Honoring unsung heroes

In my office sits a model of a red-tailed P-51 Mustang. When my eyes find it in a moment of thought, it reminds me of those who faced great obstacles but served with patriotic honor and dignity.

As we celebrate Black History Month this February, I marvel at the personal inspiration I have always known from the pilots of these aircraft and all who served with dignity, even before our nation was ready to accept their contributions.

Black Americans have served their country in every conflict since the American Revolution, but the Tuskegee Airmen forever etched a unique place in our nation’s history by shattering barriers caused by segregation and discrimination.

In 1941, in need of pilots and having too few white officers willing to command a segregated unit, the Army created the 99th Pursuit Squadron. This group was the beginning of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Due to ongoing segregation, Tuskegee became a unique facility, as every type of flight training was conducted there. Most bases at the time conducted only a single type, such as introductory training or combat training.

One of only two black line officers in the Army at the time, Benjamin Davis Jr. Was given command of airmen at the facility.

The Tuskegee Airmen soon began making a name for themselves in Europe. They were seeing some of the fiercest air-to-air engagements of the war as they protected bombers flying from Italy to Germany and Eastern Europe. Their record was exemplary: Most units lost an average of 46 bombers they were protecting while on deployment, but the Red Tails lost only 27.
By the end of the war, the Tuskegee Airmen had racked up an impressive record. In 1,578 combat missions, they destroyed hundreds of aircraft and vehicles and earned 96 Distinguished Flying Crosses, a Silver Star, 14 Bronze Stars, 744 Air Medals, three Distinguished Unit Citations and eight Purple Hearts.

When the airmen returned home and back to civilian life, they found things almost the same as when they had left. They continued to face segregation and discrimination, and their accomplishments were often ignored—even by their fellow Air Corps veterans. Many of these men believed that they deserved better for serving their country and went on to become important leaders and participants in the growing civil rights movement.

The survivors, like many veterans, continue to serve, and their legacy to both the African-American community and the country at large will continue to be cherished for generations to come.

We who have made service to our fellow veterans a lifetime commitment honor their service by ensuring that those who wore the uniform of all eras are treated with dignity and respect. We must continue to uphold the promises our nation made.

We are a better people for recognizing the possibilities that relentless warriors like the Tuskegee Airmen showed our nation through their courage and patriotism. A poster in my office reads: “The ultimate judge of a person’s character is their ability to exceed expectations when little recognition or praise is given.” Let us remember this as we think of the service of our military’s many unsung heroes.