

William McDonald: He's Kept the Faith

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The mainline church officials who make up the Religious Left prefer to portray America as a shameful imperial power obsessed with conquest. Veterans of America's wars, as cogs of the empire, are not typically honored.

But local church people often override the biases of their senior clerics and honor the veteran warriors among them. North Carolina Lutherans recently paid homage to an 83-year-old Tuskegee Airman veteran who has long been active in one of their churches.

"Just being able to survive, to make it, and to keep my faith -- those are the things I'm most proud of," William McDonald told the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) News Service. He's a long-time elder at Lutheran Church of the Abiding Savior in Durham. The denomination's North Carolina Synod, at its recent gathering, unanimously hailed him "not only for his military service, but even more for his keep faith, grace-filled personal witness, and faithful labor in the Kingdom of God."

The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black flyers in the U.S. Armed Forces and were formed by President Franklin Roosevelt at the start of World War II. They trained at the historically black Tuskegee Institute on Alabama and were deployed as bomber escorts starting in 1942 during the North Africa campaign, continuing through the Italian campaign, and concluded the war by leading raids on strategic targets in Germany.

Nearly 1,000 Tuskegee pilots were certified, 450 of whom flew in combat missions. Over 60 were killed in combat, and dozens more died in service related accidents. Fewer than 100 Tuskegee airmen are still alive, but most of them were on hand last March in the U.S. Capitol dome, where they collectively received a Congressional Gold Medal that President Bush bestowed upon all Tuskegee airmen, both living and dead. In 2005, seven elderly Tuskegee veterans traveled to Iraq to give encouragement to U.S. Air Force personnel there.

YEARS AGO, I HOSTED ONE of the most senior Tuskegee heroes at my Methodist church in Arlington, Virginia. Lt. Gen. Benjamin Davis, then age 79, had just written his 1991 memoir. The son of the first black general in the history of the U.S. armed forces, Davis was the first black to graduate from West Point since Reconstruction. His classmates in the West Point class of 1934 had shamefully shunned him, with one exception, whom Davis cited in his memoir, and who was present for the Methodist Men's breakfast at my church.

Tall, slender, very distinguished with white hair and a deep voice, Davis impressed my church with his dignity, devotion to country and lack of acrimony over his early struggles against racial prejudice, of which the silent treatment at West Point had been one of the most searing. Davis was the first of the Tuskegee airmen certified as a pilot, became a young colonel during World War II, later served in the Korean War, and eventually became the U.S. Air Force's first black general. He died in 2002.

The spirit of dignity and service that animated Davis clearly was common among the Tuskegee airmen. The North Carolina Lutherans said as much about their fellow churchman, William McDonald, who was described as a "quiet gentleman who commands respect not because of his title or his accomplishments, but because of what he has experienced and how he treats others." The Lutheran bishop of North Carolina noted, "When Bill speaks, people listen."

According to the ELCA News Service report, McDonald exemplifies the Tuskegee motto, which was, "All blood runs red." Many of the Tuskegee fighter planes during the war had red tipped wings. Noting the distinctive insignia, U.S. bombers often appreciated their protective presence without realizing that the pilots were black. On the Sunday after he was in Washington, D.C. with other veterans to receive the collective Congressional Gold Medal, McDonald's church celebrated their hero and went on to compose the resolution that the ELCA's North Carolina Synod approved last June.

That resolution hails the "record, example, and honorable conduct of the Tuskegee airmen," which has "served

as a powerful role model to multiple generations." The North Carolina Lutherans unanimously expressed their "extreme respect for our brother, William McDonald, as well as our gratitude to Almighty God for giving him to us to know and love."

McDonald credited his Lutheran upbringing in Detroit for guiding him throughout his long life. "The church meant so much to me as I grew older," he said. "When I went off to college, I was grounded well in faith, and I had the strength to combat the obstacles I had to face." His pastor at Lutheran Church of the Abiding Savior in Durham linked McDonald's integrity to his infectious faith in Jesus.

As a young man, McDonald had been the only black engineering student at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He joined the Tuskegee Airmen in 1944 and visited the South then for the first time. "We knew [in Michigan] that [segregation] existed, but reading about it and living it are two different things," he told the ELCA News Service. "You had to readjust your life and everything to those social conditions."

After the war McDonald worked as an electrical engineer and has lived in North Carolina since 1973, where since retirement he has been busy with church work and with helping to renovate housing for homeless people. Like other veterans of his era, he does not demand attention for himself, and he uncomplainingly credits God for helping him to endure racial discrimination, depression, war and other vicissitudes of life.

McDonald's example, so Christian in character, is not often recognized in the official circles of the mainline church world. But his fellow members of the Lutheran Church of the Abiding Savior in Durham made sure that other North Carolina Lutherans knew that his record deserved honoring.