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OBITUARY

Robert Searcy dies at 88; member of Tuskegee Airmen in World War II

By Molly Hennessy-Fiske

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Searcy served in Italy and later worked at a post office and opened several clothing stores in Los Angeles. The longtime Republican campaigned for Obama and attended his inauguration.

Robert Searcy, a member of the all-black group of World War II servicemen known as the Tuskegee Airmen and a longtime resident of Los Angeles, died of colon cancer Sept. 7 at his granddaughter's home in Atlanta. He was 88.

Searcy was born in Mount Pleasant, Texas, in 1921 and briefly attended what is now Prairie View A&M University before enlisting in the Army Air Corps in 1942.

[In an interview earlier this year](#), he said that after basic training at Ft. Hood, Texas, he was selected to lead a group of airmen to Tuskegee Army Airfield in Tuskegee, Ala.

Searcy described how porters on the train platform that day told him that his men would be segregated on the Pullman train car, barred from dining and sleeping quarters. Searcy objected.

"I demanded that they give us equal passage to get there, off and on, to eat and sleep with the rest of them," he said.

He said the porters, who were mostly black, eventually gave in, and he felt vindicated.

"I was put in charge of those men," he said. "I felt I had to represent what the Constitution was for those men. That's what leadership is."

Searcy went on to serve as a general clerk in Italy. He survived an attack by submarines on his way there and numerous air assaults on his encampment in the Italian marshes, where he lived in a green canvas tent and slogged through black mud and ash from nearby Mt. Vesuvius to deliver military intelligence messages to superiors.

"We didn't find out how much danger we were in until we got over there," he said.

Searcy was honorably discharged Oct. 27, 1945, with commendations for supporting combat missions over Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

He settled in Los Angeles and attended UCLA Extension school part time for two years before marrying childhood friend Betty Lydia Jones in 1948. They had a daughter, Robyn, in 1952 and later divorced. Searcy remarried aspiring Swedish actress Mona Elisa Arbie in 1978. The couple had no children, later divorced and Arbie died in a car crash in 1990.

Searcy went on to work at a downtown post office and opened several clothing stores in Hollywood and South Los Angeles. He kept clippings about the airmen, read widely, and encouraged his grandchildren to do the same.

"To me, he was like history. He just had so many stories to tell," said granddaughter Christy Davis, 32, of Atlanta.

Davis, a mother of three and a driver for FedEx, said Searcy encouraged her to get an education and better herself.

"He's one of the reasons that I'm doing so well with my life and raising my kids, because he inspired me," Davis said. "He expected people to be the best that they could be at anything they could be. He was very high on education."

A longtime Republican, Searcy said he experienced a change of heart during Barack Obama's presidential campaign, and he canvassed for the Democrat at his senior housing complex in Van Nuys. When Obama issued an invitation to Tuskegee Airmen to attend his inauguration in January, Searcy jumped at the chance.

He traveled with two other local airmen to Washington, where he claimed a front seat among celebrities, dined at an inaugural banquet, gave interviews and danced past midnight.

"We did it all," Searcy said as he returned to Los Angeles.

Searcy said he was energized by the inauguration.

"It's just like why I volunteered for the military," he said. "In your life, you do things you feel are meaningful to everyone. You don't isolate."

Davis said Searcy became ill in May, soon after he traveled to visit her and other relatives in Atlanta.

He is survived by daughter Robyn Searcy Lander of Atlanta; four grandchildren, including Christy Davis, Carlton Searcy Cooper of Los Angeles, Rashla Adams of San Francisco and LeQuan Lennett of Atlanta; and great-grandchildren De-Jai Davis, Diarran Davis and Dakwam Davis.