Henry Ernst Rohlsen: Native Virgin Islander and American war hero

TOM EADES

ST. CROIX — When receiving influential African Americans only one year during Black History Month, it's imperative to remember those individuals who have struggled to achieve such a feat that would change history forever like native Virgin Islander, native Henry Ernst Rohlsen did during World War II when he helped pave the way for other black fighter pilots.

Rohlsen, the territory's own war hero, was born to Carrie Williams and Carl Ernst Rohlsen on St. John Oct. 6, 1916. He was a member of one of the most highly respected fighter groups of World War II known as the Tuskegee Airmen, an all African American squadron of fighter pilots which formed in 1941.

The Tuskegee Airmen formed after the U.S. military designed a training program to see if African Americans could successfully operate and maintain combat aircraft. Rohlsen was one of the first pilots involved with early operation in South America, the Caribbean, and joined the U.S. Army Air Corps as a second lieutenant.

Rohlsen flew P-51 Mustangs, the airships that would become the Tuskegee Airmen's signature. After serving his country proud for three years in the fighter squadron and later in the bomber squadron, Rohlsen changed history forever by being the first African American pilots to participate in military aviation.

The military experiment which spawned the Tuskegee Airmen provided the first opportunity for African Americans to fly fighters for the U.S. military. After highly educated and experienced pilots like Rohlsen successfully qualified for the experiment, the Army Air Corps formed the all-African American war pilot unit.

Joyce E. Simpson Rohlsen was married to Rohlsen from 1942 until he died from a sudden heart attack on Jan. 15, 1991. Rohlsen, who was in service before, had no other children — Joyce Michelle Simpson and Larry Wood Rohlsen II — with his wife Joyce. Rohlsen's first wife was Gladys Gail Oliver, a former school teacher on St. Croix. Her second wife was Gladys Rohlsen.

Joyce Rohlsen recalled a time when her husband called her about his experiences as a Tuskegee Airman. She said that he told her the black men who tried to be fighter pilots for the military in 1941 had to perform at almost 1,000 percent.

"They made them repeat the test because they really couldn't believe they were capable of doing three-flying missions," she said.

When asked if she considered Rohlsen a war hero, Joyce Rohlsen said she considered all the Tuskegee Airman war heroes because they had to endure so much while proving themselves to the military in 1941. It created a group of men very motivated and dedicated and committed to what they did," she said. "It must be very difficult for them, so do I consider them heroes because they had to withstand all the pressures, a lot of segregation and a lot of pressure-don't what their capabilities were. They had to prove themselves 1,000 percent.

When asked what he believed the Tuskegee Airman were, Rohlsen said, "The Tuskegee Airman were mad at what they were doing and they didn't have much to do with them at all. They had to do the things they did.

Although she didn't know too many details about the plane crash, Rohlsen did know a little. After eventually falling ill while still serving in the military, Rohlsen was honorably discharged in 1945. He married Gladys Rohlsen shortly thereafter and the two of them lived on St. Croix beginning in 1947 after Rothenburg returned from Ecuador, where he operated National Airlines of Ecuador. Gladys Rohlsen said her former husband, who was once secretary to the chief engineer for the Virgin Islands Corporation, helped farmers acquire land when the corporation's shift island.