



*Photo by Courtesy photo*

Hill AFB Senior Airman Mark Bowen stands behind his grandfather, Eddie McLaurin, a Tuskegee Airman, who he accompanied to the Congressional Gold Medal reception honoring all Tuskegee Airmen.

## **Hill Airman reflects on legacy of grandfather; a Tuskegee Airman**

*by Beth Young*

*75th Air Base Wing Public Affairs Editors note: This is the second in a series of articles celebrating the Air Force's 60th Anniversary. As the first black pilots, Tuskegee Airman helped shape the Air Force as it is today.*

For most people history is something that is just read about in books, but one Hill Air Force Base Airman has a living connection to those who made Air Force history.

Senior Airman Mark Bowen, 67th Aerial Port Squadron, thought of his grandfather, Eddie McLaurin, as a hero long before he knew what a Tuskegee Airman was.

"When I was a kid he used to take me to the Air Force museum at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio every summer we used to walk around for hours," Airman Bowen said. "He told me he was a fighter pilot in World War II and that was a source of pride for me. I didn't realize at the time he was a Tuskegee Airman."

The Tuskegee Airmen were America's first black military Airmen. In 1941, the Army Air Corps formed an all-black combat unit and trained them at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Ala.

Besides the usual challenges that faced military members, the Tuskegee Airmen endured racism and segregation. Amid this adversity, approximately 1,000 black pilots were trained from 1940 - 1946 and the Airmen did not lose a single bomber to enemy fire in more than 200 combat missions, which is a record unmatched by any other fighter group.

Last month, these pioneering Airmen were honored with Congressional Gold Medals. Airman Bowen accompanied his grandfather to the ceremony in Washington D.C. "It was amazing," he said. "The entire capitol building was buzzing about this."

At the ceremony, Airman Bowen said he and his grandfather were treated like royalty. Those in attendance to honor the Tuskegee Airmen included Members of Congress, Gen. Collin Powell and President George W. Bush.

"It was different for the men in this room," President Bush said. "When America entered World War II, it might have been easy for them to do little for our country. After all, the country didn't do much for them. Even the Nazis asked why African American men would fight for a country that treated them so unfairly. Yet the Tuskegee Airmen were eager to join up.

The Tuskegee Airmen helped win a war, and you helped change our nation for the better. Yours is the story of the human spirit, and it ends like all great stories do -- with wisdom and lessons and hope for tomorrow. And the medal that we confer today means that we're doing a small part to ensure that your story will be told and honored for generations to come."

Seeing President Bush salute his grandfather and the other Tuskegee Airmen in attendance was a special moment for Airmen Bowen.

"You don't get to see him salute very often and when he does he means it," he said.

Airmen Bowen, who dedicated his military service to his grandfather, said that it was an honor to be with his grandfather for the medal ceremony.

"He doesn't smile a lot, but he was just beaming -- a smile from ear to ear," Airman Bowen said. "He actually ran into people he hadn't seen since those times. We were leaving and three generals walked by and thanked my grandfather. These guys were humbled in his presence."

After Mr. McLaurin was discharged in 1946 at the end of the war, he continued his service by re-enlisting as a master sergeant. During his career he worked on the development of nuclear powered aircraft. When he retired he became a guest speaker for the Wright-Patterson Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated.

"I owe my Grandfather and all other Tuskegee Airmen an enormous debt of gratitude, because without them and what they did, I would not have had the opportunity to serve my country nor walk its streets freely," Airman Bowen said. "It's intimidating to be someone's grandson that helped change the course of history. And, I am only able to join because of what he did."

Airman Bowen said that he joined the Air Force to follow some of his grandfather's footsteps. Many members of his family have also followed his grandfather's example, including his mother, who spent 20 years in the Air Force and retired as a master sergeant.

"My Grandfather has been a huge inspiration to us and others through speaking engagements throughout the Midwest," Airman Bowen said. "He showed us that through serving the country, we could become more than what we believed we would ever be and that when it was over our experience would help others reach their full potential, whether they served or not."

For more information about the history of Tuskegee Airman visit <http://www.tuskegeeairmen.org/>.