

TRY OUT A COCKPIT AT AIR MUSEUM EVENT

African American Woman Flier's Story Will Be Highlighted

By **MONICA POLANCO**
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WINDSOR LOCKS — If you want to know how a P-47 Thunderbolt handled during World War II combat missions, what it was designed for and its unexpected career change, Dick Kyte is your man.

"It was really a monster for a fighter," said Kyte, a former World War II fighter pilot. "The pilots all called it a jug."

The Thunderbolt will be one of several aircraft on display during the New England Air Museum's open cockpit days starting Feb. 19.

Kyte, who has volunteered at the museum for 18 years, will be standing by, ready to dangle visitors with stories about the plane's history.

The open cockpit day is part of a six-day event that runs through Feb. 24. During the week, visitors can participate in various aircraft-themed activities, including a Lego contest, and listen in on a presentation about the first African American woman to obtain an international pilot's license.

Tammy D. Richardson, a museum educator and storyteller, hopes others will be inspired by Bessie Coleman's story. The 10 a.m. lesson is part of Black History Month.

"If this woman could become the first African American woman pilot during that era, then there's basically nothing you can't do today," Richardson said.

For years, people told Coleman that she couldn't become a pilot because she was an African American woman. But Coleman's fortunes took a turn when she met the owner of the Chicago Defender, an African American-owned Chicago newspaper.

Robert Abbott helped Coleman go to France, where she obtained her license in 1921, two years before Amelia Earhart, Richardson said. Coleman, the daughter of former slaves, was 29 years old.

Known as a barnstormer and the world's first "negro" aviatrix, Coleman performed many of the daredevil tasks of today's stunt pilots. She flew through

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open barns and parachuted out of planes.

Abbott chronicled Coleman's accomplishments in his newspaper, Richardson said.

But her career was short-lived. Coleman died while testing a plane just before performing at an air show in Jacksonville, Fla. She was 34.

"She had become somewhat of a threat," Richardson said. "She wanted to open a flight school for other black people."

A wrench was found in the engine of the plane Coleman was testing, raising suspicions of foul play. Coleman, who always wore her safety harness and parachute, did not take those precautions that day. Earlier, she had spent

the day dropping leaflets over area schools, hoping that African Americans and whites would attend the air show.

More than 15,000 people attended her funeral. She was buried in Chicago. A road near Chicago's O'Hare International Airport has been re-named Bessie Coleman Drive. Coleman, who was born in Atlanta, Texas, was inducted into the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame in 2000.

Her uniform will be on display during Richardson's presentation.

The museum is adjacent to Bradley International Airport at 36 Perimeter Road. Admission is \$8.50 for 12 and older; \$7.50 for seniors; and \$5 for ages 6 to 11. Children under 6 will be admitted free.

The museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., but the open cockpits will close at 4 p.m. For more information, visit www.neam.org or call 860-623-3365.