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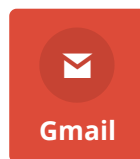
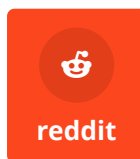
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TUSKEGEE AIRMAN CHARLES MCGEE BRINGS STORIES, ADVICE TO SILVER SPRING

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The last two months have been a whirlwind for retired Army Brig. Gen. Charles E. McGee of Bethesda, who turned 100 in December, participated in the coin toss at Super Bowl LIV in Miami, received an official promotion to general and was honored by President Donald Trump—along with his great-grandson Iain Lanphier—during the State of the Union address.

His tour continued last Wednesday, when the Silver Spring Town Center Inc. and Silver Spring Village brought McGee, the oldest living Tuskegee Airman, to the Silver Spring Civic Building for their monthly Senior Programs Aimed at Rekindling Lifetime Engagement series.

Nearly 200 people were in attendance—"double the size of our largest ever SPARKLE," according to Lisa Martin, SSTCI's executive director.

Timothy Tutt, the senior minister at Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ in Bethesda, facilitated a wide-ranging conversation that touched on everything from the formation of the iconic group of African American military pilots to the importance of getting a good education.

"When I took my first flight in that PT-17, I was hooked," said McGee, who flew more than 400 combat missions in his 30 years of service. "The only way I can put it, to be able to get in a plane, go up and loop, roll, and spin, and come back and put your feet on the ground, I was hooked."

McGee, who was born in Cleveland, Ohio, just over a year after the end of World War I, spoke of the discrimination that aspiring black pilots faced: a 1925 study by the Army War College that deemed African Americans "mentally inferior to the white man," being asked to retake qualification tests, even the building of a separate airfield near Tuskegee Institute in eastern Alabama.

"That may have been picked, they said for nice weather," McGee said, "but I'm sure you could read something else into it as well."

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Once he was accepted into the training program at Tuskegee, McGee moved to Alabama with his new wife, Frances, whose presence, he said, allowed him to focus solely on his training—unlike other trainees, who spent leisure time in Montgomery, Ala., and Atlanta looking to meet women.

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"We decided to get married...on a Saturday," McGee said.

"Monday morning's mail said [to] report...Looking back, I think that [her being there] helped me."

Even after their training was completed, the 332nd Fighter Group faced issues, with white commanders pushing to have them patrol Liberia—not an area of conflict—before ultimately latching on as one of the squadrons helping escort American bombers in Europe.

There, they gained their famous "Red Tails" nickname by painting red markings on their tails as identification for the bombers they were escorting.

After the moderated discussion, Tutt opened the floor for audience questions.

McGee advised the young people in the room to remember the "four Ps": perceive ("Dream your dreams, find your talents"), prepare ("Get a good education...learn to read, write and speak well"), perform ("Let excellence be your goal in everything that you do") and persevere ("Don't let negative circumstances be an excuse for not achieving").

The line of the afternoon, though, came in response to a question about the importance of research and expanding human understanding.

"We human beings are one small-ass speck in the mighty grand universe," McGee said. "We need to keep that in mind."

Timothy Tutt (left) interviewed Brig. Gen. Charles McGee (Ret.). Photo by Sean McGoey

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