

THE HERO NEXT DOOR

A 92-Year Old Tuskegee Airman Flies in a Fighter Plane One More Time



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Would you like to meet a real-life national hero?
Maybe you already have.

Did you know there are war heroes hidden among our neighbors at more than 1,100 Brookdale communities across the country? Although they performed valiant acts of courage, these men and women have since lived humble, unassuming lives. Because they do not boast, their heroics are a secret to most of us.

But we know about one of them. Marion "Rodge" Rodgers is a national hero who rose above the ceiling of racial discrimination, soaring upward to new heights of success in air and space. He now lives at Brookdale Monument Valley Park in Colorado Springs.



A Special Selective Service

When Rodgers was drafted into the Army during WWII, he could have been assigned to one of thousands of dismal duties commonly given to African-American soldiers. But he was among the fortunate few chosen for fighter pilot training in Tuskegee for the US Army Air Force.

After earning combat pilot certification, Rodgers was sent to the Ramitelli Air Base in Italy where he joined the 99th Fighter Squadron – one of eight squadrons of African-American pilots who came to be known collectively as the Tuskegee Airmen. The unique color scheme on each of their P-51 Mustang fighter planes included red paint on the tail – which led to their nickname "The Red Tails."

The Tuskegee squadrons Rodgers joined earned a stellar record of success on 179 bombing raid escort flights in which they only lost bombers to enemy fire on seven missions. As a result, bomber crews frequently requested Red Tail escorts, and the Tuskegee squadrons were awarded three Distinguished Unit Citations.

"Rodge" Rodgers: Red Tail

As a Red Tail fighter pilot, Rodgers flew 68 combat missions over Germany including reconnaissance flights over hostile forces, machine-gun strafing assaults on enemy vehicles, and bomber escort protection. Rodgers recounted, "The bombers took off first. You would follow them, climb to a higher altitude above and behind them, and keep

watch. Whenever enemy planes approached the bombers, you would dive down after them."

When asked how many enemy planes he shot down, Rodgers explained, "I really couldn't keep a count. When you're in a big air battle, and you hit an enemy plane – he might bank away and drop, and you might see smoke. But you don't have time to watch whether he crashes or lands somewhere. You have to keep your attention on all the other enemy planes that are still around you and engage them because they're trying to shoot you down."

Rodgers was eventually promoted to serve as Commander of the 99th Fighter Squadron in their final year before deactivation. The heroics of the Tuskegee Airmen would later be portrayed in the 2012 movie release "Red Tails", starring Cuba Gooding, Jr.

The Pilot's Shepherd

Rodgers didn't stop there. He began to rise in a new arena by volunteering for air communications training for flight control towers. Pilots had one of their own talking to them from the ground. This experience eventually led him to a 17-year career of service at NORAD where he was promoted to Chief of Communications.

If all that wasn't enough, Rodgers also spent a year as a Program Manager at NASA, working on the Apollo 13 mission – another example of helping shepherd a damaged craft on a perilous flight to a safe return home.

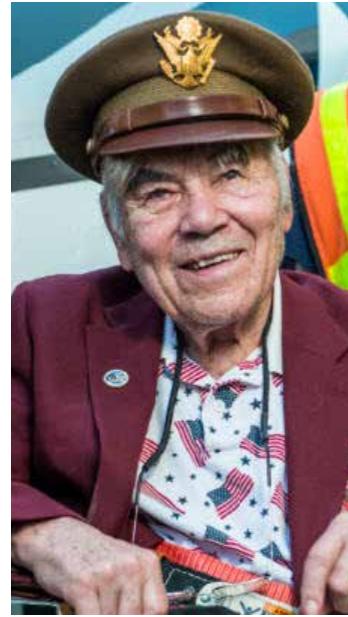
He cracked through racial ceilings, won battles in the air, and aided a mission in space that became the most dramatic flight rescue in history. After breaking those atmospheric boundaries, Rodgers looked down from those heights to turn his attention to new challenges on Earth.

A Media Voice

Rodgers wanted to accomplish even more with his life back in his hometown. He hosted a TV news magazine called “Involvement” airing on the Colorado Springs CBS station KKTU. In his stories, he explored community issues and interviewed civil rights leaders in states from Colorado to the west coast.

A Well-Earned Reward

After a lifetime of so many different victories, Rodgers finally took a rest. He is grateful to now have a home in Brookdale’s Colorado Springs community. “We have a beautiful view of the mountains. They cook healthy food and have a variety of activities. They take good care of me here,” he says.



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Wishing for the Cockpit

In spite of his leisurely retirement, Rodgers missed flying. Most of all, he yearned to take to the air one more time in a P-51 Mustang.

Brookdale and Wish of a Lifetime went to work and found a P-51 in the collection of the Commemorative Air Force, an organization of volunteer pilots and mechanics who restore and fly vintage aircraft. The C.A.F. chapter in southern California agreed to honor the wish of this revered Tuskegee Airman and greeted him with the celebrity of a national hero.

At 10:30 in the morning on September 6, 2014, “Rodge” Rodgers climbed once again into the cockpit of the plane model he first flew 70 years ago. At 92 years of age, he embarked on a nostalgic flight rising above a landscape of farmland, then out over the Pacific coast.

All he could hear was the full-throated roar of the P-51 engine. But this time, there were no flak explosions, gunfire, enemy planes, or any other sounds of war. Rodgers’ battles were over. He had risen above the racial boundaries of earth and sky. Now, he could simply enjoy the peace of soaring on the wings of an old trusted



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friend that always carried him safely back home.

Rodgers’ flight reminds us of a few lines from the poem “High Flight,” penned by WWII pilot John Magee who died at the age of 19 over the skies of England –

*“Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
and danced the skies on laughter-silvered
wings. Sunward I’ve climbed and joined the
tumbling mirth of sun-spilt clouds,
and done a hundred things you have not
dreamed of....
.... and while with silent lifting mind I’ve
trod the high untrodden sanctity of space,
put out my hand and touched the face of
God.”*

Rewarding Heroes

Rodgers is a hero to the C.A.F pilots who granted his wish for one more flight.

But each resident at every Brookdale community is a hero to someone in their life. So we give honor and care to all of them as a reward for the battles they have fought, the heights they have reached, and the victories they have won.