GFWC Florida

Women with Wisdom

Series

**Callie Gentry, GFWC Woman’s Club of Tarpon Springs**

Nominated by Reggie Gibson, GFWC Woman’s Club of Tarpon Springs

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When Maya Angelou wrote her poem, “Phenomenal Woman”, she could have been writing about 97 year old Callie Gentry!

In 1945 during the middle of World War II, Callie was serving as a member of the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) as a stenographer when she was assigned to the 332nd Unit, a flying squadron fighter group known as the Tuskegee Airmen. These brave fighter and bomber pilots made history as the first African-American flying group. Callie’s role included going out to the air field to take shorthand dictation after a plane crash, taking depositions from witnesses and property owners, and assisting however she could. When planes returning from battle were so badly damaged that pilots could not use the brakes, it was the job of all enlisted personnel, including Callie, to push heavy equipment onto the runway to prevent the planes from crashing. She served in this capacity during her two year military career.

Callie’s roots were in Philadelphia, PA, and she was not used to the level of segregation she experienced after joining the military. In Callie’s words, “Whatever you have read about segregation, it was all that and worse”. She credits the Tuskegee Airmen with being the leaders of the desegregation of the military. When Tuskegee Airmen officers were not permitted into an officer’s club because of their race, the protests that ensued proved to be pivotal in the airmen’s fight for equality and respect. President Truman signed an Executive Order desegregating the U. S. Armed Forces in 1948, although it would not be fully realized until the 1950’s.

Through all these trials Callie could have become bitter and disillusioned, but instead she chose to fight harder for what was right, fair and just. She endured tremendous hardship because of her race, but she never let it define her, choosing instead to be a strong, independent, self-assured African American woman full of hope for her future.

After her military experience, Callie had to re-educate herself in order to get a decent job. She faced a tremendous amount of rejection, finding that white employers would not hire her as a stenographer because they didn’t think a black person would fit into their organization. She was eventually hired by the Veteran’s Administration, where she worked for 38 years. She worked hard to remain strong in the face of adversity, and didn’t allow those who tried to make her feel inferior to succeed, focusing instead on her own self-worth. For the most part her experience with the VA was positive. She believes that she was judged on her work; not the color of her skin, and her positive attitude and hard work earned her many good ratings and accolades from her supervisors.

Although the movie *Red Tails* is a largely fictional depiction of a black flying squad World War II, Callie describes it as an accurate portrayal of the environment in which she and the Tuskegee Airmen lived and worked. Her voice was full of pride and nostalgia as she spoke of the times she spent with the Airmen. Callie takes great pride in her accomplishments and the rich, wonderful history of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Callie married an active duty service man. She has one daughter who resides in Florida, one granddaughter, and four great granddaughters. A member of GFWC Woman’s Club of Tarpon Springs, Callie has always surrounded herself with intelligent women and has found her club sisters to be like-minded in their positive attitudes and the many contributions they make to the community.

Callie’s vision is to encourage and motivate young women to help them succeed; providing them with support so they are comfortable making their own decisions about their future.

Callie, we admire you, we respect you for your contributions and your service, and we salute you as a Woman with Wisdom!