The Incredible Life of Charles Chenier: Acadiana's own Tuskegee Airman

By: Blair Dahl

Ask any young boy what he wants to do when he grows up and the top 10 answers will include pilot and pro-baseball player and maybe cowboy. Charles Chenier can say he became what he dreamed of as a boy. He was a professional baseball player and a pilot. He wasn't a cowboy, but he had the cowboy spirit that would help him fulfill his dreams in a time when his two professions were generally closed to men of his race. He is a unique man who, while making his dreams come true, served his country admirably in WWII and went on to teach other young people how to do the same.

When Charles tells it, everyday in the War was just another day. It was, "like another day's work. Then you came back, relaxed, went to the dining hall, played a little poker, and went to bed." He waited, along with his squadron, over 60 years for the nation to recognize what he and his fellow countrymen did in the War. In 2006, an Act of Congress awarded Charles and his fellow pilots a medal for an Outstanding Combat Record. It was a medal long-overdue to men who served their country even when others felt they shouldn't.

Charles tells the story that right out of high school, with the war going on, he knew he would not be able to finish college. He had heard that working for government facilities might keep him from being drafted, so he went to California to work in the shipyards. However, soon after arriving there, Charles describes Charles Chenier displaying his Tuskegee Airman medal of honor.

A Tuskegee Airman at just 19, Charles had looked the Germans in the eye before many of us would consider him a man. He was so full of fire that the other, older and more seasoned pilots, did not want to fly with him. Charles told me that the historians are claiming they lost three. However, even if there were three lost, the squadron flew over 1,500 missions. And only three losses still leaves an impressive percentage.

The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of fighter pilots who escorted the big bombers over their targets in WWII. They fought discrimination to gain a place in history that is unparalleled in aviation war-time. In the war, the 'Red-Tails' as they were called, never lost a bomber.
the draft board found him anyway and told him to report to Greensboro, NC.

Mr. Chenier jokes, "The orders just said to report to the commanding officer in Greensboro. It didn't say when, what date, what time, nothing. If I had been smart, I'd be arriving yet!"

He flew eight missions in Southern Italy in his P-51 before the war ended. His first flight was an ordinary one, but his second flight saw him facing a German bomber head-on. He broke formation and chased the fighter off. Upon landing, with "my chest out," as Charles puts it, he was grounded for breaking formation! In the air again after his reprimand, he flew six more missions, usually escorting a bomber group. "We never knew where we were flying. We would just be given coordinates and told to show up at that spot." It was too dangerous to let the pilots know their actual locations. Mr. Charles was even unsure as to exactly where he was stationed in Italy. I was suddenly aware of how important these flying missions were; one involved blowing up rail lines and other enemy infrastructure on the ground. "That was fun because no one was shooting back at us!" Charles says. Then the European part of the War was over, but we were still in it with Japan, and Charles came back to the States for further training.
A squadron of brave Tuskegee Airmen who escorted bombers in World War II. Photo courtesy of www.redtail.org

But, Charles’ military service ended when the US dropped two atomic bombs on Japan that ended the war quickly. We can applaud and appreciate Mr. Chenier’s service to his country, but better yet is his life beyond the war.

Charles Chenier grew in Opelousas and led a distinguished life regardless of his heroic time with the Tuskegee Airmen. He was born in a house where William’s Funeral Home stands today. His parents, Theodore and Albertha Chenier, raised Charles and his siblings to educate themselves, work hard, and find a place in this world. All nine of them did.

Let me tell you a little story about Charles’ Daddy. This will give you a good idea how Charles was taught integrity. Please take a moment to remember the times before you read further. The racial divisions in society were long-standing and very strict, in a way we cannot easily understand today. On the way to school one day (in those days, Charles and his friends had to walk all the way across town to get to school), some black boys and some white boys got into a squabble. In the middle of it all, one boy threw a brick, hitting a white boy in the head. The fighting broke up quickly, and everybody ran off to school. Well, the police were called and headed out to the black school to flush out the perpetrator. The small incident between the children was now a potential powder-keg. Word got to Mr. Theodore quickly, and he headed up to the school house. He blocked the door and would not let the white officers inside. He was afraid that if they took the boy out, they would kill him. Mr. Theodore was able to talk to the officers and calm the situation. Further violence was averted in those touch fire times. Charles distinctly remembers his father walking black kids to school and waiting for them when they got out of school to walk them home. Even though he usually walked with two 45’s (for protection), he was a peace-loving man and taught his children to make their own opportunities.

After the war, Charles returned to Opelousas to play baseball with the Opelousas Panthers. This team was not a member of the Negro Leagues but played the teams that were. Charles played with them for five years. They played Jackie Robinson’s All-Star team, and Charles says, “We beat them as much as they beat us!” Charles and Jackie Robinson played the same position, second base, so as a young man, Charles experienced some unique times. The team began to break up and Charles’ family was nagging at him to get his college degree; so he went back to Tuskegee, not as a pilot this time, but as a student.

He earned a degree from Tuskegee in physical education. Then, Charles
went to New York University to earn his master's degree. It was in New York that he met and married Margaret, his wife of 48 years. Soon afterwards, the newlyweds went back to Tuskegee to begin a life for themselves. Margaret taught at Tuskegee while Charles taught physical fitness in the public schools. Three beautiful daughters arrived, Debbie, Brenda, and Lois, and as Charles puts it, "I had three daughters wantin' to eat!"

So, in 1964, he began a new job writing the programming guidelines for the Head Start Program. It worked out so well that the National Program wanted Charles to come to Washington DC to help them there, but he decided to stay in Tuskegee and serve as the State Training Officer for all of the Head Start Programs in Alabama.
1960’s Alabama would not easily accept a black as the superior to whites. The climate was rich with trouble. Charles had seen it in the war when he watched his superiors fight against segregation in the military. So, what Charles had learned, he practiced. “I treated everyone the same. On the phone, they [whites] couldn’t tell if I was white or black. Then when they saw me, they wanted to give trouble. But I just treated everyone the same. At first it was Mr. Chenier, then Charles, then Chuck!”

Charles kept working throughout Alabama to make its Head Start Program progressive for almost 30 years. He worked tirelessly for the youth of the state to make sure they had the best start to kindergarten his organization could provide.

All along, as Charles will admit, he was a “sports and fitness fanatic.” He spent his years in Alabama teaching CPR and first aid for the Red Cross... spreading his spirit and enthusiasm even further around. For Tuskegee, he helped the track and field team in many different ways, coaching, driving, training, anything. For his endless assistance to the track and field department, Charles received a well-deserved plaque commemorating his years of service.

But he was not fated to stay Alabama’s prize. His home was calling. Charles retired in 1987, and Margaret died in 1999. Charles lived the single life and reported, “It didn’t agree with me.” So, in 2002, he married the lovely Sonya Robinson of Opelousas. Mrs. Sonya taught art for 40 years in Opelousas. She has one daughter, Sonya Ann who is currently in medical school at LSU in Shreveport.

Today, Charles loves to see as many LSU and Southern (in Baton Rouge) football games as possible. He operates the scoreboard and chuckles when he says, “I get the best seats, in the press box. I’d work for nothing, but they made the mistake of paying me!”

He spoke in Church Point a while back to some young people about his life and experiences, and he would love to do more. His story is unique. And there are only a little over one hundred of the original Tuskegee Airmen alive today. He has seen a lot, but his charming, boyish face and his youthful smile hide it. Like many others, living life in the south has its challenges, but Charles was brought up to meet them, work around them, and make a good life for himself and his family. And then he took it all a step further by spreading this attitude--to his fellow pilots in the war, to America by disproving their theories that blacks were in any way inferior to whites, to Alabama children by letting them know that even in their youngest years, they were valuable, and then to us in Acadiana by teaching us that the greatest accomplishment in life is a whole life...one filled with hard work, a genuine smile, and a willingness to spread your heart around.