

William Accoo, Tuskegee Airman, Salem councilman dies

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US Army African-American Staff Sergeant William Accoo, crew chief of a P-51 Mustang aircraft, washed the aircraft he was in charge of, Italy, circa Sep 1944.

SALEM An iconic local figure who broke through racial barriers as a Tuskegee Airman in World War II and as Salem's first black councilman in the turbulent 1960s died Wednesday at his home here. He was 93.

Leading a quiet life of service to his country and love for his family, William H. Accoo came to symbolize in the midst of segregation the equality of men, through a war his own Army didn't want him fighting. The Tuskegee Airmen were the nation's first black military pilots.

Accoo died quietly Wednesday morning inside his home on East Broadway here. His sister-in-law found him lying on the bathroom floor just before 8 a.m. Doctors classified the death as a result of hypertension.

He was the only known Tuskegee Airman living in Salem County, according to Bob Boon, the county Veterans' Services Officer.

Though it is not the celebrity that touched his life or the accolades that cover his home's walls which his wife, Ida Accoo, will remember him for, but for the simple and profoundly pious man that he was.

"I'm going to miss him. His kindness for me, his love for me. He was a wonderful son and a wonderful husband," Ida Accoo said Thursday. "He lived a good life. After his faith in God, his love for me came next."

There are only approximately 300 documented Tuskegee Airmen still living, Boon said, out of a class of 994 that trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama from 1942 through 1946.

William Accoo fought with distinction for the 332nd Fighter Group, 99th Fighter Squadron during its World War II campaigns in North Africa, Sicily and Italy.

For his service he was bestowed the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor last year in Salem by U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo. It is the country's highest civilian honor.

Known as the "Redtail Angels" because of the crimson paint adorning the planes' back wingtips, the 332nd set an unprecedented standard by flying 200 of its 205 bomber escort missions without the loss of a single bomber to enemy aircraft. It is the best record of any escort group.

A lifelong Salem City resident, William Accoo was a dedicated member of the Mt. Hope United Methodist Church in Salem, overseeing its restoration after a fire destroyed the sanctuary and Sunday school room several years ago.

He became the first commander of American Legion Post 444, and in 1963 was sworn in as the city's first black councilman, a position he held until 1966. He served on the mayor's task force and advocated for the Community Action Group.