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Distinguished
Eagle Scout Award Profile

COL. CHARLES E. MCGEE

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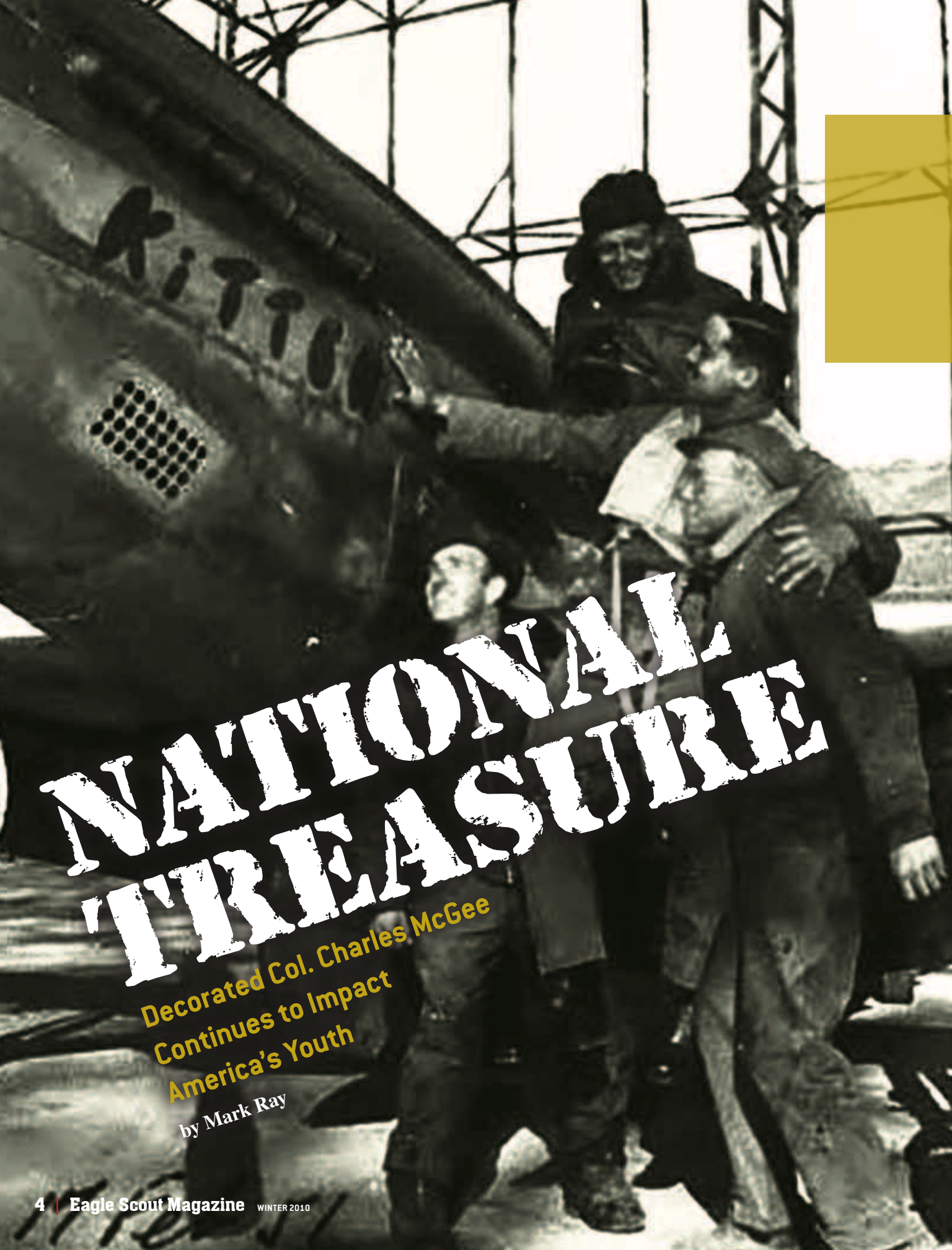
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NATIONAL TREASURE

Decorated Col. Charles McGee
Continues to Impact
America's Youth

by Mark Ray



Became an Eagle Scout: Gary, Indiana, 1940

Became a Distinguished Eagle Scout: Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia, 2010

Lives in: Bethesda, Maryland

Occupation: Retired Air Force colonel

Family: Three children with his late wife Frances, 10 grandchildren, and 10 great-grandchildren

As the years go by, Eagle Scouts often forget some of the skills they learned in Scouting—Morse code, perhaps, or the intricacies of the eye splice. Col. Charles McGee is no exception. Six decades after becoming an Eagle Scout, the 91-year-old is as sharp as ever, but he admits that his forestry skills are a little rusty.

“At one time, I could go out there and, just looking at the leaf, name all the trees,” he said last summer. “Unfortunately, that skill has somehow left me.”

That may be true, but there’s one tree McGee undoubtedly knows at a glance: the oak. In a 30-year career with the U.S. Air Force (and its predecessor, the United States Army Air Corps), he earned enough oak leaf clusters to cover a small tree. There’s his Legion of Merit with one oak leaf cluster, his Distinguished Flying Cross with two oak leaf clusters, and his Air Medal with 25—yes, 25—oak leaf clusters.

And those are just a few of the awards this Distinguished Eagle Scout has received. Add the Bronze Star, the French Legion of Honor, the Elder Statesman of Aviation Award, the Air Force Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award, and the prestigious Congressional Gold Medal, and you begin to get a sense of McGee’s impact on American history.

Not bad for someone who should never have been able to fly a combat airplane.

“I could not sit down and write a script of better opportunities than I had in the service.”

—Col. Charles McGee

Flying Across the Color Line

That, at least, was the judgment of the War Department in 1941. Twenty-four years after Eugene Jacques Bullard became America’s first black airman (while serving in the French Foreign Legion), the U.S. military remained stubbornly segregated and steadfastly opposed to letting African Americans fly in combat, claiming they didn’t have the necessary mental capacity. It literally took an act of Congress in 1941 to force the War Department to launch what would become known as the Tuskegee Experiment and determine whether maybe, just maybe, the experts were wrong.

In March 1942, when McGee was a sophomore engineering student at the

University of Illinois, the program graduated its first five black pilots (including Capt. B.O. Davis Jr., who would eventually lead the Tuskegee Airmen). McGee arrived later that year and received his wings on June 30, 1943. By the following February, he was in Italy, patrolling Naples Harbor and the Italian coast.

Soon, however, McGee’s 332nd Fighter Group moved on to a more critical—and hazardous—duty: escorting B-17s and B-24s on bombing raids over German territory. In their nimble P-47 Thunderbolts and P-51 Mustangs, the Tuskegee Airmen offered essential protection to the lumbering bombers. By the end of the war, the 332nd had flown more than 15,000 sorties on 1,500 missions. While the Tuskegee Airmen’s record wasn’t perfect, as is commonly believed, they lost far fewer bombers than other fighter groups.

“The research has shown that our record of success in escorting bombers... exceeded the records of other squadrons doing the same work,” McGee said. “Ben Davis Jr., who was our commander, let us first and second lieutenants know what the task was and what he would do to you if you didn’t carry it out right. We respected that, and we followed that.”

Despite the black aviators’ prowess, it took awhile for them to earn the trust



Charles McGee, in the red jacket, poses with his children, Ron, Charlene, and Yvonne, after being awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

of white bomber crews. “As word of black escorts spread, disbelief turned to dismay and anger,” wrote McGee’s daughter, Charlene McGee Smith, in *Tuskegee Airman*, her biography of her father. Soon, however, word spread that the Red Tails (so named for the color of their planes’ tails) could be counted on. “They now looked forward to seeing the Red Tails overhead,” Smith wrote.

By the war’s end, McGee had successfully flown 136 missions, including one during which he shot down a German fighter, but his military service was just beginning. In fact, his story, with its constant refrain of “But, wait; there’s more,” resembles an infomercial for patriotism.

A Lifetime of Service

McGee remained in the U.S. Air Force, as it became known in 1947, after World War II and fought in America’s next two wars. During

the Korean conflict, he flew 100 missions; in Vietnam, he flew 173. That brought his three-war total to 409, an unmatched record of service. After logging 6,300 flight hours, he closed out his career as commander of Richards-Gebaur Air Force Base in Kansas City, finally retiring in 1973. Appropriately,

he was the first African American to hold a stateside wing and base command.

“I could not sit down and write a script of better opportunities than I had in the service,” he said. “The assignments I got, the advancement that came with it, the people I worked with—I couldn’t have ever expected it to work out so well. I feel very grateful.”

Not long after retiring from the Air Force, McGee completed his long-delayed college education, earning a degree in business administration from Columbia College in Missouri, where he made the dean’s list. That degree gave him the credentials he needed to become manager of the Kansas City Downtown Airport, a position he held from 1980 to 1982. He then retired a second time, although he has scarcely slowed down in the intervening years.

Leaving a Legacy

Throughout his military career, McGee found time to give back to Scouting. He served as an assistant Scoutmaster and did district committee work, receiving the Silver Beaver Award for his efforts. He was also active (as he continues to be) in his church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, and other community groups.



Charles McGee stands next to the Princess Elizabeth P-51.

During World War II, Charles McGee, left, named his P-51C “Kitten” to honor his wife, Frances, whom he called Kitten, and to recognize mechanic Nate Wilson, who kept the plane’s engine purring. When he served in Korea, McGee flew a P-51D, which he also named Kitten.

But McGee's most lasting volunteer service has been with Tuskegee Airmen Inc. (TAI), a foundation he helped create in 1972 that seeks to perpetuate the story of the Airmen, introduce young people to the world of aviation and science, and honor those whose work supports the group's goal. He served twice as TAI's president. He has also been involved in the creation of the new Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, located at Tuskegee's Moton Field, where he and the other Airmen trained.

Over the past three decades, McGee has traveled extensively for TAI and other causes. Whenever he speaks, he shares the lessons he learned as a young black man in a segregated Army Air Corps. "It's easy to make excuses. It takes a little work to put hard times behind you," he said. "What I tell folks is target the positive. If you stick to the negative, you're looking the wrong way and you take your focus off of what you need to be doing. You can find some negative everywhere. That doesn't mean you don't need to be aware of it, but you don't focus on it."

By focusing on the positive, McGee and his fellow Tuskegee Airmen did more than just serve. They also opened doors for generations of blacks to serve in the military. That point was driven home during the 2007 ceremony, when surviving Tuskegee Airmen received the Congressional Medal of Honor. Among the speakers that day at the U.S. Capitol was Gen. Colin Powell, the first African American to serve on the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"I know in the depth of my heart that the only reason I'm able to stand proudly before you today is because you stood proudly for America 60 years ago," Powell said. "You caused America to look in the mirror of its soul, and you showed America that there was nothing a black person couldn't do."



Charles McGee had plenty of admirers during the 2010 National Scout Jamboree, including NESA President Glenn Adams, top right, who presented McGee with his Distinguished Eagle Scout Award plaque. McGee was accompanied by his daughter, Charlene, bottom left, and enjoyed visiting with and signing autographs for Scouts at the NESA exhibit, bottom right.

McGee Honored During Jamboree Ceremony

Col. McGee received his Distinguished Eagle Scout Award at the 2010 National Scout Jamboree. Fifty-four Distinguished Eagle Scouts attended the ceremony—a record number—as did at least 100 other Eagle Scouts and jamboree participants.

During the ceremony, NESA Jamboree Chief Shawn Briese, who had nominated McGee for the award, called the colonel "a national treasure." He also noted that McGee's nomination had been approved easily and unanimously.

McGee and his daughter, Charlene Smith, spent much of the day at the NESA exhibit, signing autographs and posing for photos. Whenever the colonel met a Scout who was not yet an Eagle Scout, he offered a simple message: "Don't give up until you've accomplished that goal. Keep your eye on the goal of becoming an Eagle Scout, and it'll give a better life that you'll never regret."

