

# Red Tails reaching out

**Traveling exhibit takes Tuskegee Airmen story to children**

BY JILL W. TALLMAN

**AIRSHOWS ARE A GREAT WAY** to showcase aviation to the nonflying public—so long as the public comes to the airshows. When you have an important story to tell, however, sometimes you need to go directly to your audience.

That's why the Commemorative Air Force (CAF) Red Tail Squadron created the Rise Above exhibit to tell the story of the Tuskegee Airmen. Rise Above is not simply a static P-51—though that impressive airplane plays a starring role in an aviation setting. A key part of the exhibit is a short-form film that puts its viewers in the back seat of that P-51. The film is viewed in a 35-seat theater housed in a 53-foot trailer that is trucked directly to schools and other venues.

## THE STORY ON FILM

Adam White, director of documentaries *Flight of the Red Tail*, *Red Tail Reborn*, and *The Restorers*, was in the director's chair for this effort as well. "We try to remember what normal people don't know," he said. "Ninety percent of African-Americans don't know about the Tuskegee Airmen. You have to hit them with the very clear facts: that these airmen volunteered to save the world"—and then encountered prejudice when they returned home to the United States. Two versions were shot; the longer version for schools features a young student who learns that a new friend fought in a war as a pilot, and that the man had to overcome obstacles to reach his goal. Tuskegee Airmen Col. Charles E. McGee appears as himself, which White said added even more impact to the story: "Here's the guy who was asked to sit in the back of the bus."

White filmed three P-51s from a variety of angles to give the film its needed authentic feel. "You couldn't shoot these on a green screen," he said. An aspect ratio of 7:1 allowed the filmmaker to use more parts of the screen and do more to keep the viewpoint realistic. "This movie was made for one theater only," White said. "It will not be seen on DVD or iPad." The theater employs a custom-built 163-degree panoramic screen designed by a company that specializes in planetarium shows.



**RISE ABOVE** is a traveling exhibit, which features a 35-seat movie theater inside a 53-foot tractor trailer (left). Images of the airmen (top) are featured on the trailer; documentaries are shown in the theater (above center); *Red Tails* movie star Cuba Gooding Jr. (above).

In 2013, the exhibit will travel to more than 25 locations, including EAA AirVenture in Oshkosh. There's never a charge to schools or youth organizations, although Rise Above does seek sponsors at airshow locations and accepts tax-deductible donations. Its principal sponsor is Texas Flying Legends Museum in Houston. A full calendar and more information are available at the Red Tail Squadron website ([www.redtail.org](http://www.redtail.org)).

White says the Rise Above message can be especially important for youth who may be at risk, because they can see firsthand that the Tuskegee Airmen overcame obstacles that seemed insurmountable. "They were told they didn't have the physical, moral, or mental capacity to operate those machines," he says.

### THE AIRPLANE AND ITS PILOT

The distinctive P-51C *Tuskegee Airmen* can be seen when the exhibit is on display at airshows, fly-ins, and other aviation venues.

On a May afternoon in 2012, *Tuskegee Airmen* sat outside the Rise Above trailer at Culpeper Regional Airport in Virginia. The exhibit had just finished a three-day run at Andrews Air Force Base, and plans were to take the program to public schools in Virginia. Unfortunately, a week of mandatory testing had left no room in the schedule for Culpeper's students to view the film. The show would go on, however, for about two dozen home-schooled children and Boy Scouts who were coming out to the airport.

White, producer Kara Martinelli, and a group of CAF volunteers were on their hands and knees assembling the screen. A hard drive that had been shipped overnight had been damaged, and a new hard drive must be made operational before the students arrive.

*Tuskegee Airmen's* pilot, Doug Rozendaal, recalled attending Canada's World Fair in 1964 as a 10-year-old, and viewing a 360-degree panoramic film in which the audience got to "fly" in the open cockpit of a biplane. "I spent the next 40 years" with airplanes, he said of that film's impact. He hopes Rise Above will have the same type of effect on this generation. "If the objective is to cause people to realize their hopes and opportunities," he said, "it has to rise to the level of an experience."

Donated to the CAF in the 1960s, *Tuskegee Airmen* did not fly until 2001, after retired Navy pilot Don Hinz took it on. He had envisioned using the airplane as an educational tool—it was making airshow appearances in support of the Tuskegee Airmen story—but in 2004, Hinz died from injuries he suffered after the airplane crashed during an airshow performance in Minnesota. The Red Tail Squadron decided to rebuild the P-51 a second time, and CAF Project Leader Brad Lang spent five years and raised \$1 million to see it airborne once again.

Today's group of children filed back outside after viewing the film and studying the artwork on the side of the trailer—images of the airmen, and a set of principles: "Aim High," "Believe in Yourself," "Use Your Brain," "Never Quit," "Be Ready to Go," and "Expect to Win." Each child had been given a bright-red key tag with those same principles.

The children lined up a hundred yards away from the P-51. The throaty roar of the Rolls-Royce (Packard) Merlin engine filled the air as Rozendaal started *Tuskegee Airmen*. One of the CAF volunteers was about to get a special treat: a ride in the airplane, which has been modified with a rear seat. The kids were excited to see the airplane they had just watched on film start up and taxi away, and they cheered and clapped when Rozendaal took off and then returned to make a low pass.

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