

Purple Heart medal quest widens for Tuskegee Airmen

By Phillip O'Connor

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Eleanor Macon wanted the record set straight.

Macon, 75, contacted the Post-Dispatch after the newspaper reported that historical accounts vastly understated the number of Tuskegee Airmen who received the Purple Heart. Using a government database and military archives, the newspaper initially identified 47 airmen who received the award and an additional 10 who appear to have received the medal. The tally was seven times greater than what had been routinely reported.

Macon's late husband, Capt. Richard D. Macon, was among the airmen whom the newspaper identified as a likely recipient of the award. He was shot down by anti-aircraft fire on Aug. 12, 1944, on an escort mission to Toulon, France. He broke his shoulder and neck, and was held prisoner until the end of the war. He died in 2007.

Hugh White was a Tuskegee Airman, flying bomber support from an airfield in Italy. He was shot down once, earning the Purple Heart, and held prisoner for a short time by German soldiers. (Family photograph)

His widow mailed to the Post-Dispatch a copy of her husband's discharge papers and a photograph of his tombstone at Arlington National Cemetery. Both note the medal, removing all doubt that Capt. Macon received the award.

"I just want him to have all the recognition he's earned," said Macon, of Detroit. "I just feel he's due all this."

Others stepped forward with new information, too, since the Post-Dispatch's

report was published in late September, offering photographs, letters and military records. Those contributions, along with the newspaper's ongoing research, have led to the confirmation that 59 airmen have received the Purple Heart. In addition, the newspaper has identified seven other airmen who appear to have received the award.

For decades, the long-held belief was that only eight members of the legendary World War II unit were Purple Heart recipients, despite a roster filled with dozens of airmen who were wounded, killed or missing in action. No one is certain why most historical accounts used the erroneous number, which made its way into the Library of Congress and the Congressional Record.

"History has been changed," said retired Army Lt. Col. Ray Funderburk, a Vietnam veteran who first asked the paper to investigate the discrepancy. The former public relations director for the Military Order of the Purple Heart is himself a two-time recipient of the award.

"The American public will now understand the courageous efforts of the Tuskegee Airmen and the sacrifices many made to protect our bomber pilots," said Funderburk, of LeRoy, N.Y.

The Army Air Corps announced the formation of its first-ever black unit in March 1941. The pilots trained at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) in Alabama. About 1,000 pilots, including about two dozen from St. Louis, graduated from the program.

The unit eventually became the 332nd Fighter Group and by the end of the war in Europe was credited with having shot down 112 enemy aircraft and destroying an additional 150 on the ground. Their record of accomplishment contributed to President Harry S Truman's decision to integrate the armed services.

EMERGING INFORMATION

Today, more than six decades later, the effort to document the Tuskegee Airmen's service continues.

Gene C. Browne Jr. of Seaford, N.Y., sent the Post-Dispatch documentation that confirmed his father received the Purple Heart after he was shot down July 18,

1944, while escorting B-17 Flying Fortresses on a raid against an airfield at Memmingen, Germany.

"He took three 20 mm slugs to his left leg, and a slug grazed his head when it came through the canopy," Browne wrote. First Lt. Gene C. Browne Sr. crash-landed and was a prisoner for 13 months. He died in 2002.

"It's important to me because it's history and it's good to know that there's going to be at least some legacy of my family left around long after my father is gone, and I'm gone," Browne said. "It is very important that these heroes be remembered for their contributions to th

researching the airmen, provided material that confirmed four other airmen. Among the material was a photograph of Capt. Luther H. Smith in dress uniform wearing his Purple Heart ribbon.

Smith, an Iowa native, was severely injured Oct. 13, 1944, as he tried to abandon his burning P-51 after escorting B-24s to Blechhammer, Germany. His foot got caught and he broke his hip in two places. He was captured and spent seven months as a prisoner.

Smith died Dec. 9 in Pennsylvania. He was 89.

Huntly, historian for the Los Angeles chapter of Tuskegee Airmen Inc., also sent a page from the 99th Fighter Squadron's war diary that showed Lt. John L.

award.

— First Lt. Arnett Starks was part of a formation strafing rail targets in the Munich area on March 31, 1945, when anti-aircraft fire struck his P-51. Another pilot on the mission, Conrad A. Johnson, reported making six passes at the target.

"After the fifth pass, I looked back and didn't see Lt. Starks, nor was I able to contact him by radio."

Starks was listed as missing and later declared killed in action.

— First Lt. Walter Westmoreland was seen to crash in Hungary as a result of anti-aircraft fire on the Oct. 13, 1944, mission to Blechhammer.

— Second Lt. Wellington Irving was killed by enemy aircraft on the July 1944 raid on Memmingen.

Zellie Rainey Orr hopes to obtain the Purple Heart for the family of Irving, a Mississippi native. Rainey Orr is historian for the Atlanta Chapter of Tuskegee Airman Inc. Her research was instrumental in the posthumous issuance of medals, including the Purple Heart in 2004 to Quitman Walker, another Tuskegee Airman and Mississippian who was killed during a strafing mission in Hungary.

In November, Rainey Orr traveled to Irving's hometown of Belzoni, Miss., in what proved to be an unsuccessful search for the airman's relatives. If she's successful in obtaining the medal for the late pilot, Rainey Orr said she may end up having it presented to the local library. Those who might treasure it most are fading away.

"It's heartbreaking," she said. "The family needs to know that we as Americans appreciated their loved one who made the greatest sacrifice."

recently confirmed purple hearts

Lt. Gene C. Browne

Lt. John L. Hamilton

Pfc. James W. Jones

Capt. Richard D. Macon

Lt. Thomas Malone

Capt. Lee Rayford

Lt. Hugh J. White

honoring their service

The Post-Dispatch developed an online memorial that is dedicated to providing an accurate account of the Tuskegee Airmen who were awarded the Purple Heart.

The website will be updated as new information about airmen who may have received the award is submitted and verified. See the page at STLtoday.com/airmen .

To contribute information about the Tuskegee Airmen, please contact either Erica Smith at esmith@post-dispatch.com or Phillip O'Connor at poconnor@post-dispatch.com .

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