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Veterans Day Parade Features Memorable Grand Marshal

The organizers of this year's Veterans Parade in Perris believe their choice for grand marshal is the living embodiment of the chosen theme: A Tribute to Old Glory.

Buford A. Johnson served with the legendary Tuskegee Airmen, a group of African-American volunteers who overcame prejudice to write a stellar chapter of American military history that resonates decades after they first fought in World War II.

The Veterans Day parade kicks off at 10 a.m. at D and 4th Street and ends at City Hall, D and San Jacinto Avenue. The parade includes marching bands, classic cars, floats and the appearance of local elected officials. Pre-parade entertainment begins at 9 a.m.

Free t-shirts and hand-held American flags will be presented to the first 150 spectators.

The parade selection committee chooses as its grand marshal a veteran who served honorably and contributed to his or her community after leaving the military. Johnson has accomplished both.

Johnson, 87, entered the Army Air Corps—the predecessor to the U.S. Air Force—on Nov. 22, 1945 and served as a flight-line mechanic on P-47 Thunderbolt aircraft, a mainstay of American air power during the war.

Later on, Johnson was assigned to the 5th Air Force at Itazuke Air Force Base in Japan, where he helped integrate the facility. Johnson continued to serve with distinction in the Air Force, becoming the first African-American jet mechanic ever in that service and the first African-American jet mechanic to serve in a combat zone. Johnson served in Korea.



Cadets from the California Military Institute carry the colors during the 2013 Perris Veterans Day Parade. This year's parade takes place at 10 a.m. on Saturday.

After seven years in the Air Force, Johnson was promoted to the rank of master sergeant and earned the Air Force Commendation Medal for meritorious service. He retired in 1966, after 21 years in uniform.

In retirement, he has spoken many times about his service, his life and the struggle African-American aviators who were part of the Tuskegee Airmen faced during their time in uniform.

The Tuskegee Airmen grew out of a series of government initiatives to help blacks participate in the nation's defense and become pilots. Tuskegee Institute in Alabama was selected as the training base for pilots. In 1942, the first group of cadets received their wings as U.S. military aviators. The group included Capt. Benjamin O. Davis, a West Point graduate, who would take command of the Tuskegee fliers during the war. The unit would go on to achieve an outstanding service record during the war in Europe.

Even after that success, Johnson said he encountered blatant racism. White colleagues distrusted his ability as a mechanic, despite his accomplishments, believing blacks lacked the ability to repair military aircraft. At times, Johnson said, he was denied admittance to restaurants because of his skin color.

Through it all, he persevered and triumphed. And earned recognition.

Johnson became one of the first African-American aviators to receive a Congressional Gold Medal—the nation's highest-civilian award—for his service.

Media Contact

Joe Vargo
Public Information Officer
951-956-2120
jvargo@cityofperris.org



Perris City Hall
101 N. D Street
Perris, CA 92570

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