

ARKANSAS LIFE

The Greatest of the Generation



Hats off to tuskegee airman milton crenchaw on his 95th

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Leaning back coolly in a dark, metal-framed chair in a buzzing banquet hall rests a man who could pass for two decades younger than the birthday he's about to celebrate.

He still looks so much like the picture resting in a display case at the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center that it's hard to believe the photo was taken 74 years ago, and that the man—Milton Pitts Crenchaw—is a few days shy of 95.

The line builds for handshakes, and American Legion members bend to whisper praise as Crenchaw cracks a slight smile, just like the one in the faded photograph. The only thing missing is the Air Force uniform Crenchaw spent 40 years sporting, training a group of Alabama cadets now better known by a different name: The Original Tuskegee Airmen.

Crenchaw first traveled to Tuskegee, Ala., in 1939 to pursue a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering at the Tuskegee Institute. But after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, his plans took a turn. Crenchaw entered the Civilian Pilot Training Program, graduating with his civilian pilot license and commercial pilot certificate in 1941—making him one of the first black licensed pilots in the history of the country.

Now, after years of teaching aviation classes at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Crenchaw sits as a lifetime honorary board member of a group founded in his name: The Milton Pitts Crenchaw Aviation Training Academy. The academy provides funding support for underprivileged Arkansas students looking to start a career in aviation.

At 95, no one would fault Crenchaw for not coming to the academy's annual awards banquet. But there he is, looking right at home at the head table. He could be just another veteran, there with his family and talking about old times. But of course, everyone here knows better. That's Milton Crenchaw. And the night is all about him.

