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## **Former mechanic stands by the legend of the Tuskegee Airmen**



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As a prized mechanic for the Tuskegee Airmen, Arthur Williams is honored that President Bush last week presented more than 300 Tuskegee Airmen with a Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor.

But like the few remaining airmen alive today, Williams believes the recognition was long overdue.

"It's a little late, but it's never too late to do good," said Williams, 88, of Pensacola who was one of about 1 million black servicemen in World War II.

From 1942 to 1946, nearly 1,000 pilots, as well as mechanics, bombardiers, navigators and gunnery crews, and administrators trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama.

Williams was among them. After graduating No. 1 in a class of 600 in the Lincoln, Neb., Army Air Corps Mechanics Training School in 1943, Williams served as a mechanic at the school founded to determine whether blacks, who were largely assigned to menial positions in the military, could perform as combat pilots.

They performed quite admirably to say the least.

The 450 Tuskegee Airmen, led by Col. Benjamin Davis, were part of the so-called "Tuskegee Experiment." They flew 1,500 combat missions during World War II, damaged or destroyed 400 enemy airplanes and received 95 Distinguished Service Cross awards.

Williams served three years in the service, leaving in 1946, before becoming a civil service worker at the Pensacola Naval Air Station. He said his proudest moment was when the report came out that the flying squadron never lost a bomber to enemy planes during World War II.

But recent reports seem to confirm that at least 25 bombers were shot down by enemy aircraft, contradicting the legend that the famed black aviators never lost a plane to enemy aircraft.

Williams isn't buying the new report that puts the airmen's stellar record in question.

He wonders why, if they had records back then to refute it, they waited so long to change something that had been said for years.

"I don't believe they lied," Williams said about the airmen's records. "I don't believe that journalists and the news media would have let that happen."

The report, coincidentally released last week, the day before the medal ceremony, was based on after-mission reports filed by both the bomber units and Tuskegee fighter groups, as well as missing air crew records and witness testimony.

The tally includes only cases where planes were shot down by aircraft. No one ever disputed the airmen lost some planes to anti-aircraft guns and other fire from the ground.

Williams never saw combat, but he was considered a top mechanic and consistently was selected for additional training at bases across the country to broaden his knowledge.

His biggest memory about serving as a mechanic was that it was hard, demanding work that started every day at 5 a.m. It was a constant, never-ending job to keep airplanes ready to fly, he recalled.

Their motto was "Do it right the first time."

"There was nothing easy about it," he said. "Like the Blue Angels, people talk about the pilots, but nobody talks about the mechanics."

Williams may not have received a Congressional Gold Medal, but he will always have the lifetime honor of knowing that he served with one of the best group of fighter pilots in armed forces history -- whether they lost a bomber or not.