

# *The Sheffield Historical Society*



Summer 2011

## **Tuskegee Airmen September Program to Feature Tuskegee Airmen**

On Friday, Sept. 9, the Historical Society will present Bruce Bird, founder of the Museum of Black World War 2 History in Pownal, Vermont. Mr. Bird will speak about the Tuskegee Airmen, the first all Black Airforce unit to fly combat missions in World War II.



The Tuskegee unit was established in January, 1941, as the Army Air Corps became open to Blacks after decades of segregation. Tuskegee, Alabama, was chosen for the flight school. Because of local prejudice, the 99<sup>th</sup> fighter squadron was not sent into combat until July 2, 1943, and thus had received more training than any white squadron. This unit was joined in February, 1944 by the 100<sup>th</sup>, 301<sup>st</sup>, and 302<sup>nd</sup> fighter squadrons to form the 332<sup>nd</sup> fighter group. Eventually the group flew P-51 Mustangs, known as “red tails”. The Germans called the 332<sup>nd</sup> the “Schwartzes Volgelmenchen”, or “Black Birdmen.” While most white pilots were rotated home after 50 missions, black airmen flew as many as 158 missions, because Tuskegee could not train enough black men to replace them.

The 450 Tuskegee pilots flew over 1,500 missions, destroying 111 enemy aircraft in the air, plus 150 more on the ground. The Tuskegee Airmen also included 994 flight crew and 16,000 to 19,000 ground crew in the Army Air Corps. Many Black units served with great distinction in WW II, and this was a factor in President Truman's order to desegregate the Military in 1948.

Bruce Bird had spent most of his life as a factory worker

until he sustained a back injury in 1977. As a result of this injury, he started a college career at the tender age of 37, when the state of Vermont financed his Associates Degree in Industrial Management. Unable to find employment in that field, Bruce returned to school and earned his BA in History in 1985. From 1988 to 1990, Mr. Bird was part time curator of the Vermont National Guard Museum, while performing fulltime factory work, until at age 64, he accepted early retirement. Having read military history, built military models, and collected military artifacts, he decided to open a military museum. When a former school house became available in Pownal, Mr. Bird decided to honor Black troops with a Museum designed to highlight the forgotten service of 1.1 million African-American servicemen and women who served in World War Two. The Museum of Black WW II History was opened on June 3rd, 2006, and is the only Museum about the African-American service in WW II in the country.

“Tuskegee Airmen” will be presented at Dewey Hall in Sheffield on Sept. 9, 2011, at 7:30 p.m. For further information, call (413) 229-2694.

*Joyce Hawkins, with Bruce Bird*