



Join WILL AM-FM-TV's effort to capture and share the stories of central Illinois World War II veterans and their families in conjunction with the broadcast of Ken Burns' The War on PBS in September.

WILL Stories

In stories on WILL radio, television and the Web, WILL looks at the war from many perspectives: men in battle on land and at sea, Japanese-American families in internment camps, conscientious objectors, women in the service, African-Americans at Chanute Air Force Base, German POWs in Hoopeston.

Oral History Interview: Joseph Smith of Champaign

Joseph Smith enlisted in the United States Marine Corps on June 11, 1943. Smith selected the Marine Corps after a USMC recruiter convinced him that he would be treated just the same as white recruits and could expect a job other than cook. While Smith would eventually serve in the Okinawa Campaign as a truck driver, he quickly learned during his trip to boot camp that institutional racism was alive and well in the Armed Forces.

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[Visit The War web site on PBS.org](#)

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Rantoul's 99th Pursuit Squadron

Sixty people attended a community conversation September 20, 2007 at the Rantoul Business Center in Rantoul, IL about the all-black 99th Pursuit Squadron formed during World War II at Chanute Field. Speaking were Col. Elmer Jones, one of six original aviation cadets to be trained at Chanute; Edith Roberts, widow of George "Spanky" Roberts, who was the first commander of the 99th Pursuit Squadron at Tuskegee; and Mrs. Eunice Dansby Gingery of Decatur, wife of Ellsworth Dansby, who was one of the first enlisted volunteers to arrive at Chanute Field in 1941. The event was co-sponsored by WILL and the Chanute Air Museum. The panel and audience discussion were moderated by Howard Piggee of Rantoul.

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Tuskegee Airman Elmer Jones

Aired on WILL-TV's "Prairie Fire" at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 21

Producer Denise La Grassa talks with Tuskegee Airman Col. Elmer Jones, one of six original aviation cadets for the Tuskegee Airmen trained at Chanute Field in Rantoul. Jones, who became ground crew commander, was proud to serve his country in aircraft engineering during World War II, even though he served in an all-black unit. He maintains that being in a segregated unit provided an unexpected opportunity for the Tuskegee Airmen. They were able to prove their abilities at a time when people questioned whether African Americans should be allowed to fly and maintain planes. "They proved they were as good as white fighter pilots," said LaGrassa. "World War II was really the beginning of the civil rights movement."

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Illinois' Tuskegee Airmen

Aired on Feb. 19, 2008, on WILL-AM



The story of the Tuskegee Airmen began as an experiment and ended by proving the ability of many African-American servicemen. The military's first black pilots withstood animosity to fight America's enemies overseas while continuing to fight racism on the home front. This story by WILL-AM's Jeff Bossert looks at the paths taken by two of the first members of the Army Air Corps' 99th Pursuit Squadron. Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul was the first training ground for these officers. AM 580's Jeff Bossert spoke with the widows of two men, Bill Thompson and Ellsworth Dansby, who helped pave the way for many others:

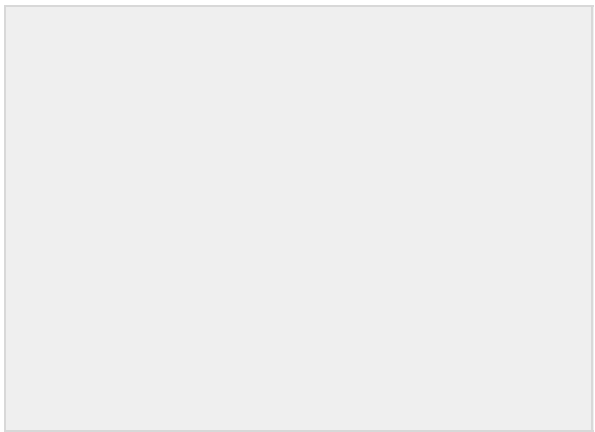
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Theodore Freeman of Rantoul



Freeman was a steward, serving officers in the mess hall on the USS Missouri. But when the enemy struck, he had to man his position on a gun mount and defend the ship. He was on board the USS Missouri when a Japanese kamikaze pilot crashed his plane into the ship very near to where Freeman was standing. He talked with WILL-TV producer Denise La Grassa about the challenges he faced as an African-American on board ship and about the conflict between his life as Pentecostal pastor before Pearl Harbor and his life as a sailor pledged to defend the country.

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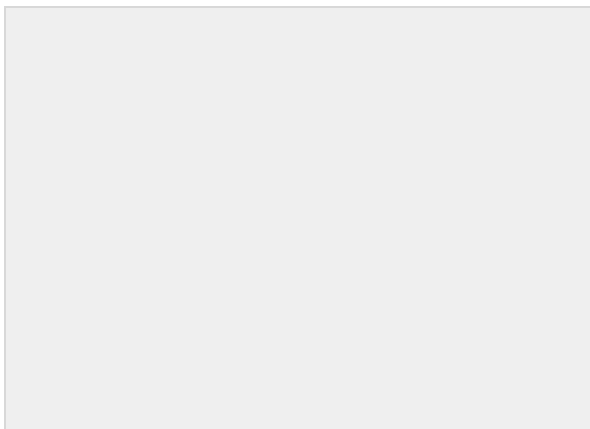
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Iris Lundin, Champaign

Aired on WILL-TV's "Prairie Fire" at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 7



When World War II broke out, Iris Nigg Lundin of Champaign left her small town in Minnesota and joined hundreds of other women in the newly formed Marine Corps women's Reserve. She became one of the first four female navigation instructors.

Producer Denise La Grassa said that in her conversations with Lundin, she was impressed by the strength of this woman who left a secure life in Minnesota to join the ranks of the Marines, the toughest of the tough. "This was the first time many of these men who were her students had encountered a female instructor and she really held her own," said La Grassa. "When I listened to her stories, I was moved by her description of how she went to bat for African-Americans on the military

bases where she worked. She was brave enough to tell a higher-ranking officer that he shouldn't be treating a steward in a demeaning manner. Later in her life, equality was very important to her."

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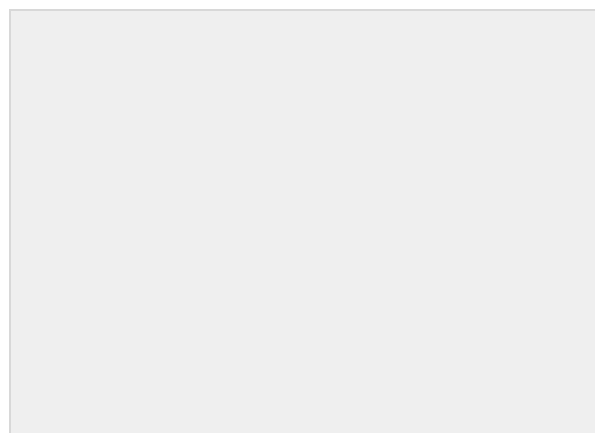


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University of Illinois' WWII Veterans Presentation



Three hundred people attended a community conversation August 28, 2008 at the Alice Campbell Alumni Center at the University of Illinois IL featuring musical storytelling emphasizing the events of WWII and prominent songs of the period with vocalist and narrator Dena Vermette, Don Heitler and his jazz trio with Ben Taylor on bass and Jeff Magby on drums. The musical performance will be narrated by veteran John Weaver. The musical performance was followed by a video screening of people who lived and trained at the U of I during WWII and discussion with panelists plus an archival display.

Speaking were Katie Harper Wright, who attended the U of I from 1940 to 1944 and was one of a small number of black students on campus; Jim Stallmeyer, who was drafted into the Navy and

trained at the U of I from 1944-1946; Earl Swanson, who attended the U of I before joining the Army in 1943; William Prather, a soldier in the Army who trained on campus, and Kathryn Luther Henderson, a student from Champaign.

The event was co-sponsored by co-sponsored by WILL, the U of I Alumni Association, and the U of I Archives' Student Life and Culture Archival Program, funded by the Stewart S. Howe Endowment.

The panel and audience discussion were moderated by Tom Rogers of WILL AM-FM-TV.

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The First to Enlist for Chanute's All-Black 99th Pursuit Squadron



My late husband Ellsworth Dansby, Jr., one of the original Tuskegee Airmen, spent his early years learning everything he could about flying. He would watch flies as they lifted off and banked into turns, and dreamed of the days he could do that also.

He became good friends with a pair of brothers whose family owned a plane. Their father had seen to it that they had flying lessons. One day when the parents weren't home, Ellsworth visited and wanted to watch them fly. One of them took the plane up and, after he had landed, told Ellsworth, "Now it's your turn."

Ellsworth had never been in a plane in his whole life but he had read everything he could get his hands on. Besides, he was a 12-year-old kid who couldn't pass up the opportunity or the challenge. He hopped in and took off—alone, of course. It was a one-seater plane. He had no trouble

flying. However, he hadn't read the part about landing. But he figured that if he flew the plane down to the ground and cut the engine, it would work. It did.

During the next few years, he flew whenever he could, and he became a very good mechanic. There is a legend that I believe is true, that the old Mr. Charles Walgreen—yes, that Walgreen—landed in Lake Decatur in a pontoon plane that had some mechanical trouble. The mechanics available were called in and none could repair it. At that point, someone recalled that there was a black kid in Decatur High who could fix anything. Ellsworth was called out of class, worked on the plane, and had it running in a few hours.

Frustration seemed to dog his steps whenever he tried to pursue his flying dreams. He applied to every flight school in the country and they were enthusiastic to have him until they discovered he was black. He was turned down at every try, even though A.E. Staley, a friend of Mr. Walgreen's, offered to pay his tuition.

As the clouds of World War II gathered, he was desperate to get into the Air Force, but of course he couldn't because he was black. Then came the creation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, a break that he and thousands of others had prayed for. He heard the news that an all-black unit was being created, got on his motorcycle and tore to Chanute Field in Rantoul, Ill., where he became the first enlistee. He was 27 at that time, the upper limit of the age for enlistment as a pilot, so he settled for being a mechanic. The 99th Pursuit Squadron members who trained as ground crew at Chanute went to Tuskegee, Ala., where they joined with the squadron's pilots, and became the first unit of the famed Tuskegee Airmen. After he went to Tuskegee, he decided to stay on as a mechanic and became the first black Master Sergeant.

The 99th were aching to get into combat, but were left sitting at Tuskegee while the U.S. was in desperate need of more pilots. Prejudice on the part of the Army brass caused this to happen. After a great deal of pressure was put on high places, they were finally shipped to North African where again they sat, doing nothing. It seemed that no white outfit would attach them to their units.

One day, a plane carrying Field Marshal Montgomery of the British landed at their field. He demanded to know what they were doing just sitting there. When it was explained that no U.S. group would attach them, Montgomery said some pithy words about whose war it was anyway, and said he'd be glad to take them. They were then attached to the British and produced an enviable record.

When the invasion of Sicily took place, the U.S. had finally realized what they were missing, and from then on, the "Red Tails," named because of the red tails on their planes, fought for their own country. The fame of their mechanics had spread all over the U.S. Air Force and planes from all kinds of units would fly in to have their repairs done by the 99th.

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Ken Burns' The War

The War, Ken Burns' seven-part documentary series directed and produced by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, re-airs on WILL-TV on three consecutive Saturdays in December. The most-watched PBS series in the 10 years, it explores the history and horror of the Second World War from an American perspective by following the fortunes of so-called ordinary men and women who become caught up in one of the greatest cataclysms in human history.

Upcoming Broadcasts:

- Dec. 15: 1 p.m. Part 1; 3:45 p.m. Part 2
- Dec. 22: 1 p.m. Part 3; 3:10 p.m.