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Rhohelia "Bob" Webb



Rhohelia "Bob" Webb was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen and lived in Seattle for more than 40 years.

As a member of the U.S. military, Rhohelia "Bob" Webb was never allowed to eat or spend time in the officer's club — even though he was a pilot and second lieutenant.

He and the other African Americans who became known as the Tuskegee Airmen had to stay in their barracks — regardless of their rank. And they had to work extra hard.

"They had to be the best of the best," said his daughter, Lauri Januari, of Seattle. "They couldn't just pass the same standards as ordinary Caucasian Air Force officers. They had to be above and beyond."

Lt. Webb, who lived in Seattle for more than 40 years, died on May 28 at age 87. He was one of the hundreds of African-American pilots who trained at the segregated

Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama and went on to fight bravely for the U.S. during World War II.

Despite the racism he and the other black pilots endured, Lt. Webb never lost his compassion or love for other people, his family said. Instead of becoming angry, he just made a decision never to live in the South again.

After serving in the Air Force and living in Los Angeles for a time, he went on to become an active member of the Seattle community, helping found the North Beacon Hill Community Council and becoming a key volunteer at his church.

"He never let [anything] get him down," Januari said. "He always kept his eyes on the goal: to help others, and improve others."

His sympathetic nature also extended to animals, his daughter said. Her father never said no when his daughters found a stray cat or dog and asked, "Daddy, can we keep it?" Except for the five parakeets and many goldfish, nearly all of the animals that went through their home over the years were adopted — the guinea pig, the three dogs, five cats and a handful of baby chickens.

The oldest of 11 children, Lt. Webb was born and raised in Baltimore before joining the military in 1942. He served until 1945, then went on to get a bachelor's degree in biology from Morgan State University in Baltimore.

He later moved to Los Angeles, where he earned a master's degree in health administration from the University of Southern California — and met his future wife, Lois.

The couple moved to Seattle in 1964, where Lt. Webb worked as a health inspector at the Seattle-King County Health Department.

In Beacon Hill, they immediately joined the predominantly Japanese-American church down the street — the Blaine Memorial United Methodist Church. His family said Lt. Webb always felt a special bond with the Japanese-American men at the church because he related to their difficult experiences during World War II.

After retiring from the health department in 1981, he became a "super volunteer," church members said. For more than 20 years, he worked in the church's Atlantic Street Center, which teaches academic and practical skills to low-income children and their families.

"This was his second home," said Edith Elion, executive director at the center.

He served on the center's board for six years and worked as its risk and property manager. As part of his efforts, he taught community members how to respond to emergencies, including earthquakes, Elion said.

He became such an appreciated member of the church that a conference room, with dark bamboo flooring and robin's egg blue walls, was named after him in 2006. A large portrait of Lt. Webb hangs on the wall.

His family said he loved to recite poetry, especially when somebody was feeling upset, to cheer them up. He often quoted poet William Ernest Henley as saying, "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

His daughters recall a story he often told about his time at the Tuskegee Army Air Field, when he and a group of other pilots entered the officer's club and stood silently, with dignity, protesting the injustice of exclusion until they were told to leave.

Webb is survived by his wife, Lois, and his two daughters, Lauri Januari, of Seattle and Sheri Webb, of Minnesota.

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