held as prisoners of war.

"The Tuskegee airmen left a segregated country to fight in war, and unfortunately returned to one that was still segregated," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (news, bio, voting record), D-Calif. "Though Hitler was defeated, prejudice was not. ... Today we are trying to right that wrong."

It was long thought the Tuskegee Airmen amassed a perfect record of losing no bombers to the enemy during World War II. But new research has cast doubt on that.

Two historians recently said Air Force records and other documents show at least a few bombers escorted by Tuskegee pilots were downed by enemy planes. A former World War II bomber pilot said last year that his plane was shot down while being escorted by the unit.

Congress has awarded gold medals to more than 300 individuals and groups since giving the first one to George Washington in 1776. Originally, they went only to military leaders, but Congress broadened the scope to include authors,

entertainers, notables in science and medicine, athletes, humanitarians, public servants and foreign officials.

Other black recipients include singer Marian Anderson, athletes Joe Louis, Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson, civil rights activists Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, the Little Rock Nine, Rosa Parks and Dorothy Height, and statesmen Nelson Mandela of South Africa and former Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The medal for the airmen, made possible through legislation by Sen. Carl Levin (news, bio, voting record), D-Mich., and Rep. Charles Rangel (news, bio, voting record), D-N.Y., and signed last year by Bush, will go to the Smithsonian Institution for display.