

Surviving Hell

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Reserve in 1942. When asked by an audience member at Thursday's forum why he make such a choice, knowing the turmoil of the time, he says, "I got news for you, there was a war going on. Everybody [was] in the Army, Navy, and Marines. And if I were drafted as black man, I'd go to the quarter residences; heavy, nasty, filthy, dirty work."

Instead, Jefferson took up the opportunity to become a pilot in the Tuskegee regiment, becoming a second in command to the men in his squad, and becoming a self proclaimed ladies-man in the process.

He fought for a country that had only recently allowed white women to vote, and the value of black life was systematically often made dispensable; his skin remained a barrier for him in service.

He recalled one time where he and his black brigade were fraternizing with other white soldiers at a safe haven for Americans in the middle of the warzone. Jefferson says a low-ranking white general walked into the quarters and stated "Gentleman this is my airfield. As long as I'm in command there will be no socialization between white and colored officers."

Though his daily heroism continued to be overshadowed by his color, Jefferson like so many other black soldiers in World War II carried on.

It would be on his 19th mission that the horrors of war would become much more real to the gold bar Lieutenant Colonel.

Flying over skies of France and charged with taking down a group of German soldiers, his fighter bomber was hit by gunfire and

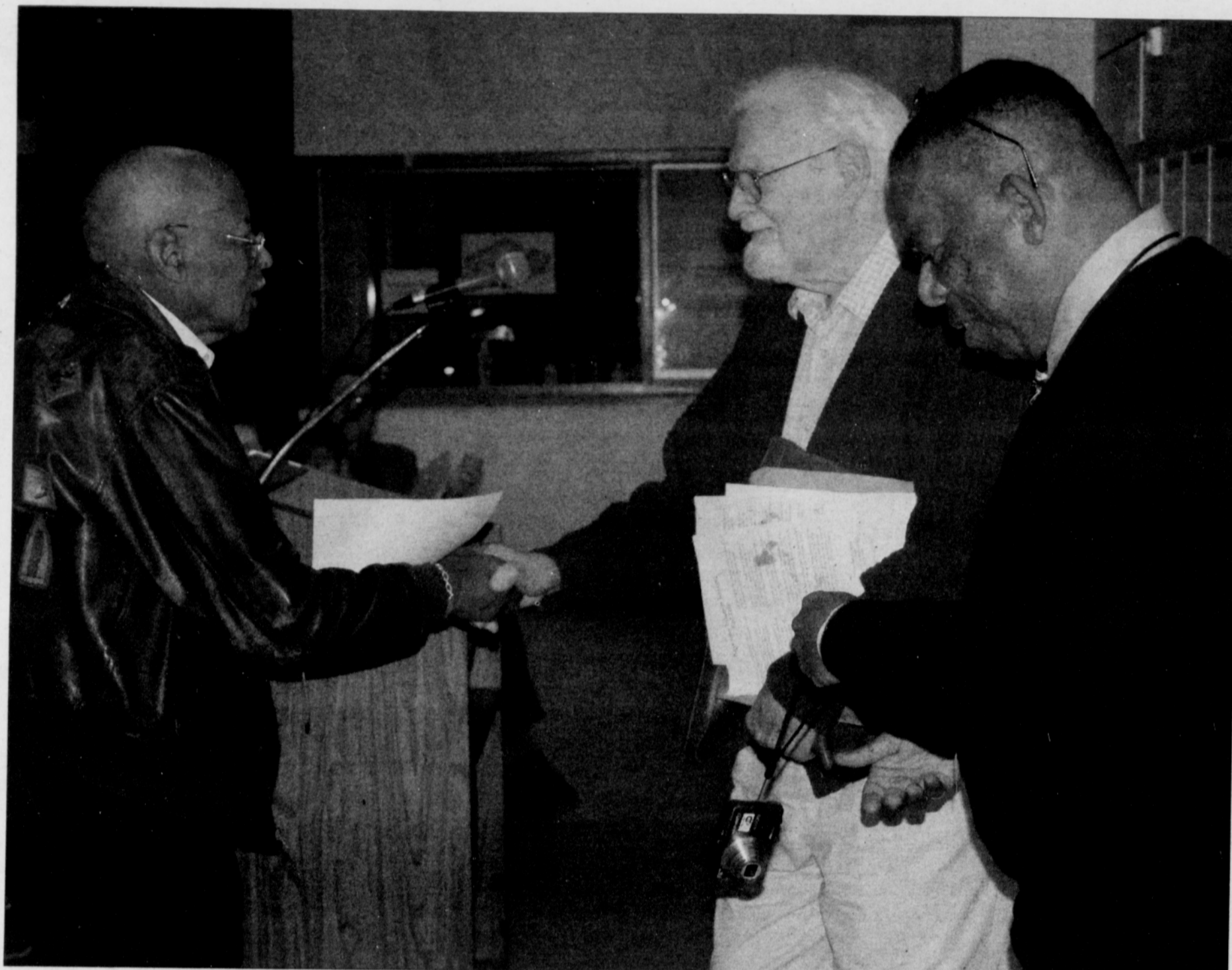


PHOTO BY DONOVAN M. SMITH/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Former Tuskegee airman Alexander Jefferson (left) and longtime Portland educator Bob Gerber shake hands while reminiscing on their World War II service during a veterans forum at Portland Community College in north Portland. Gerber said his own life was saved by Jefferson and three other members of the all-black Tuskegee regiment after his plane was attacked by German troops. Gerber, 93, shed tears recounting the experience, saying the heroism by black soldiers forever transformed his views on race.

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began nose diving toward the ground. He was forced to eject himself from a plane that would have almost certainly killed him in a fiery fashion as it hit the ground.

He says it was his first time ever being underneath the wind of parachute, something his trainers had ever prepared him for. Almost fittingly for someone who was suspended at 15,000 feet in the sky amongst warplanes for the first time, Jefferson found himself landing inside the branches of a tree.

He was immediately detained

by Nazi officers and made a prisoner of war. For months he and other captives lived in hellish conditions and forced to eat bread he says was primarily filled with sawdust and soup that included worms.

Sometime later he and others would be freed by American troops and sent back home. Upon reaching New York City shores he recalls reaching an unlikely welcome with being told "whites to the left, niggers to the right."

Despite his country's continued undermining of his humanity, Jefferson became a high school teacher and worked to build America up by being an active citizen. He encouraged the young people at the PCC event, which was co-sponsored by the Portland chapter of the National Association for Black Veterans, to "join the system."

"I don't know, we've gotta overcome the knuckleheads," he says. "Tell kids, you've gotta learn English, math, science and join the system. America needs young people with brains."

He recalled Jackie Robinson, the first black major leaguer who broke the color barrier in baseball.

"He could not play baseball in the American League or the National League. He's was out of the system. But once he got inside of the system, he could break hell out of it. We live in a system."

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