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Photos courtesy of Pia Winters Jordan

MEET THE

Tuskegee Army NURSES

by Patricia Luebke

You have no doubt learned about the Tuskegee Airmen in school. They were a group of African American military pilots who flew during World War II. Before the Tuskegee Airmen, no African American man or woman had been a U.S. military pilot. In fact, according to the United States census, there were only 124 African American pilots in the entire country in 1940. These African American men were recruited and trained to fly as military pilots. By the end of the war, the Tuskegee Airmen had flown 1,578 combat missions and earned distinguished awards and reputations for being excellent military pilots.

But just like today with all pilots, the Tuskegee Airmen had a support team behind them. One such group was the Tuskegee Army nurses. Now these nurses' history is collected and told by Pia Winters Jordan, the daughter of First Lt. Louise Virginia Lomax Winters, who was a Tuskegee Army nurse. Approximately 29 nurses served in the Army Nurse Corps during World War II at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, and Pia has gathered photos and history of the nurses and shares them on her website www.TuskegeeArmyNurses.com.

Recently, AFG asked Pia about the Tuskegee Army nurses and her memories her mother shared with her.

When you were growing up, did you know your mom was a Tuskegee nurse and did you know how important that was?

When I was growing up, I did not know that my mother was a Tuskegee Airmen nurse. I knew she had been a military nurse and was currently working as a nurse at a psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C., but I had never heard of the Tuskegee Airmen as a child. She was just Mom to me. I think she may have never talked much about it because it was a painful period for Negroes [the former term for African Americans] who didn't have the same opportunities as white people.

How did your mother and the other nurses become involved with the Tuskegee Airmen? Were they recruited or selected for the work or did they volunteer themselves? The American Red Cross recruited nurses for the Army Nurse Corps during World War II. You had to have graduated from nursing school and earned your registered nurse license to even be in the corps. It was hard for women of any color to join the ANC because the Army was a man's domain. However, it was even harder for black women because of their sex and their race. Basically, after joining the ARC, these women volunteered for service in the ANC and were appointed to the station hospital at Tuskegee Army Air Field, an army base, in Tuskegee, Alabama, where the future Tuskegee Airmen were in training as pilot cadets.

What were some of the jobs of the Tuskegee nurses, and how did they support the pilots? The nurses worked at the base's station hospital. They were on call for 24 hours per day. They supervised the care and handling of patients. They worked in surgery, on the hospital medical wards, giving out medicine and treatment prescribed by the doctors and taking care of medical supplies. They cared for the officers, enlisted men, family members, and others who worked on the base.

These pioneering women were registered nurses and Army officers who worked side by side with the Tuskegee Airmen.

Do you remember a particular story or incident your mother told you about her work with the Tuskegee Airmen? My mother told me of a couple of things. She told me that the pilot cadets were around 19 years old, and some were homesick and used her as a sounding board where they could talk to her about how they were feeling. Another story she told me involved an enlisted man who worked on her ward when she was working the night shift and he tried to get fresh with her. She reprimanded him for his behavior and reminded him that she was an officer. The nurses who were on the base outranked the future Tuskegee Airmen because the airmen were in training as pilot cadets. The nurses entered the Army Nurse Corps as officers—lieutenants. They outranked the men who were training as pilots.

Why do you think so many people have heard of the Tuskegee Airmen yet so few people know about the Tuskegee Army nurses? The Tuskegee Airmen are the faces of the Tuskegee Experience. The United States Army Air Corps was trying to prove if black men were smart enough to fly military planes to help in the war. They proved they could do the job. However, future movies brought their contributions to the public's attention, but you did not learn



much about the support people who helped them in training. One Tuskegee Airmen wrote a book where he explained that for each airman, there were 10 persons supporting him and that included nurses.

Other than visiting your website, how else can we learn more about the Tuskegee nurses? Basically, my site is the only comprehensive site about the nurses. However, interested people could visit the National Park Service's Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site in Tuskegee, Alabama.

It is located at one of the earlier pilot training facilities at Moton Field. There are places around the country that also have displays, exhibits, or written mate-

rial about the Tuskegee Airmen which includes nurses. The Tuskegee Airmen Collection at the University of California at Riverside; The National Tuskegee Army Museum in Detroit, Michigan; Maxwell Air Force Base's Air Force Research Agency; U.S. Archives I in Washington, D.C.; and U.S. Archives II in College Park, Maryland.

The Tuskegee Army nurses would be an interesting topic for a school paper or project. These trailblazing women served their country in time of war and proved themselves to be invaluable to the Tuskegee Airmen. ✈️



Pia's mom First Lt. Louise Virginia Lomax Winters

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