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**Daughter sees dad finally get due**

Columnist Brenda Payton's father flew with the Tuskegee Airmen in WWII. Last week, James Williams joined his fellow airmen at the Capital, where they received the Congressional Gold Medal.

Column by Brenda Payton

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James B. Williams, former Tuskegee Airman in WWII



DR. JAMES B. WILLIAMS, 87 (left), and James Clayton Flowers, 91(Courtesy Creighton University)

I forgot to look at the medal. I took a bunch of pictures of my dad holding his replica of the Congressional Gold Medal awarded to the Tuskegee Airmen last week.

"Turn this way," I said. "Hold it at this angle." But I forgot to look at it.

The Rotunda of the United States Capitol was packed. In fact, in order to seat the 300 Tuskegee Airmen and their wives, U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel, co-sponsor of the bill establishing the medal, had to ask people to move to an overflow room. Family members had come from all over the country to see what most had never expected: the government's recognition of the achievements of the Tuskegee Airmen. Sixty years later.

At the beginning of World War II, the armed forces were still segregated and the U.S. Army Air Corps (later renamed the U.S. Air Force) did not train Negro pilots. In response to a lawsuit, it agreed to an experiment training pilots and crews at Tuskegee University, an experiment it expected to fail.

But the Tuskegee Airmen, as the men came to be known, defied the odds. They amassed a remarkable record defending the bombers they escorted on missions in Europe. They challenged racial segregation and paved the way for the integration of the armed forces which today is our nation's most successfully integrated institution. They fought fascism abroad and racism at home.

My dad, James B. Williams, was a first lieutenant and an engineering officer with the 477th Bombardment Group, 619th squadron. His story highlights the fight against racism at home. While stationed at Freeman Field in Indiana in 1945, the men were told to sign an order establishing a whites-only officers' club. He and 100 other Tuskegee Airmen refused to sign. He told his superior officer if he couldn't enjoy the privileges of being an officer, then he shouldn't be one.

The group was spirited off the base. A camera hidden in a brown paper bag captured a picture of the group that ran on the front pages of Negro newspapers across the country. They were arrested for disobeying a direct order by a superior officer, an offense punishable by death in time of war. The charges were later dropped but a letter of reprimand, stating they were a discredit to their country and their race, stayed in their individual files until 1995.

After the 1945 incident, members of the group met with top officials about the need to integrate the armed forces. Some historians have said the protest at Freeman Field was the beginning of the end of segregation in the armed services; in 1948 President Harry Truman signed executive order 9981, integrating the forces.

Last Thursday in the Capitol Rotunda, the air seemed to contain more oxygen than usual. The exhilaration was palpable, like static electricity. We waited for what seemed like hours. I worried about how the men, in their 80s and 90s, were holding up.

Then they entered. The crowd rose and the men walked to their seats to continuous applause. Some were in wheelchairs, some used walkers. Overall they were surprisingly sound. Their hair, silver, thinned. If their steps had slowed, their backs were still straight.

They were the picture of dignity. Their wives were stylish, their white hair catching the light coming in through the Rotunda's high windows.

I wished a section had been reserved for young African Americans. I wished they could feel the pride in that room. It was immense.

Speaker after speaker thanked the men for their service. Sen. Carl Levin, co-sponsor with Rangel. U.S. Rep. Carolyn Kilpatrick. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. President Bush. "An honor long overdue" was a repeated phrase.

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell asked a profound question.

"Why did you serve a nation that would not serve you? When the conflict was over you returned to the same conditions. You still believed in a vision of what the declaration and constitution set forth of what America could be. Thank you for what you did for African Americans. Thank you for what you've done for America," he said.

The 300 at the ceremony accepted for the hundreds who have already passed on. Each year at the Tuskegee Airmen convention, the list of Lonely Eagles, the deceased, is longer and longer. Five died since January.

One died the week before the award ceremony. Long overdue.

I asked my dad how it felt.

"I think it was pretty rewarding," he said. "I think we deserved it. I was happy to see they went to the extent of doing it."

He said he never imagined the group would get that kind of recognition. We couldn't stop telling him how proud we are. He was beaming.

I'm not sure if the glow he's radiating is permanent. The congratulations keep coming in. While visiting the Aerospace Museum in Washington D.C., people noticed his Tuskegee Airmen cap and came up to shake his hand. On the flight home, the airline bumped him and my mother up to first class. I think he may have had his Tuskegee Airmen cap permanently attached to his head.

That procession of elderly African-American men, parading into the Rotunda of the United States Capitol to finally get their due. I'll never forget that sight.