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PREMIER NIGHT: Lewis Center Air Force JROTC students and their families fill a room at UltraStar Cinemas for the premier of Red Tails, a new movie starring Apple Valley native Cuba Gooding Jr.

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN CELEBRATED AT 'RED TAILS' SCREENING

Lewis Center hosts fundraiser to benefit Air Force JROTC

BY NATASHA LINDSTROM, STAFF WRITER / Daily Press

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APPLE VALLEY • As Edison T. Marshall Jr. watched a special screening of “Red Tails,” he took pride in the trailblazing Tuskegee Airmen of World War II, and also recalled his own struggles with racism as a black man in the military during the 1950s.

Now an 80-year old retired Air Force technical sergeant, Marshall turned down several football and track scholarships to black colleges as a young boy from New Orleans, and instead joined the military in hopes of more opportunities for advancement and traveling the world.

“I can relate to a lot of scenes in that movie,” said Marshall, who was the first black man assigned to the supply squadron at the base in Bordeaux, France. “A lot of people brought the norms with them. You had to play the game if you wanted to swim. I played.”

Marshall was one of the special guests at the Friday night event hosted by the Lewis Center for Educational Research to raise money for the Air Force Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps at the Academy for Academic Excellence in Apple Valley. Guests included three other retired Air Force servicemen: Lt. Col. Tony Marshall, Robert Porter of the Tuskegee Airmen Inc. Riverside Chapter and Col. George Armstrong, JROTC instructor at AAE.

About 370 people filled two packed theaters at UltraStar Cinemas, and the school’s cadets opened the screening with presentations by the color guard and drill team.

Regina Weatherspoon-Bell, board member over the AAE and Lewis Center’s foundation, was inspired to organize the event both in honor of the movie and Armstrong, who was named the 2011 Air Force JROTC Outstanding Instructor with Merit out of some 890 instructors worldwide. She was also eager to see the film itself, which gives a glimpse into the combat missions of the first black U.S. fighter pilots. Aside from battling the Germans, the Tuskegee Airmen were tasked with debunking the belief that black people were incapable of combat.

“Even in the face of that adversity, they rose above and set a standard of excellence that cannot be denied,” Weatherspoon-Bell said. “I think for young people, especially nowadays, that’s a great message to her.”

According to producer George Lucas, “Red Tails” almost didn’t make it to the silver screen. With half a dozen major studios deeming it too risky to back an action blockbuster with an all-black cast, the Star Wars creator poured \$58 million of his own money into the film.

The movie, directed by Anthony Hemingway and starring Terrence Howard and Cuba Gooding Jr., has been poorly received by some critics who say the cheesy dialogue takes away from sharp flying sequences, though the general public has been giving it much higher marks. After Friday’s screening in Apple Valley, the theater erupted into loud applause.

“I loved the friendships and the courage on many levels,” said Kelly Bergstrom, whose daughter is in JROTC at the Academy for Academic Excellence. “They had to deal with so much on top of being soldiers.”

Tyler Harrison, 14, who wants to be an Air Force medical officer, said he loved the action. Christopher Patterson, 14, who wants to be a plane engineer, said he especially enjoyed the scenes with the P-51 Mustangs and heavy bombers.

The four retired Air Force veterans all gave the film approval, though for a better understanding of the Tuskegee Airmen they recommended “Double Victory,” a documentary Lucas produced as the historical companion to the entertainment-gearred action flick. In “Double Victory,” living Tuskegee Airmen tell their own stories about both combat in Europe and racial struggles in the United States — including getting treated worse than German prisoners by American officers.

Tony Marshall, a combat pilot who spent 269 days in captivity after his F-4 went down in North Vietnam in 1972, credits men like the Tuskegee and Edison Marshall with paving the way for equal treatment within the military.

“When people today talk about how tough they have it, I have to laugh,” Tony Marshall said. “They don’t know what tough is.”