



### **Leon "Woodie" Spears: A Tuskegee Airman**

Woodie Spears is one of the original Tuskegee Airmen who trained in Alabama during World War II and became a United States Air force fighter pilot in a segregated Air Force. He was born on January 15, 1924 in Trinidad, Colorado and raised in Pueblo, Colorado. As a young boy, Woodie always wanted to fly. His father discouraged him from spending his spare time at the airport and dreaming about becoming a pilot. Woodie's first memory of Colorado was his family's move from Trinidad to Pueblo, Colorado so that his dad could get a job working in a steel mill. Woodie described his father as not being able to read so one of his tasks at home was to read the newspaper to his father. He describes the neighborhood that he grew up in as a racially integrated neighborhood near the Pueblo airport and he remembers being able to identify with airplanes as early as six years of age by the sound of their engines.

Woodie's pastime was to go down to the airport and watch airplanes land and take off from the airfield. His father felt that Woodie was wasting his time at the airport because he believed that Woodie would never be given the opportunity to fly as an African American. His father was so convinced, that one day he found him at the airport and took a switch to Woodie to help make his point that he did not want to see him wasting time looking through the fence and wishing for an opportunity that would never happen.

His father had no idea how deeply the idea of flying was engrained in Woodie. Woodie gives an example of how strong his desire was to fly when he told the following story:

"I remember sitting at the breakfast table and I heard this droning and it was something I had never heard before. I jumped up from the table and ran outside and looked up to see what it was and I discovered that it was a Boeing P-26A, which was known as the Peashooter." He describes the airplane as the most beautiful airplane he has ever seen. The plane circled to land and taxied up near the fence where Woodie was standing. It was an Army plane and the pilot had his name written on the side of the airplane. At that moment, Woodie knew that the only thing in the world that he wanted to do was to become a pilot and fly airplanes. He said to himself, "I don't care what happens, that is what I am going to do....I have got to fly." At that moment, his concentration was broken by the voice of his father. "Son, how many times have your mother and I told you to stay away from this airport. There is nothing down here for you. They are not going to allow you to participate in anything down here, so go home."

However, despite his father and mother's attempts to dissuade him from the idea of becoming a pilot, Woodie still held onto his dream and eventually he got his chance. Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Imperial Japanese Air Force in December, 1941; which leads the United States to begin acceleration in Pilot training. By the time that Woodie applied to pilot training, the first group of Black Pilots had graduated from Tuskegee, Alabama flight training school and had been featured on the front page of Life magazine. Woodie took the article with him to show the recruiter that an African American was being recruited in the Air Force pilot training in Alabama. After taking a physical examination, he eventually rode the train to Alabama to begin his pilot training. Having been born in Colorado in an



integrated community, Woodie was not accustomed to the ways of the South and what was known in the 1940s below the Mason-Dixon Line as, “Jim Crow” laws. Essentially, the Mason-Dixon was a survey line that was ‘drawn’ between 1763 and 1767 conducted by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon to resolve a dispute between British Colonies in Colonial America. For African Americans, this line was very important to their survival and existence as a race of people. Below the Mason –Dixon line, there were States with laws that limited their freedom and humanity. As an example, public facilities were separated. These facilities included restrooms, bus stations, train stations, separated education facilities, graveyards, and even segregation in the court rooms. Eventually, the term “Dixie” was applied to all of the Southern States that had “Jim Crow” laws. The state of Alabama was one of those southern states with Jim Crow laws. The United States military also practiced these laws and separated African Americans from military personnel of other races. It was into this environment that a very young Woodie Spears entered for his Pilot training to become an aviator. At Tuskegee University, he began his initial flight training... when the military searched for a facility to train African American pilots, it concluded that the Tuskegee site was best to construct an Army pilot training facility and would experience the least delays, so the Army Air Field in Tuskegee to train African Pilots was selected. At Tuskegee, during his initial flying training, his flight instructors were African American. When he advanced to military pilot training status, he was assigned to a white pilot instructor who used his position to abuse African American students assigned to him for pilot instructions. Woodie provides an example of the temperament of this particular instructor and other white instructors who taught them.

“Not only were they white, but they were indigenous to that area. When you took off in an airplane with them, you were flying over their outhouse or their pig farm.” Woodie provides an example of what may have been a typical flight for an African American student pilot who flew with one of these instructors. “There was an intercom in there and Gabe was screaming and hollering in there from the minute we took off.” He said, “Who ever told you that you had the capabilities of ever flying? Niggers don’t have that capability. I don’t see why you people ever thought about this.” The instructor took the stick and swung it around, banging Woodie’s knees and that sort of thing. The instructor pilot told Woodie to land, that he was going to beat some flying into him so he landed the airplane and on his way out of the cockpit he disconnected the long metal control stick and stepped out on the wing with it in his hand ready for combat. He knew that if he struck him, he might as well kill him. Seeing the metal rod in the Woodie’s hand, the instructor revised his intentions and suggested that they get back in the airplane and fly. Within two months Woodie graduated and was relegated to flying the P-40 for training.

The Tuskegee Airmen, including cooks, bakers, clerks and mechanics, were sent to train at various locations throughout the country. Because of the stringent requirements by the military, only top quality personnel were selected for technical classifications. As a consequence, the Tuskegee Airmen had to level individuals in these skills. Leroy Gillead was one of the first enlisted men to go to a technical school to become a mechanic. In his book, The Tuskegee Aviation Experiment and the Tuskegee Airman 1939-1949, Gillead describes the training environment for Tuskegee Airmen who were non-aviators: “All non-flying personnel with ground technical and administrative skills required to operate an Army Air



force Flying school and Airfield were trained at either Army, Army Air force, Civilian or educational institutions throughout the United States...few black instructors at these locations were removed because letters to members of Congress indicated that southern white people would not support the war effort with black instructors crammed down their throats.” He further states that the primary goal of the military leadership was to avoid mixing of the races at any level. This policy was to avoid black officers ever being in charge of white enlisted personnel. Added to these indignities were inferior equipment given to the segregated Tuskegee Airmen to ensure the failure of their efforts as an experiment. Their record, resolve, and intuitiveness bear mute testimony to their superior skill and intestinal fortitude in their quest to prevail. The War Department, southern politicians and top military officials at the outset attempted to nurture their failure whenever possible.

Since there was only one unit that an African American pilot could be assigned to because of the segregation policies of the United States military, he could only be assigned to the 332; which was in an overseas command and he would only be assigned as a replacement pilot. This meant that he would stay at Tuskegee for approximately six months, flying the P-40 as an advanced trainer. During that time, the 332 had advanced from the P-39's to P-47 and eventually they got the P-51 when they transferred to Ramitelli ,Italy. When he finally arrived in Italy, Woodie began flying the P-51C with “Donna” and “Kitten” painted on the nose-cowling of the airplane. When Woodie arrived in Italy, the 332 had been assigned the task of flying protection for B-17's and B-24's making bomb runs over Germany, Rumania and Poland. As a consequence of this assignment, after the war they were able to boast that not one airplane they flew cover for was ever lost to a German airplane in the air. Woodie relates this story about one of his flights over Rumania, “Shortly thereafter, over Rumania six P-51's came upon a damaged B-24 limping back after a mission. Two engines were not operating and it faced having to cross the Alps to get back to Italy. The Alps were 18,000 feet high at their crossing point and it would have been a very difficult task for it to make the crossing without getting rid of some of its weight. So the crew was tossing everything they could do without overboard. Woodie flew up to the side of the B-24 and communicated with one of the gunners, he began to observe the gunner's behavior was becoming erratic and he looked up and saw a German Fighter airplane bearing down on them. Because the B-24 was crippled and needed to get back on the ground as soon as possible, the Tuskegee Airman invited them to accompany them to their base at Ramitelli and when they got back on the ground they met up with the B-24 crew members in the dining hall. According to Woodie, the crew was happy to be back on the ground in one piece. The Captain of the B-24 was from North Carolina and in his Southern drawl he said, ‘If I don't do anything else in my life, I am going to make damn sure that you guys get a distinguished flying cross for this, because if you guys had not come along we were goners...’”

On the fifty-first mission that he flew, Woodie recalls their rendezvous with a B-17 group over Ragensberg while turning toward Berlin. During this mission, he saw his first ME-262 jet fighter. According to Woodie, the ME-262 did not hang around very long because the Tuskegee Airmen would have attacked them. Since the Bombers were also turning toward their target, it was wise for the German fighters to veer off and wait until they had dropped their bombs and then turn back for home.



This would allow them the opportunity to wait and catch Bombers that had been damaged by ground fire and were struggling to stay in the air. Sometimes, the damage would be severe to the aircraft and its engines. While the Bombers were making their Bomb runs, the fighters would fly to the side of their formation while they dropped their bombs. Woodie rolled his airplane to the right and leveled off. At that point, he saw tiny black specks in the air around him; which turned out to be flack. Before he realized what was happening, he was in a burst of flack and his airplane took a severe hit. The flack knocked off one of the tip tanks and damaged the propeller severely, along with the engine cooling and oil systems. In addition to this damage, he had a gaping hole in one wing and was upside down. He managed to roll out at twenty thousand feet, level his wings and attempt to assess the situation. At this point, he looked at the engine gauges and saw that the temperature and oil pressure were both pegged and there was severe vibration in the engine. He determined that he would leave the airplane when he remembers that one of his flight instructors had told him to never leave an airplane unless you are forced to do so. So he elected to try and stay with the airplane and put it on the ground. Having made that decision, he turned the airplane toward Poland and let it slide down until he made a crash landing and was captured by the Germans, who had watched him crash. He climbed out of the airplane and saw a German staff car coming toward him with some officers and enlisted men. After his capture, he was taken to Posen, Poland and put on the second floor of a building with a guard at the door. He had injured his foot during the crash landing and they provided medical attention for his foot. He spent four or five days in the building. One morning he woke up and heard a tremendous noise. The building shook. He rushed down an empty hallway and peeked out of a boarded up window. Woodie saw Russian troops in the streets. His German captors had abandoned the building and left him to the Russians.

Realizing that the Germans had taken his identification papers, he pulled off his jacket that had an American flag on it and held it up to the window. The Russians recognized the American flag and he was safe, a Russian officer called out, "Amerikanski," and ran up the stairs and gave him a big bear hug. He spent three months with the Russians with much difficulty getting used to their food. According to Woodie, he ate lots of fish that still had the fish head intact. The Russians started moving him to a location where he could be shipped out. When he reached Lodz, Poland there was a German death camp there. He said that, "when they had me on a train, I went past a death camp and there would be a big pile of clothing. Some of them still had the paper star of David on them. There would be a big pile of shoes and a big pile of teeth with gold fillings." According to Woodie, the Russians were forcing German prisoners to unearth bodies from mass graves where they had been dumped, covered with lye (in some cases before they were dead). The German prisoners were then forced to uncover these bodies and rebury them in singular graves.

According to Woodie, every town they passed through had some downed Allied Airman under Russian control until they reached Odessa, on the Black Sea. There, they were told by a British Officer they would be shipped home on a French luxury liner. Eventually, he wound up in a field hospital where he received much needed medical attention to his foot. He was told during his stay in the hospital that he



would probably lose his foot; however, when he was released from the hospital, he left with his foot intact.

Woodie was discharged from the service at the end of World War II and returned to civilian life. When the Korean War started in the 50s, he was called back to active duty and served in Korea where he flew 17 combat missions. On one of the missions he flew, his younger brother was flying ahead of him in the formation; Woodie had the distinct misfortune of observing his brother's airplane take a hit and witnessed his descent and eventual death.

Woodie has remained active in Bay Area communities speaking at public and social affairs where he spoke vividly about his experiences growing up in Colorado, his pilot training at Tuskegee and his combat experiences in Europe. The same year that he passed away, he had already kept 42 speaking engagements. He lived to tell the Tuskegee Airmen story... near the end it was his "life's work." There is a movement in his home town, the city of Hayward, CA, to create an exhibit in a museum and name it after him. The proposed name is the Woodie Spears Museum exhibit.

