

August 12, 2007

***Tuskegee Airmen proud but say nation's appreciation is a long time coming***



STEPHEN M. DOWELL, ORLANDO SENTINEL, August 9, 2007

Haldane King, left, and Gilford Langford, both former Tuskegee Airmen, received the prestigious Congressional Gold Medal. They are pictured with one of the medals at King's home in The Villages.

Adrian G. Uribarri | Sentinel Staff Writer August 11, 2007

Haldane King, one of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, recalls getting hostile looks during World War II when his plane would land at a U.S. military base.

First, he had to convince white ground personnel that he was the flight commander. Then, once his plane was refueled, he'd worry whether his reserve tank had been sabotaged. "There were times we found water in that tank," said King, 85.

King and Gilbert Langford, 81, residents of The Villages retirement community northwest of Orlando, have received the highest honor bestowed by Congress: the

Congressional Gold Medal. But they said this week that the recognition was too long in coming to a group that battled segregation in addition to the nation's enemies.

"This would have meant a lot more to me if it had taken place 10 years after the event," Langford said. "Now, a lot of water's gone under the dam."

The accolade came more than 60 years after the men trained at an all-black airfield in segregated Alabama. In the 1940s, young men at the Tuskegee Institute helped the Allies prevail against their foes.

"What they were involved with were two wars: They were fighting the war against Nazism and the war against bigotry and racism," U.S. Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Ocala, said Friday. "They were fighting for our freedom, yet they weren't getting theirs."

King, a native of Brooklyn, N.Y., trained at Tuskegee in 1943 and flew U.S. planes over Europe and North Africa. He said military service was laced with obstacles for black men.

"The whole idea at the time was that you weren't qualified to be an officer of the United States Air Force," King said. "You were a Tuskegee Airman, which didn't mean anything to them."

When he became an officer, King said, the title lost some of its perks because he was black.

"You couldn't get into the officers' club," he said. While white officers enjoyed snacks and drinks between flights, he had to stay in his plane or take food with him.

After a 29-year military career, King served as an administrator at a port authority and a hospital.

Langford, who also was an officer and spent 31/2 years in the Army Air Corps, remembered similar trouble with white officers. He once invited a military nurse to attend a dance.

"The base commander was a little uneasy with that," he said. "Here's a black lieutenant having fun in his officers' club."

Langford, from Indianapolis, said he was transferred back to Tuskegee days later.

Langford later spent more than 25 years at General Electric Co. and 16 at the Defense Department and moved to The Villages from Alexandria, Va. He also was a management consultant.

But despite qualifying on exams, he never became a military pilot. He was assigned to be a navigator-bombardier, and shortly after he completed his training, the U.S. dropped an

atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

It wasn't until the 1950s, King said, that race relations improved in the military.

"I began to realize that I got a white co-pilot, I got a white navigator, and I was a flight commander," he said. "They started to meld black pilots into regular activity."

More than six decades later, the struggles still wear on the Tuskegee Airmen. Langford regrets that some died long ago, before Congress decided to honor them. King nodded as both sat on a couch inside King's home. His wife, Brigitte, had framed the Congressional Gold Medal along with a letter from Stearns, who recently presented medals to King, Langford and other area airmen who didn't attend a Washington ceremony in March with President Bush.

Though both think the acknowledgement of their service is late, they're proud of their medals.

"This is something you can pick up and say you've earned," King said.

Copyright © 2007, [Orlando Sentinel](#)