

# COURAGEOUS

## AFRICAN AMERICANS



by Ron Weber

### Tuskegee Airman Defends America

Luther Smith, now 84 shares story

Clouds of smoke, flames and debris pounded the sides of his plane. A piece of the tail blew off. He feared the incineration of the aircraft and himself. Hands frozen on the controls and fighting for his life, the oxygen mask began leaking. His body shaking, heart pounding, he knew he had to do the impossible.

Radioing a frightened "goodbye," to his Tuskegee Airmen comrades he parted company with his P51 fighter plane. In all the commotion, he pulled the parachute a little early. As he was yanked from the plane at over 400 miles an hour, his head hit something hard. When he looked up and saw his aircraft disappear, then everything went silent and dark. His comrades watched in silence.

What would happen to their trusted friend and fellow at arms? Would he pummel to the ground and die or would he make survive and suffer the fate of angry Germans below. He and his buddies had just reduced another enemy airport to rubble. Nazi soldiers would wait patiently on the ground for the American pilot. He would surely pay for what he did. Hitler would see to that.

Seconds later Lieutenant Luther

Smith woke up to what appeared to be a horrible dream. Head pounding in pain and legs wound up in a parachute torn in half by the early ejection sequence. This he figured was surely the end. He did what he could to free himself, but then the world went dark once more. Was it all over, or would he wake up again? Would he ever see America and his loved ones again or would he die right here and now in a desolate European woods?

Suddenly Smith regained consciousness, only



Lt. Smith's P-51C Mustang Fighter Aircraft

to feel his body being slammed from all directions. With crushed ribs, cuts and bruises all over his body, and one foot turned 180 degrees backwards, he kept crashing down through the trees. When he awoke he was in a Yugoslavian hospital room surrounded by German guards.

For the next several months Smith was a Prisoner of War. The doctors wanted to cut his leg off, but he refused. He wanted American doctors to look at it. Seven months later, when

him who fight for our freedom.

The Tuskegee Airmen were formed during World War II, originally to see if African American men could fly airplanes and handle the technical controls of American fighting planes. They not only achieved this goal, but also went on to set many military and flying records. Flying over 200 escort missions, they never lost a single bomber. By the end of the war, many white bomber pilots refused to fly with any escorts other than the highly skilled Tuskegee pilots.

Thanks to the sacrifices of Luther Smith and the Tuskegee Airmen, black soldiers around the country were given opportunities to fully participate in all facets of America's wars. Many paid the ultimate price, giving their lives. Others like Luther lost limbs and suffered for decades to come. We as a nation must never forget the path they cut through centuries of prejudice so that others may have it better.

Today, Smith and his wife Lois of 60 years live in Villanova, Pa. After his military experience and 37 years as an aerospace engineer for the General Electric Co., Luther is finally retired. Today he works on his autobiography and enjoys the company of his two grown children. He also recently finished publishing a colorful

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the war ended and Russian soldiers freed the American POWs, Smith began an 18-month rehabilitation in an American hospital.

Sixty-one years later, this African American war hero is not only still alive to tell his own story, he is also president of the famous Tuskegee Airmen's Association.

During Black History Month, Smith, 84 years old, visited the Evergreen Aviation Museum in McMinnville, to share a story that tells us all why we love America and the Americans like

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