

Organizers reflect on success of Tuskegee Airmen monument at the Alton National Cemetery

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - While they were equals in the sky, the Tuskegee Airmen were treated like second class citizens while on the ground training in the Southern U.S., preparing for war in Europe and even when they returned to their homes.

"All they wanted to do was fight for their country, but they ended up fighting against their fellow countrymen to do it," Charles Baird said.

Baird, along with Eugene Baldwin and Lorenzo Small worked toward erecting a proper memorial to two of these brave black airmen from Alton. George and Arnold Cisco flew in the Army Air Corps, with George Cisco earning the rank of second lieutenant and Arnold Cisco dying just before attaining the guaranteed rank of major. The three men visited the brothers' graves at the Alton National Cemetery and believed such brave men fighting for such a distinguished purpose should have something more.

"We need to do something here," Baird said when recalling seeing the graves. "The ball started rolling, light bulbs and flashes started going off in our minds."

The donations first came as a trickle as the three men presented displays to Alton High School, and the Alton Museum of History and Art. They also presented a documentary at the Great Rivers Museum. Soon after donations started coming, Baird said the three received more than their \$5,000 goal, which will be used for future dedications and honors toward the Tuskegee Airmen since the establishment of the monument at the Alton National Cemetery.

A ceremony was held to honor the men and dedicate that memorial on Saturday, June 3. It began with an invocation from Rev. Gregory Harrison and the presentation of the colors by the Alton High School Air Force ROTC program. Small, who is a nephew of the Cisco brothers, sang the National Anthem.

"He totally impressed me," Baird said.

Small, Baldwin and Baird then gave remarks about the process the three undertook to construct the monument for the men. Baird then unveiled the new monument and Baldwin read a poem he wrote for the occasion, which Baird said "touched a lot of people."

The Alton VFW Post #1308 Honor Guard then presented a rifle salute, which is not a 21 gun salute. Baird said the latter is done using artillery, while a rifle salute is presented by soldiers firing rifles.

Recent Alton High School graduate Devin Long performed "Echoing Taps" with Alyssa Plummer before Harrison did another benediction and people were invited to look at the new monument.

The new monument is an angled slab of black granite, which features a likeness of the brothers with their ranks as well as an image of the P-51 Mustang pilots utilized on missions - earning them the designation of "Red-Tailed Angels."

"One of their primary purposes in the war was as fighter escorts to the bombing missions," Baird said.

Arnold Cisco flew as many as 85 combat missions in the European theater of World War II, with the majority being as escorts for those bombing raids. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross Medallion as well as the Air Medal with 5 Oak Leaf Clusters. He died while on home from leave after a transport plane crashed in a storm.

George Cisco joined the Army Tank Corps, and was stationed in Louisiana. He had always wanted to fly, but black men were not allowed to do so when he first joined. After Arnold Cisco was among the first airmen to graduate into the Air Corps and become what would later be known as a Tuskegee Airman, George Cisco also joined. He was stationed in South Carolina and perished in a training accident.

Baird said the two brothers were among a massive group of as many as 16,000 men and women who were known as "Tuskegee Airmen." Despite only about 1,000 of them being pilots, many of the men were mechanics, support personnel and office workers who ensured the Army Air Corps were functioning at its best.

After U.S. President Harry S. Truman integrated the U.S. Armed Forces in 1948, many of the Tuskegee Airmen continued as pilots in the Korean Conflict as well as the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, those men were often excluded from positions as commercial airline pilots for which many applied following the war, due to the color of their skin.

"They never really could get jobs as commercial airline pilots," Baird said. "It's really strange, but it's very interesting."