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Published April 25, 2013, 12:00 AM



Iowa hometown honors Tuskegee Airman Joe Gomer of Duluth with statue

On Wednesday, World War II Tuskegee Airman Joe Gomer watched the projected image of a second statue being unveiled in his hometown of Iowa Falls, Iowa.

By: [Steve Kuchera](#), Duluth News Tribune

When a statue of World War II Tuskegee Airman Joe Gomer was unveiled in Duluth in June, the 92-year-old Duluth resident remarked: "I never thought I'd see this in my time."

On Wednesday, the retired Air Force major watched the projected image of a second statue being unveiled in his hometown of Iowa Falls, Iowa.

"It is amazing to have two statues," Gomer said after the unveiling.

During the ceremony, Gomer thanked via cell phone those attending the Iowa Falls unveiling. The statue, he said, represented not just him, but "so many people throughout the services."

It also represented "so much change throughout my 92 years," he said.

The American military was strictly segregated when the Army — under congressional order — created the African-American outfit that would become known as the Tuskegee Airmen after the Alabama airfield where many of them trained. Many credit the accomplishments of the Tuskegee Airmen with being a major factor in integrating the military and helping pave the way for the civil rights movement.

Gomer, along with the rest of the airmen, received a Congressional Gold Medal in 2007. Individually, Gomer was inducted into the Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame in 2004; named a "history maker" by a Chicago-based nonprofit in 2002; and received a Distinguished Alumni Award in 2009 from Ellsworth Community College in Iowa Falls, where the new statue of him now stands.

Gomer was joined by about 80 people to watch the unveiling from the chapel at Duluth's Ecumen Lakeshore, where he lives in assisted care. The Duluth audience stood and joined an Iowa choir in singing the national anthem as images of an honor guard posting the colors were projected onto a large screen. Later the choir sang "America the Beautiful" as the statue was unveiled. The Duluth crowd sat quietly until the song was finished, then broke into applause.

At Ellsworth Community College, more than 200 people — from sweatshirt-clad college kids to gray-haired veterans — gathered to witness the unveiling of Gomer's statue.

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Joe Gomer



Joe Gomer, in Duluth, has a microphone in one hand and a cell phone in another as he speaks to the crowd in Iowa Falls, Iowa, gathered Wednesday for the unveiling of a second statue in the Tuskegee Airman's honor. (Bob King / rking@duluthnews.com)

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The life-size bronze figure stands on a grassy area of the campus, depicting him in flight gear, mid-stride. It was designed by artist Charles R. Taylor and sculpted by Sutton Betti of Loveland, Colo. Duluth's statue, also bronze, was created by sculptor Tim Cleary, who also is chairman of the visual arts department at the University of Wisconsin-Superior.

In Iowa Falls, Robert Aguilera, who was one of the driving forces behind the statue, had tears in his eyes as he sat on a bench in front of the statue after the ceremony.

"Look at him. He's walking toward you with dignity and strength," said Aguilera, a veteran of the Korean War. "He's actually walking. It's magnificent."

Aguilera and the artist's father, Chuck Taylor, spent the last year working with the sculptor, raising money and finding a place for the statue. They lined up community donations for a granite base, park benches and landscaping around the statue.

Gomer was born in Iowa Falls in 1920. He graduated from Iowa Falls High School in 1938 and attended Ellsworth College, where he studied pre-engineering. He earned a degree in 1940 but returned to school at Ellsworth the following year for flight instruction training through the Civil Aeronautics Authority. The group of young pilots learned to fly in a pasture outside of town.

When World War II broke out, Gomer was accepted to Aviation Cadet Training and was sent to the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama, where black pilots were trained. Upon completion of training, Gomer was assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group and sent to the 301st Fighter Squadron in Italy.

Gomer flew 68 missions, escorting ship convoys and bombers of the 15th Air Force during bombing missions over Italy and Germany. The 332nd Fighter Group flew 311 missions. Sixty-eight pilots were killed and an additional 30 were captured as prisoners of war. Gomer had several close calls. He crash-landed one plane, and on another mission his plane was riddled with bullets.

At Lakeshore in Duluth, veterans advocate Durbin Keeney, who was instrumental in the creation of the Gomer statue on display in the Duluth International Airport terminal, joked about Gomer's latest recognition.

"Most of us are lucky enough to get our names on a headstone," he said. "Joe's getting his name on two statues."

Iowa Falls Times-Citizen Editor Sara Konrad Baranowski contributed to this report.

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