



Volume 19, Issue 5, May 2004  
A Monthly Publication of the Pine Mountain Lake Aviation Association

## Captain Leon “Woodie” Spears *Adventures of a Tuskegee Airman*

About Our Guest Speaker for May 1, 2004



airplanes in combat for the US Army Air Corps against the best pilots the Axis powers had to offer during World War II.

Growing up in the steel mill town of Pueblo, Colorado, it was an especially trying time for African Americans. All of the images of daring pilots, like Tailspin Tommy, Bill Barnes, Roscoe Turner and Wiley Post, were white.

It seemed the destiny of African Americans to work in the local steel mill, yet Woodie and his friends (who were all white and Hispanic) would meet at his house to talk and dream about flying.

Woodie learned that The Tuskegee Institute in Alabama had been selected as the location for training young African American men to fly.

All the while, Woodie's friends could not believe that their group would be separated. "Our country is not going to do that," his friends would say. As Woodie keenly points out, "What does that tell you about prejudice, about bias? It has to be taught."

In order to be accepted for flight training, applicants were required to have at least two years of college with the equivalent of an Associate of Arts degree. So Woodie and all of his friends attended Pueblo Junior College to get their degrees.

With some college work behind him, Woodie went to the local army recruiter and requested an application for aviation cadet training. The recruiter replied "What? There is no such thing!" Woodie presented a copy of Life magazine, which showed the first graduating class from Tuskegee on the cover. The recruiter said that he would check it out and get back to him. Woodie took that to mean "don't call me, I'll call you." But true to his words, the recruiter did call back and made arrangements for the entrance exams. Woodie finished his degree program and was accepted into the US Army.

Woodie's training began in Piper Cubs followed by Stearman PT-13's. He endured racial slurs by his white instructors to become one of fifteen cadets out of fifty to graduate.

Upon graduation, white pilots were assigned duty at bomber and fighter groups all over the world, while black pilots were assigned solely to the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group or the 477<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group.

The graduated class of 44-F was sent to Walterboro Army Air Base to fly transition in the high performance P-47. Then they were off to Italy where they were trained in the P-51.

Woodie Spears is one of the few remaining Tuskegee Airmen, a living legend who dared to dream. He was determined to fly

The Tuskegee Airmen were limited to escort missions, which consisted of flying top cover, protecting the bombers from

marauding enemy fighters. They saw combat in over 15,000 missions across Europe and Africa during World War II. They are the only unit from World War II to hold the distinction of never losing a bomber.

Of Woodie's 51 missions, the one on March 24, 1945 turned out to be his most eventful. The group was briefed to fly to Berlin. As they approached the city, they ran into heavy flak and consequently pulled off the bombers.

Woodie found himself in an inverted spin and recovered only to find a large portion of his left wing gone. Then, attempting to make it to Russia he had to make a forced landing in Poland. Woodie made the mistake of lowering his landing gear. This created a great deal of drag resulting in rapid altitude loss. He tried to raise the gear but the engine was not developing enough power. His Mustang hit the ground at about a 30-degree nose-down attitude in what Woodie calls a perfect three-point landing, "a nose and two wheels." One of the plane's rudder pedals snapped down on his right foot, nearly severing it.

After exiting the aircraft, Woodie noticed the most beautiful Mercedes convertible heading toward him. It was filled with German soldiers who took him to their headquarters, which appeared to have been a hotel. He was treated fairly well. In fact, on one occasion, his guard had left his gun leaning against the open door and walked away. Woodie picked up the weapon and took it apart. When the guard returned to see his dismantled gun on the bed he proceeded to show Woodie the right way to disassemble and re-assemble it.

After a few days in the hotel-jail, Woodie heard a tremendous earth-shaking racket. It was a Russian tank. He looked for his captors but they had left. Woodie rushed to his window and showed a Russian officer the US flag on the back of his A-2 jacket. The Russian seemed happy to see him and they traded hugs and pleasantries. Woodie was then interned by them, and explains, "It was absolutely horrible. If the Germans had told me they were leaving, I'd have gone with them."

The Pine Mountain Lake Aviation Association is privileged to welcome a man of great perseverance and accomplishment, Captain Leon "Woodie" Spears, on Saturday, May 1, 2004 at the Buchner Hangar. Please find more details on the last page of this newsletter.



# President's Corner

Welcome to the special roster addition of the PMLAA news letter. I have chosen to publish an abbreviated addition to make room for the mailing of the roster without incurring extra mailing expenses. In addition, some of your favorite columnists are representing us at "Fun and Sun" down in Florida. Last I heard there was plenty of "Fun" but not too much "Sun" to be had.

Please respect the privacy of our members. This list is published as a service to our members for their personal non-commercial use. In the past we have had a couple of instances of the list being used for commercial purposes. Please don't even think about using this list for mass mailings. You won't get the desired results. This list is also available electronically on our web site. We have published this in several formats so that you can upload this to your electronic address books if you are up to the challenge.

Lots of good stuff going on with our community relations efforts this month:

On May 11th, we will be holding our second annual Airport Day. Our intent here is to raise the awareness of what goes on in the general aviation world to our local youngsters. Last year's event was a tremendous success. We are looking to make this year even better. Come on out and join the fun or better yet get involved in the planning and management of having 50 or so 5th and 6th graders exploring our airport. Call Rand at 962-0710 for more info.

Last year your board approved the creation of an award to the student from Tenaya elementary who demonstrated the most interest, aptitude and achievement in science and technology. We wanted this award to provide an incentive to our local young people. This award has been named the "Mark Kelly Science and Technology Award" in honor of Mary Kelly's late husband. I never had the privilege of meeting Mark but I am told that he was very connected with our schools and was internationally recognized in the world of aeronautical engineering. This year's recipient of the award will be named next month.

We are investigating the possibility of participating in a vocational program for Tioga High. This program would provide pre-employment education for students interested in a career as an A&P (Airframe and Power-plant Mechanic). Check with Rand Siegfried for more details.

Thank You, Bill Thomas for last month's inspiring inside look at the life of a naval aviator. Or how to making a living out of blowing stuff up. Nice work if you can get it... This month our meeting will revert back to 6:00 PM as daylight savings challenges our video equipment capability. The food program will be hors d'oeuvres, desserts and some special beverage options.

Once again we have a dynamite program lined up for Saturday's meeting. Don't miss it!

*Pine Mountain Lake Aviation Association  
Proudly Presents*

## **SERGEI SIKORSKY**

**RECOLLECTIONS OF A PIONEER,  
THE LEGACY OF IGOR SIKORSKY**



***Bountiful Beach Blanket  
Barbecue Buffet***

***The Blankenburg Museum***

**Saturday, June 5, 2004**

**4:00 P.M.**

**RESERVATIONS REQUIRED**

**\$25 per person**

# Seminar Update

*Register Today for Upcoming Pilot Seminars!*

**Certification of Aircraft and Airmen for the  
Operation of Light-Sport Aircraft  
May 8, Buchner Hangar  
1:00-3:00pm**

**Mountain Flying in the Sierra Nevada  
June 26, Buchner Hangar  
1:00-3:00pm**

To register, email Guy: [gnrussell@earthlink.net](mailto:gnrussell@earthlink.net)

**IFR Clinic  
May 15, Wallace Hangar, Columbia Airport  
9:00am – 3:00pm**

To register: call Alan at 626.287.7400 or Adrien at 209.532.3407