



National Society Daughters of the American Revolution

Linda Gist Calvin, President General

AMERICANISM COMMITTEE – Laura McCrillis Kessler, *National Chairman*
P.O. Box 1018, Newport, NH 03773-1018 E-mail: lmkessler@nhvt.net Phone: (603) 863-7883

October 18, 2007

Ms. Valerie Holmes
NSDAR Office of Committees
1776 D Street N.W.
Washington, D. C. 20006

Re: LUTHER HENRY SMITH MEDAL OF HONOR 2007-08 #12

Dear Valerie:

This letter authorizes approval of the DAR Medal of Honor to be awarded to Luther Henry Smith, of Villanova, Pennsylvania. The Jean Marie Cardinell Chapter, of Des Moines, Iowa, is sponsoring Mr. Smith and the presentation will be on July 11, 2008, at National Defense Night at the 117th Continental Congress.

Mr. Smith was born on September 27, 1920, in Des Moines, Iowa to Luther Henry and Idah Green Smith, both of whom were very active in the United Methodist Church where Luther's father worked as a minister. Smith's interest in aviation began at a very early age when he drew a picture of an airplane for his second grade class. "The only thing on my mind," says Smith "was that I wanted to be an aviator like Charles Lindbergh." His wish was to become a military aviator, even though, due to racism there were no black military aviators in the 1930's in the USA.

He kept his dream a secret and quietly prepared academically by enrolling in the University of Iowa in 1938 to study engineering. By the time Smith left the university in 1940, the military was not any closer to accepting blacks in its ranks, so Smith enrolled in a Civilian Pilot Training Course, a program established by the government to train pilots in the case of a national emergency. That emergency came on December 7, 1941.

While in the air, Smith heard the urgent radio message "All aircraft return to their airports immediately." Upon landing, he learned that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. That same year, the U.S. Army Air Force began to train black aviators at Alabama's Tuskegee Army Air Field and at Tuskegee Institute, a black college in Alabama. Earning the distinction as one of the first black Americans to become a licensed pilot, Smith made the transition as a cadet to the U.S. Army Air Force's training facility in Alabama. He graduated as a second lieutenant in 1943, beginning his military career flying P-39 Aircobras and P-47 Thunderbolts. In June 1944 Smith transitioned to flying P-51 Mustangs the most advanced US fighter plane, which escorted American bombers to and from their targets. The 332nd Fighter Group boldly painted the tails of their P-51 Mustangs bright red which led to their widely being known by the US bomber pilots as "The Red Tailed Angels".

As a member of the 332nd Fighter Group (today known also as the "Tuskegee Airmen"), Second Lieutenant Smith was deployed to the European Theater. Within eight months of his deployment he logged 132 missions. His final assignment of World War II – No. 133, was scheduled for Friday, October 13, 1944. Parachuting while unconscious out of his burning P-51 Mustang aircraft, Smith came to rest in a tree in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, where German soldiers took him captive, imprisoning him for seven months. When Allied soldiers liberated the prison camps, Smith weighed 70 pounds. He spent the next two years in and out of hospitals in the United States. His injuries proved so severe that the US Air Force granted him early retirement at the age of 27.

Captain Smith's military awards include: the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with six Oak Leaf Clusters, the Purple Heart, eight European and Mediterranean Theatre Campaign Ribbons and the Prisoner of War Medal. The 332nd Fighter Group, to which Captain Smith belonged, was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for its longest bomber escort to Berlin, Germany, March 24, 1945 during which the group was credited with destroying three German ME-262 jet fighters and damaged five additional jet fighters. This was an unparalleled accomplishment for a US Fighter Group unit flying single engine piston aircraft vs. the advanced German jet fighters.

As Smith could no longer fulfill his lifelong dream of serving as a military aviator, he returned to the University of Iowa, where with the promise of the GI Bill, he earned a B.S. degree in mechanical engineering. General Electric hired him in 1951, where he became the first African-American aerospace engineer to work for their Missile and Space Operations in Philadelphia; a position he retained for 37 years. Captain Smith's work included missile and jet engine design and such activities as consulting with scientist Werner Von Braun, who was in charge of rocket development for NASA, and helping the government create silent submarines. He also holds two U.S. patents. While working at General Electric Luther Smith additionally earned a Master's degree in engineering from the Pennsylvania State University.

Upon his retirement from General Electric in 1988, Captain Smith remained committed to educating people about the Tuskegee Airmen. He is in the process of writing a book to document his experience as a black officer and combat fighter pilot in a largely white military where he believes "Racial equality in America started in the skies over Europe."

Congressman Leonard Boswell of Iowa relays "Not only did Luther Smith put his country before his life, he also served as a pioneer in the fight for racial equality, both in his military life and as a civilian. His actions serve as an inspiration to us all."

President Clinton selected Captain Smith as one of seven World War II veterans and as the sole representative of the US Air Force, to accompany him to Europe for the 50th Anniversary of World War II in 1995. He also served on the Architect-Engineer Jury that chose the design for the Nation's World War II Memorial in Washington D.C., and worked tirelessly to gain recognition for the contributions of the Tuskegee Airmen. In June 2004 he headed the 60th anniversary celebration of the Tuskegee Airmen's signature achievement; escorting American heavy strategic bombers on 200 missions throughout Europe without the loss of a single bomber to enemy aircraft - a record that is unsurpassed in military history.

In 2001 Captain Smith received the Society of Automotive Engineers highest award – the Aerospace International, Franklin W. Kolk Aerospace Industry Award. In 2006 he received: an honorary doctorate degree in public service from Tuskegee University, the University of Iowa Distinguished Alumni Award for Achievement and was inducted into the Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame. In March of 2007 he was presented the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award bestowed by the U.S. Congress and the President of the United States.

U.S. Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa says of Smith "Luther Smith's accomplishments and his service to our nation have been nothing short of amazing. He is a shining example of an American who lives and breathes the principles of duty, honor, and country. I cannot imagine anyone more worthy of being honored by the DAR with the prestigious Medal of Honor."

We recognize Captain Luther Henry Smith as an outstanding American citizen who has served his country and his community with distinction. We commend him for his leadership, trustworthiness, and patriotism and we salute him for his outstanding service to the United States. Recognizing his exemplary military accomplishments, his outstanding efforts of educating current and future generations about both the Tuskegee Airmen and the importance of education, we, therefore salute him with our highest award, the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution Medal of Honor.

Please send the certificate to:

The Office of the President General, NSDAR
Attn: Martha Lawrence
1776 D Street NW
Washington, DC 20006-5303

Thank you for your cooperation in this matter and please contact me if you need additional information.

Sincerely,

Laura McCrillis Kessler

cc: Judith D. McNamara, Chapter Regent
Donna Ragner, State Americanism Chairman
DiAnne B. Lerud-Chubb, Iowa State Regent

