

Distinguished Graduate

Tuskegee Airman

Captain Willie Howell Fuller

Posthumous Award



Willie Howell Fuller was born to Edward William and Mamie King Fuller on August 2, 1919, on the King Family Farm near Tarboro, North Carolina. His paternal grandparents were Howell and Ida King, both of whom were born at the end of slavery. They lived on the King family farm land which had been purchased by his paternal great-grand parents. Captain Fuller's siblings were Jennie King Carney, Sally King Dancy, Howell King, Ietta King Thorpe, Demsey King, Allen King, Mattie and Matthew (twins) King, and Meltchus Leander King.

After graduating from Tarboro Colored High School in 1937, Willie pursued a formal education at Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, where he eventually earned two undergraduate degrees. After receiving his first degree, Willie joined the United States Air Force and served courageously from 1942 to 1947 as a member of the original 99th Fighter Squadron-European Theater with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. As a fighter pilot, he was instrumental in conquering the Island of Pantelleria, flew 76 combat missions, and was lauded as an "Unsung Hero."

The requirements for admission to the Tuskegee program were deliberately set high with the expectation that few, if any, would qualify. This meant that the men who were admitted were particularly well qualified, a factor that contributed greatly to the success of the program and later to their success in combat.

The 99th Fighter Squadron, including 42 officers and 287 enlisted personnel, departed April 2nd for Camp Shanks, N.Y., en-route to Casablanca, Morocco, North Africa. They arrived on April 24, 1943. The Squadron moved from North Africa to Sicily, then to Foggia, Italy, on October 17, 1943. There the Airmen joined Colonel Earl E. Bates, Jr., Commanding Officer of the 79th (all White) Fighter Group who integrated the 99th Fighter Squadron. The Airmen remained with the 79th over Anzio in 1944.

Captain Fuller's and 99th Fighter Squadron's exemplary combat performance during World War II, including the destruction of 260 enemy aircraft, earned them more than 850 medals and helped to persuade President Harry S. Truman in 1948 to issue Executive Order 9981, desegregating the U. S. Military.

Following his service in the military, Willie owned and operated the first black cab company (The Arrow Cab Company) in LaGrange, Georgia, and went back to Tuskegee to complete a second Bachelor's degree. He then accepted a position with the South Florida Council of Boy Scouts of America in Miami, Florida, where he served as District Executive. Also, during the years immediately after World War II, Fuller served as a flight instructor for civilians.

On visits to his mother and family in Tarboro, Willie would "buzz" her house on West Wilson Street (near Edgecombe Community College), land on a landing strip along side Highway 258 outside of Princeville, and be met there by his mother.

Upon retiring in 1982, he remained an ardent member of the Lakeview United Methodist Church. Before his death on January 2, 1995, he was honored with numerous accolades including the following: Air medal with Oak Leaf (World War II); featured in the landmark exhibition of "Black Wings: The American Black in Aviation" at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum (1984); recognized by the Congressional Black Caucus for his courageous leadership during World War II (1991); honored by the Metro Dade County Aviation Department for his leadership with the Tuskegee Airmen, and for pioneering efforts for the advancement of Blacks in aviation (1993); featured in a historical display at the Miami Museum of Science and Space Transit Planetarium, Miami, Florida (1994); featured in a historical display at the Troup County Archives Historical Society, LaGrange, Georgia (1994); Memorial Fellowship Room (dedicated to his memory) Union Baptist Church, (1990).

Willie Fuller died on January 2, 1995, and was survived at that time by his wife, Willie Dunson Fuller; Louanna Howell Coleman, daughter; and Demetrius and Donovan Coleman, grandsons.