



Staff Report

REPORT HONORING TUSKEGEE AIRMAN LESLIE WILLIAMS, A 50-YEAR RESIDENT OF BELMONT

Honorable Mayor and Council Members:

Summary

Former Tuskegee Airman Leslie Williams, who has resided in the City of Belmont for over 50 years, was recently awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by the Congress and the President of the United States, along with other surviving pilots and ground crews. The Congressional Gold Medal is one of the nation's highest honors. Previous recipients included such people as George Washington, the Wright Brothers, Thomas Edison, Jonas Salk, Jesse Owens, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela and Pope John Paul II

While in Washington, Mr. Williams was personally recognized by congresswomen Anna Eshoo. To quote representative Eshoo, "Les Williams and the Tuskegee Airmen are extraordinary Americans who endured discrimination and injustice to serve our country with distinction during World War II. Les Williams embodies the perseverance it took to be among the elite Tuskegee Airmen."

At tonight's meeting, the City of Belmont Mayor and City Council wish to also honor Mr. Williams and the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II.

Background

Mr. Leslie Williams - Mr. Leslie Williams, 87, was born in San Francisco in 1919, was raised in San Mateo and attended San Mateo High School, San Mateo Junior College and after the war, Stanford University and Stanford Law School. After the war, Mr. Williams owned and operated a dance studio in San Mateo. At age 50, he returned to school to obtain his law degree. Mr. Williams has practiced law in our County for over 30 years. Today, he is still a practicing attorney in our City. He is happily married to his wife of 60 years, has two children, two grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Prior to and during World War II, the American military was racially segregated. African American men were generally assigned to the Quartermaster (supply) branch doing menial tasks. Very few African Americans became officers, let alone fighter pilots or bomber pilots. Belmont's own Leslie Williams was one of the very few exceptions. Even before Pearl Harbor, Mr. Williams wanted to become a military aviator. He tried unsuccessfully to enlist for military flight school. After December 7, 1941 (Pearl Harbor Day), he was drafted into the Army Quartermaster branch and assigned to an all black unit in Puget Sound, Washington. Because of his natural leadership abilities, he quickly rose in the enlisted ranks to the rank of master

sergeant. This was an amazing accomplishment in and of itself. In his spare time, he organized and led an orchestra and entertainment group that performed in the Seattle area for war benefit shows. He was noticed by a general by the name of Denson who asked him if there was anything the general could do for him. Leslie said "yes, I would like to go to flight school." As they say, "the rest is history." By March 1943, Leslie Williams was in the all black Tuskegee Airmen flight training program class 43-J at Tuskegee Army Airfield, Tuskegee Alabama. Nine months later, after enduring extreme prejudice and constant harassment from white instructor pilots, he received his aviator's wings and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Army. Over half the entering cadets in each flight class were washed out before completion of training. Trained as a fighter pilot, he later became the first black B-25 bomber pilot and joined the all black 477th Medium Bombardment Group. This bomber group trained at Selfidge Field Michigan, flew training missions in Michigan and California in the waning months of the war and experienced a great deal of racism. Mr. Williams was honorably discharged in 1947 with the rank of Captain. In 1947, there were very few black captains in the military. He, his wife and daughter returned to San Mateo where he opened a dance studio.

The Tuskegee Airmen - The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black military airmen. Between February 1942 and 1946, only 994 black men graduated from the Tuskegee program. 445 of these pilots were deployed to Europe and formed either the 99th pursuit squadron or later the 332nd Fighter Group, what became the legendary "Red Tails." The "Red Tails" (the tails on all their aircraft were painted red) flew P-40 Warhawks and received multiple distinguished unit citations for having never lost a single bomber it escorted in the North Africa, Sicily and Italian campaigns during the war.

They fought the war in segregated units physically separated from the other air units. Individual pilots of the "Red Tails" won Silver Stars, Distinguished Flying Crosses, Bronze Stars and Air Medals.

Recommendation

Informational report only. No recommendation.

Respectfully submitted,

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