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Spring, vintage styles set to come down the runway at Firehouse benefit show

Dressed for success

By Gage Cogswell

It's still February. The shortest month of the year is a day longer this leap year, and it seems endless, doesn't it? And we haven't even had that much snow ... yet. There's still March and then April and even part of May to get through before winter weather finally vacates the area.

The Firehouse is addressing the problem by presenting its benefit Cabin Fever Fashion Show Feb. 28 to help assuage the boredom resulting from being cooped up for too long. Fashion show producer Diane Gage, who is also the owner of Moxie Fashion Consignment in Rowley, is coordinating the show, which will combine vintage fashions with a preview of the very latest spring fashions just reaching area retailers and from local designers.

It will be a little different.

"A straight fashion show can be tedious," says Gage, whose company Proteam Events has pro-

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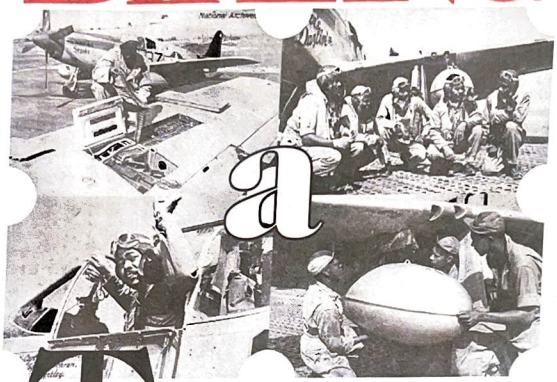
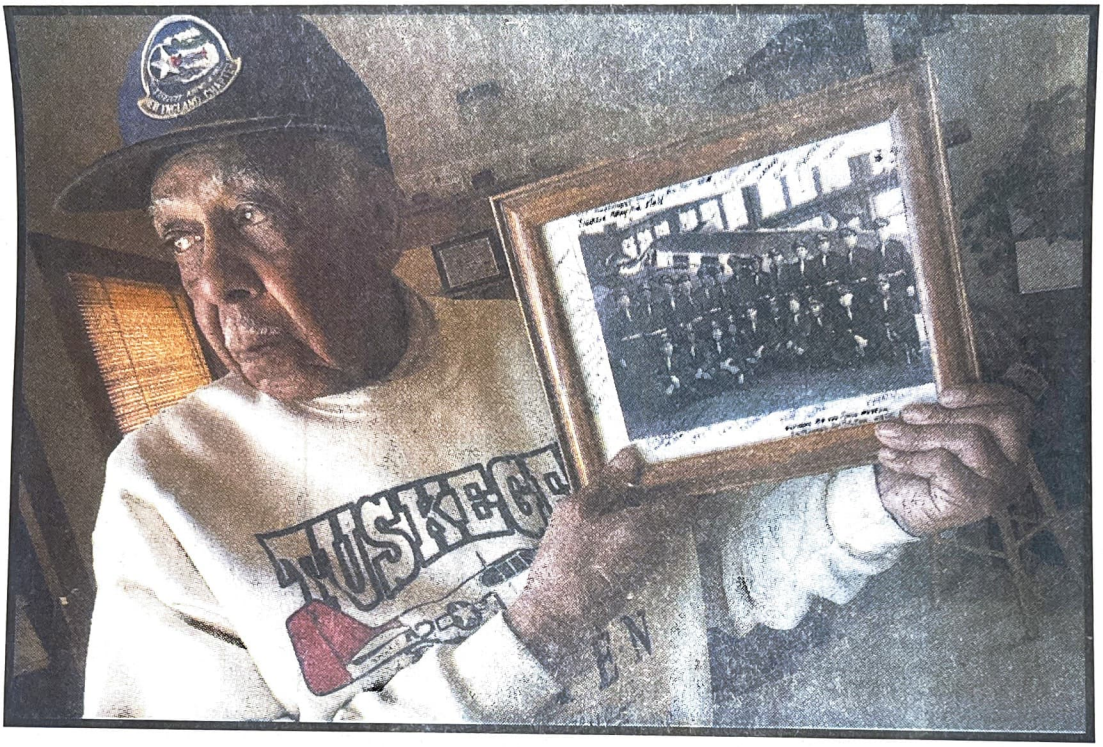
BLAZING a TRAIL



A member of the elite Tuskegee Airmen, Luther McIlwain shares his story of discrimination and perseverance during World War II



STAFF PHOTO BY NICOLE GOODHUE

Tuskegee Airman Luther McIlwain holds an old photograph including him and more than 20 of his fellow airmen. Only two in the photo, including McIlwain, are still living today.

By Rob Marino

On a hot South Carolina day in September 1943, a young Luther McIlwain and several other students were sitting on the green of a college campus in shorts and T-shirts.

"This black guy came on the campus with a pilot's cap, wings on his shirt and gold bars on his shoulders and I had never seen a black officer in my life," the Methuen resident recalls. "We all ganged around this guy and it was like nirvana, it was like serendipity, it was like any of those kind of words."

The officer told McIlwain he graduated from Tuskegee Pilot School and that he was given 30 days to come home and visit his relatives before being transferred to the Detroit area to train for combat flying. If he completed his training, the officer explained to McIlwain he would then go overseas.

Interested in signing up for the pilot school, McIlwain was directed by the officer to visit the local recruiting office.

"Later on that afternoon, I went and talked to some of the guys around campus and I found out where the recruiting office was, and I was so damn scared of being in South Carolina. I didn't go anywhere because 90 percent of the boys at the college were from South Carolina and they would talk about lynching. They schooled me about not going into stores on Main Street and purchasing anything,"

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BLAZING a TRAIL

STAFF PHOTO BY NICOLE GOODHUE

Tuskegee Airman Luther McIlwain goes through folders of photos and thank-you notes from his various speaking engagements.

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he says, adding his friends called him Yank. "They said, 'Don't be walking into no restaurant because the police will beat you up. That's the way it is down here.'"

Despite the warnings of his peers, McIlwain found himself walking from campus to the recruiting office on Main Street. When he got there, he got far from a warm welcome from a group of white military men. "They looked up and with a Southern dialect, said, 'Nigger, what you want?' I'm ready to run. Can you imagine? It's 9 o'clock in the morning and there's seven or eight guys all bigger than me and this guy looks up from his desk and says, 'Nigger, what you want?' Like I'm the damn scum of the Earth.

"One of them said that the United States Army wasn't going to trust a nigger like me and then another guy said to me, 'A guy like you needs to be put on a farm and put behind a mule to plow because that's all you're good for. What the hell do you know about flying? You're not going to be trusted. You can't learn to fly anyway. You're ignorant.'"

It's a personal experience shared by many other black men, McIlwain says, all with the capability to become pilots, but who were never given the chance.

For this black man, however, luck was on his side.

McIlwain went on to became a member of the elite all-black Tuskegee Airmen. He served in the all-black unit from 1943-47, earning a rare triple rating as bombardier, navigator and rated weather observer. He was one of four black officers assigned to train the first group of flying officers for the Chinese Air Force, flew with the British Royal Air Force in tests over the Atlantic Ocean, and placed first in a post-war competition of combat-style maneuvers.

McIlwain, now 83, will talk about his WWII experiences March 13 when he'll be the featured speaker at the fifth lecture in the series "Personal Stories of Early Aviation" held by Plum Island Community Airfield, Inc. (PICA).

Early struggles

Born outside of Columbia, S.C., McIlwain and his family moved to South Lawrence when he was 3. At age 8, McIlwain's family moved in with his aunt and uncle in Methuen when the Great Depression hit. Living in the same home today where his relatives lived, McIlwain reflects on a childhood that centered around a tight-knit family and plenty of hard work.

"This house had no electric lights, no running water and there was a well out back," he recalls. "My job, because I was the only boy, was to make sure that there was plenty of wood so that mother could start the stove and cook."

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'How many white guys would have gone through what I told you about the first time I went to the recruiting office to get on that train? I cried many, many times, because that's the only relief I could get. Who the hell was I going to complain to? I'm in Fayetteville, N.C. I don't even know where that is.'

The Black Birdmen

By Rob Marino

Before Rosa Parks' made headlines in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Ala. bus to white people and before Martin Luther King Jr. gave his hailed "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, the Tuskegee Airmen were already making history in the pursuit of civil rights.

An elite all-black flying group of fighter planes and twin-engine bombers that flew many combat missions in North Africa and Europe during World War II, the Tuskegee Airmen earned global veneration for their tremendous track record. As bomber escorts, they are reputed to have never lost a bomber to enemy fighters during missions over Europe.

The tails of their aircraft painted red, the Tuskegee Airmen soon were revered by white American bomber crews as "The Black Redtail Angels." The Germans, who both feared and respected the airmen, called them "Schwartze Vogelmenschen" or "Bird Blackmen."

With an outstanding combat record including more than 1,500 missions, 66 airmen gave their lives in combat and 32 were captured as prisoners of war. They were recognized by receiving over 850 medals, including the Presidential Unit Citation, the highest award that can be given to a military unit.

But before proving themselves to the world with their stellar performance, the Tuskegee Airmen would be shunned, laughed at and everything else in between. The dedicated and determined young men who enlisted to become America's first black military airmen did so at a time when many people thought black men lacked intelligence, skill, courage and patriotism.

Some congressmen, however, championed the cause of blacks to serve in the Air Corps and sought the passage of a law that would ultimately create the Tuskegee Airmen. Approved April 3, 1939, the law provided for the large-scale expansion of the Air Corps, with one section of the law authorizing the establishment of training programs in black colleges to employ blacks in various areas of Air Corps support services.

On Jan. 16, 1941, the War Department announced the formation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, a black flying unit to be trained at

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Blazing A TRAIL

Tuskegee Airman Luther McIlwain holds an old photograph including him and more than 20 of his fellow airmen. McIlwain is the third from the left in the front row.

STAFF PHOTO BY NICOLE GOODHUE

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Raised with a solid work ethic, McIlwain eventually went on to college in South Carolina. It was while he was attending college that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. It wasn't long after the historic attack that many of McIlwain's fellow college students started getting drafted. Some received exemptions for studying dentistry, medicine and science or for signing up to be in the reserves. McIlwain didn't get an exemption, however, and soon began wondering what the future had in store for him.

"They were taking juniors and seniors who were older than I was, but who were also examples to me in college. They'd come back on campus after basic training and they'd be privates," McIlwain says. "But I wasn't stupid. I knew that my father hadn't struggled to make enough money to send me and my sister to college to get an education for it not to be recognized and to be doing what the juniors and seniors were doing."

Many of McIlwain's college peers coming from basic training were cleaning barracks and privies, he says.

"If they hadn't got caught (by the draft), six months later, they'd a had a degree," McIlwain says. "It was really disillusioning, so I wondered what the hell I was going to do, but I had a stroke of luck."

Train ride

After he was rejected at the recruiting office, a despondent McIlwain went to the house of a girl he was dating. Knowing that she was at work, it was actually the girl's mother, the chief cook for the state's game warden, whom McIlwain wanted to see.

"I cut class that day and went to her house and I sat on the step and I was crying like hell," McIlwain says, adding the mother soon arrived home. "She wanted to know why I was crying and I told her, so she fed me and said, 'You go home and get a night's sleep and don't worry. Good things will happen.'"

The mother assured him she would inquire about the matter with her boss and told McIlwain to return the following evening. Upon doing so, McIlwain learned he should go to Fort Jackson, the biggest Army encampment base in the state. The next morning, he was chauffered to the base 14 miles away where he took a physical and medical exam.

Three days later, he was asked to return to the base to take a four-hour written exam, which he passed.

"By now, I'm going by the Army bus that comes into town that I found about," McIlwain says. "I had to ride in the back of the bus, but it's alright. It's the Army bus."

'My message to the kids in the schools is don't let barriers deter you. Don't give up before the miracle happens.'

After he passed the exam, he was instructed to return to Fort Jackson the next morning to be sworn in and was told to bring only a change of underwear, his shaving kit and his toothbrush. Armed with two meal tickets and sealed orders, he was put on a train for Fort Bragg, N.C. When he got there, two white soldiers showed him to an empty barrack used to store Army bunks.

"There was nobody in there," McIlwain says. "One of the soldiers said, 'This is where we were told to put you.' In the middle of the floor they threw two mattresses and said, 'Now, lay down!' They took another mattress and they put it on top of me and that's how two guys woke me up in the morning, sleeping under a damn mattress. Talk about ill treatment."

McIlwain says he then waited several months to be called to Tuskegee. However, that all changed one afternoon. With his packed duffle bag by his side, McIlwain was taken in a command car by his captain and major to Fayettesville, N.C. to catch a train. Once again with several meal tickets and sealed orders in hand, he attempted to board the train when he

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was approached by an angry white Pullman porter. Stepping back, he says he almost fell.

The station manager also expressed his displeasure at having a black man board the train and had a lengthy private discussion with the major and captain before McIlwain was allowed aboard. As he boarded, McIlwain says the conductor warned him not to cause any trouble. What happened next, however, was anything but ordinary for McIlwain.

"This white Army major said, 'I want to wish you luck and happy flying,' and he hugged me," McIlwain proudly remembers. "I felt like a million dollars. It just felt so good."

McIlwain adds, "How many white guys would have gone through what I told you about the first time I went to the recruiting office to get on that train? I cried many, many times, because that's the only relief I could get. Who the hell was I going to complain to? I'm in Fayetteville, N.C. I don't even know where that is."

It's at this point where McIlwain starts to laugh. "Don't think I'm all serious," he says, reflecting on a more light-hearted encounter.

"When I got on the train, there was a small, skinny black guy in a Pullman porter's uniform and he laughed with me and he put his arms around my shoulder and he says, "C'mon buddy, we're going to take care of you.' He said, 'You're fortunate, because you've got a lower berth to sleep in one night and an upper berth to sleep in another night, because none of them white people are going to bother you," McIlwain recalls, laughing. "There's always something to keep you going."

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STAFF PHOTO BY NICOLE GOODHUE

McIlwain will be speaking at an upcoming Plum Island Airfield event.

Blazing A Trail

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Before the miracle

Indeed, McIlwain did keep going. In 1943, upon receiving his flying wings at graduation, he was assigned as a combat-flying instructor. In 1944, he was the first black aviator to be sent to the University of Chicago of Meteorology to become a rated weather observer in a class of 200 white flying officers. He was the only black officer in his class.

"I could sit anywhere in the class and I could eat in the dining hall wherever I wanted to sit, but they had no provisions for me to sleep," he says. "So they had a Jeep with two white soldiers who used to take me at 5 o'clock to the black section of Chicago to a residential black hotel and that's where I stayed for three months."

"I could sit anywhere in the class and I could eat in the dining hall wherever I wanted to sit, but they had no provisions for me to sleep,"

But that didn't stop him from moving forward. In 1944, he was one of four black officers to be assigned to the Midland Air Force Base in Texas to train the first group of flying officers for the Chinese Air Force. In 1945, he was detailed to the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio to fly with the British Royal Air Force to perform air, sea and rescue experimentation tests over the Atlantic Ocean along with the U.S. Naval Air Force.

Again with no sleeping provisions for black officers at the base, McIlwain had to sleep in an attic room of a black minister's home in a black neighborhood of Dayton.

"I had to take the bus back and forth," he recalls. "I couldn't stay at the base, but they had room enough for the whole city of Dayton."

Also in 1945, McIlwain was assigned as the lead navigator of a group of 21 B-25 Bombers to escort the casket of captured Gen. Jonathan Wainright for a burial ceremony. In 1946, McIlwain placed first in an air show competition held at San Angelo Air Force Base in Texas where 50 bomber squadrons were selected from various Air Force bases in the country to compete in combat-style maneuvers.

Honorably discharged in 1947, McIlwain is one of the few triple-rated military flying officers in the U.S. Army Air Corps. His military accomplishments are documented and on display at the National Air and Space Musuem at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. He is also featured in the Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project that's part of the National Park Service's efforts to establish a historic site at Moton Field in Tuskegee, Ala.

In addition, statues, monuments and museums paying tribute to the Tuskegee Airmen can be

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Blazing A Trail

STAFF PHOTO BY NICOLE GOODHUE

Tuskegee Airman Luther McIlwain displays the array of visuals he uses when making presentations to classrooms.

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found at the historic Fort Wayne in Detroit, the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., and the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

Retired after working for the New York City Police Department for 20 years, McIlwain has served on three Massachusetts governor's staffs and as a special assistant to the mayor of Methuen for 22 years. He also has taught black military history courses at Harvard University.

McIlwain is also part of the New England chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. Established in 1972, Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that gives out $60,000 in scholarship money each year to 15 high school students who are interested in aviation.

Just as important, however, McIlwain continues to share his stories and experiences with as many people, schools, groups and organizations as he can.

"My message to the kids in the schools is don't let barriers deter you," he says. "Don't give up before the miracle happens."

Looking back at his experiences – for better and for worse – McIlwain won't say whether it was worth it. Instead, he suggests talking to the likes of Secretary of State Colin Powell (who he's met and spoken with several times) and to the country's black generals.

"They come to our conventions out of reverence," he says. "We're like kings because they know that we paved the way. Had we failed, they would have never gotten the chance, probably, to do what they're doing. That's the way the ball bounces."

The Black Birdmen

➤ **BIRDMEN,** FROM PAGE 4

Tuskegee, Ala., the home of the Tuskegee Institute. Started by Booker T. Washington, the institute was one of the first black schools to open after the Civil War.

From 1942 to 1946, more than 900 pilots graduated from the Tuskegee Army Air Field, about 450 of whom were sent overseas for combat assignment. More than 10,000 black navigators, bombardiers and gunnery crews were trained at selected military bases elsewhere in the country.

Despite allowing blacks to serve, not even the Air Corps was immune to the prevalence of racial segregation. Since there were no black officers in the Air Corps, white offers were assigned the duty of training, thereby dictating an element of racial integration to get the program started. While racial integration may sound like a step in the right direction, it's clear that in the 1940s, there were plenty of people not on board with the idea of Air Corps training for black men. In fact, there wasn't a whole lot of faith in the entire idea, hence why it was initially dubbed the "Tuskegee Experiment."

However, what was an expected "experiment" failure resulted in unqualified success. Today, the Tuskegee Airmen — also called the "Lonely Eagles" — are highly regarded for challenging racist views while having a willingness to fight and protect American freedoms that they often weren't entitled to enjoy themselves.