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Tuskegee Airman Lived to See 1st Black Commander in Chief

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One of the stories Augustus L. Palmer loved to tell about his exploits as a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the pioneering black fighter pilots of World War II, involved an incident in which several of the men were denied access to an officers club after stopping at an all-white military base to refuel.

"The white officers wouldn't let them in," Mr. Palmer's son Robert said in an interview. "They had never heard of a black officer. Once the planes were refueled, my father and the other black pilots got in their planes and they left. But as they did, they turned around and buzzed the tower. That was among his favorite stories to tell. It really showed you what they went through."

Mr. Palmer, who died of prostate cancer Jan. 20 at 85, was among the last of the almost 1,000 recruits accepted into the U.S. Army Air Forces training program for black pilots. It was 1945 and World War II was winding down. The program had been started four years earlier when the government bowed to pressure from civil rights groups to let blacks have the right to defend their country in the cockpit.

The Tuskegee program had been a hard sell. Bigots in Congress railed against funding, saying blacks weren't smart or industrious enough to fly, said Bill Broadwater, a Tuskegee Airman who lives in Upper Marlboro. "The performance of the black pilots is what eventually won the bigots over," he said.

Mercedes Hardwick was an early childhood education major at Hampton Institute, now Hampton University, when she met Augustus Palmer, a swaggering young man from Newport News brimming with confidence and fresh out of the Tuskegee program. "He thought he was the best thing going on," she said.

She turned him down several times before she finally accepted an invitation to the movies. The couple were married a year later in her hometown of Savannah, Ga., after graduation. They had five children, and celebrated their 61st wedding anniversary in August.

Mr. Palmer worked first as an administrator at Hampton, which had also been his alma mater, then later at Texas Southern University in Houston, another historically black university. In 1971, he joined Howard University and retired 20 years later as associate vice president for health affairs.

Robert Palmer said his father always felt that his biggest achievement was contributing to history as a member of the Tuskegee Airmen.

"He was so proud of going through the program," he said. "At the time, he didn't realize how important it was, but later he did and he was very proud to have been a part of it." Augustus Palmer was at the Capitol Rotunda two years ago when President George W. Bush conveyed the Congressional Gold Medal on the Tuskegee Airmen. A photo taken that day of several members of the group shows Mr. Palmer standing with his brethren.

He made sure that his children knew their history and the role he had played in it. On a trip to Tuskegee several years ago, he explained the flight program and the difficulty the personnel there faced from a sometimes ungrateful nation. A family photo shows Mr. Palmer's oldest son, Augustus Jr., seated in the cockpit of an airplane, reaching down and holding hands with his father. The son died in December -- just a month before his father.

Robert Palmer said despite the lessons his father had tried to teach about the airmen, they did not fully realize the importance of the group until that trip to Tuskegee.

"We had never felt the awesomeness of what they, as men, had accomplished for us until we were sitting there amongst them," Robert Palmer said. "We didn't know until that day all they had given up and risked for us. Even people like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President Barack Obama stood on their shoulders."

Mr. Palmer had a special place in his heart for Obama, Mercedes Palmer said. Though his health was failing from complications of two strokes, he went to the polls Nov. 4 to cast his ballot.

He and other Tuskegee Airmen had been invited to witness the swearing in Jan. 20, but illness kept him away. Instead, he lay in his hospice bed and watched with members of his family as the first African American commander in chief of the U.S. armed forces was sworn in.

Later, he watched the televised parade.

"He saw the whole thing. I was holding his hand," Mercedes Palmer said. "When the last float passed by the viewing stand, he closed his eyes and went to sleep."

Palmer's daughter, Anne Palmer Moss, said he lingered near death for weeks. She believes he held on to see Obama take office.

"He was so excited about President Obama," she said. "He hadn't been able to speak, but you could tell that he was happy about what he was seeing."
After Palmer's death, Moss received a letter from the White House. In it, Obama told Mr. Palmer's family that they should take solace in continuing the values he held dear, as he had when he lost loved ones.

The letter, the Palmers said, gave them comfort.

"It was genuine and expressed everything he has always said about the debt he felt he owed to people like my father," Moss said.