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Morris Graduate to Construct Statue Honoring Tuskegee Airmen

Summary: Timothy Cleary '92, has been awarded a commission to create a statue commemorating the Tuskegee Airmen.

(February 29, 2012)-Nearly 70 years ago, a group of young African American men now known as the Tuskegee Airmen became famous for protecting American bombers against the Nazi Luftwaffe. Today, they are famous for smashing the color barrier preventing African-Americans from serving their country as combat pilots, paving the way for the desegregation of the U.S. military. Fewer than 100 of the pilots are alive today and 92-year-old Duluth resident Joe Gomer is perhaps the last in Minnesota.

Gomer has been active in his community for decades, making contributions to veterans groups, education, and promoting civil rights. Last fall, The Northland Veteran Services Committee in Duluth commissioned '92 University of Minnesota, Morris alumnus Timothy Cleary to construct a statue of Gomer to commemorate the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen. Cleary is an active artist and an assistant professor of art at the University of Wisconsin-Superior. The statue will be placed in the Duluth International Airport upon completion.

“Joe’s personal humbleness and humility really pulled me into the project,” Cleary said. “I asked him once how he felt about the statue and he gave a two-word answer: ‘It’s embarrassing.’ Joe’s the kind of person who’d rather remain in the background, but he decided to lend his face to the statue as a way of honoring the Tuskegee pilots and ground crew.”

The Tuskegee Airmen were the first African-American military aviators in the United States armed forces. At that time, the American military was racially segregated and the Tuskegee Airmen faced steep racial discrimination.

“They were considered to be second-class citizens, but they resolved to fight for their country despite being unappreciated, even hated,” Cleary said. “So they were in a fight for their civil liberties as well as their country.”

Despite adversity, the pilots trained and flew with distinction. The Tuskegee Airmen were particularly valued for their superior ability to protect bomber squadrons, which led to a dramatic decrease in downed bombers. The crews they escorted over Europe dubbed the pilots "Red Tail Angels" because of their distinctive tail assemblies.

Gomer experienced first-hand some of the fiercest fighting, flying 68 of the unit's 311 combat missions.

“When I first met Joe, I learned he had lost all of his tent mates in combat, and then all of their replacements,” Cleary said. “Throughout the war, he always felt that his time was coming. He called the missions ‘Russian roulette on a grand scale.’”

Cleary is especially interested in bringing out this human side of the larger historical conversation associated with the Tuskegee Airmen, and aims to create a memorial that captures Gomer’s personality and character.

“I didn’t want to create the classic war memorial with a steely-eyed pilot staring off into the distance,” Cleary said. “In

my designs, I tried to connect the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen to a real human being. I tried to place Joe's personality—his body language, gesture, and expression—in front of the historical backdrop.”

The statue will be a life-size figure of the young Gomer in period World War II flight gear. To create the statue, Cleary will sculpt an original figure in wax, which he will then cast in bronze. The project is slated to be completed by Gomer's birthday in June.

“For me, it's a real fast track,” Cleary said. “Making a statue like this is very time consuming. At my usual pace, I'd plan to have something like this done by November. There are many layers to the process people don't see. There's research, like making sure Joe's clothes and likeness are right, and acquiring the right materials needed to finish the project—metals, stone, plaster and wax. And then there's the physical sculpting itself, which is the most time consuming. In addition, I have a full-time job that prevents me from dedicating all of my time to the project.”

Cleary says that studying at Morris provided him a firm foundation for building his professional and personal life. In particular, he values the relationships he forged with his professors.

“We weren't just names on paper,” Cleary said. “My teachers were very good at bringing out student's individual strengths. They helped me understand that hard work is the basic necessity for success. I learned that you have to care about what you are doing. You can't be half-committed.

“One of my mentors at Morris was John Ingle,” Cleary continued, “he always encouraged his students to ‘avoid the occasion of regret.’ To me this means being willing to take risks. Even if things don't end up the way you want, I feel that overcoming your fear and taking that risk is its own kind of victory.”

Cleary encourages current Morris students to work hard at what they love and get the basics down while in college.

“Having a grasp of the basics allows you to create something that you care about, something of real value,” Cleary said. “If you don't do what you love, you'll have to do something else—something perhaps you don't love. So go all in, don't hold back.”

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