

## Roger 'Bill' Terry dies at 87; member of WWII Tuskegee Airmen

Terry was the only member of the unit convicted in the Freeman Field Mutiny, in which black officers plotted to integrate an all-white officer's club in Indiana in 1945. He was pardoned in 1995.

By Molly Hennessy-Fiske  
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Roger "Bill" Terry, the only member of the all-black group of World War II pilots known as the Tuskegee Airmen convicted in what became known as the Freeman Field Mutiny, died of heart failure Thursday at Kaiser Permanente West Los Angeles Medical Center. He was 87.

Terry, born in Los Angeles on Aug. 13, 1921, earned an athletic scholarship to UCLA, where he played basketball and roomed with Jackie Robinson.

After graduating from UCLA in 1941, he was recruited to train at the Tuskegee Airfield in Alabama and earned his silver pilot's wings on Feb. 1, 1945, becoming a second lieutenant.

Terry and his 477th Bombardment Group were later transferred to Freeman Field in Indiana, where the main officers' club was reserved for whites and a rundown club was for blacks. Terry and other pilots nicknamed the black club "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and plotted to forcibly integrate the main club.

"We had always been fighting, all the time we were in the Army, for equal rights -- not just to go to the officers' club, but equal rights for promotions," Terry said in an interview earlier this year at his Inglewood home.

On April 5, 1945, Terry helped 2nd Lt. Coleman A. Young, who later became mayor of Detroit, send black airmen over to the white officers' club, three at a time. In all, 162 black officers were arrested during what came to be known as the Freeman Field Mutiny. But only Terry and two others received general courts-martial.

It was a high-profile case even at the time -- directing their defense was future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. The two other officers were acquitted. Terry was acquitted on charges

of disobeying an order but convicted of "jostling" an officer. He was fined \$150, reduced in rank and dishonorably discharged in November 1945.

He never flew overseas.



Terry returned to Los Angeles, met a librarian, Anna "Mae" Terry, married and earned his law degree from Southwestern Law School in 1949. He went to work as an investigator with the Los Angeles County district attorney's office and, later, with the county Probation Department. The couple settled in Inglewood and had two sons, Jeff and Mark, and two grandsons, Robert and William. His wife, sons and grandsons survive him.

In 1972, Terry helped found Tuskegee Airmen Inc. to draw attention to their history. The group now has scores of members nationwide and has a museum in Detroit.

"He had a real dynamic way of communicating with young people, and older people too," said Theodore Lumpkin, president of the Los Angeles chapter of Tuskegee Airmen Inc. "He was one of the more prominent."

Terry did not shy away from discussing his discharge.

"It was a badge of honor for him," Jeff Terry said of his father's discharge. "He was never bitter about it. He was in fact quite proud of it."

On Aug. 2, 1995, the Army pardoned him, restored his rank and refunded his \$150 fine. Two years ago, Terry and several other airmen collectively received a Congressional Gold Medal from President George W. Bush in Washington.

"They finally recognized the fact that we did exist -- just a little bit late," Terry said.

In recent years, Terry was interviewed and served as a technical advisor for "Red Tails," an upcoming film about the airmen produced by George Lucas. As part of the process, he visited Lucas' Skywalker Ranch in Northern California for a week and toured the prop vault.

Earlier this year, President Obama invited Terry and other airmen to attend his inauguration. Terry's doctor said the cold Washington air would be too much for him, but Terry said he was excited just to watch on television.

"He was really quite gratified that he and his colleagues were honored in his lifetime," Jeff Terry said. "With him, it really was the right thing to do, and he accepted the consequences of his actions. He knew if people didn't take a stand, things were not going to change, and they had to change."

molly.hennessy-fiske@ latimes.com