

# The Oregonian

## Tuskegee Airman Vernon Sport was an advocate for civil rights

**Service - The NAACP and affirmative action worker kept quiet about his military role**

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Until Vernon K. Sport and other members of the Tuskegee Airmen received a Congressional Gold Medal last year, many of Sport's friends in Conyers, Ga., had no idea he had been part of the nation's first group of African American military pilots.

So humble was Sport that he hadn't discussed his World War II service in depth with Naomi Sport, whom he married in 1992 after moving to Conyers from Boston, where he had been director of affirmative action for the Trial Court of Massachusetts.

"I said, 'Honey, why did you never tell me about this rich history?' He looked at me and he had pain in his eyes and he said, 'Those were not good days,' " she said. "He was not a boastful man, and he said, 'I never dreamed that this would make history and we never had in our mind that we were doing anything extraordinary. We were just doing what we should do.' "

Sport, who participated in the March on Washington in 1963 and was in the audience for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, died Sept. 8 in his Conyers home of complications from cancer and Alzheimer's Disease. He was 85.

"I've known Vernon for years, and it wasn't until the last seven years of his life that I realized the magnitude of what he had done," said Dr. Alfred Wyatt, a son-in-law in Fayetteville, Ga. "That, to me, made him even more amazing."

### **Served with NAACP**

In Massachusetts, Sport had served with the New England Area Conference of the NAACP and had helped increase the number of minorities working for the Trial Court, which includes courts across the state.

Speaking with the Boston Globe in 1989, he noted that in the nine years since he became director of affirmative action, minority presence in the work force for the courts had grown from 1.3 percent to 13 percent.

"We're doing good," he said.

Arthur M. Mason, retired chief administrative justice of the trial courts, recalled that "this was a time when we were really trying to look at the system and install an affirmative action program. He came in and was very well-received, very well-liked all the way around. He really was able to handle it well, and that was most appreciated by all of us."

Civil rights was more than simply a job for Sport, however. His daughter Valerie Best, of Lithonia, Ga., said the Sport family moved to Abington, Mass., to break the color barrier in housing, and lived there for many years.

Fighting housing discrimination in the rental and sales markets, she said, was a key part of her father's work, as was encouraging young African American men and women to pursue higher education.

"I know there are a lot of people who, because of him, went to college, got good jobs, and were able to buy houses," she said, "and I'm one of them."

Born in Lynn, Mass., Sport enlisted in the Army Air Corps after high school. Because he didn't have a college degree, his wife said, he initially was turned down when he tried to volunteer for the Tuskegee Airmen. Every day he asked to be transferred to the group, she said, and every day he was rejected until he wore down his superiors.

### **A keen memory**

Naomi Sport said she wasn't surprised that he succeeded with the unit.

"He had a photographic memory," she said. "Even in his later years he would read the dictionary. I would ask him, 'What does this word mean?' And he would recite the definition. It was like living with Webster's Dictionary."

After World War II, Sport returned to Massachusetts and graduated from Suffolk College, where he studied sociology. He received a master's degree from Goddard College in Vermont.

Along with his civil rights work with the NAACP and the court system, Sport worked with the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society.

"He really was a humanitarian," his wife said. "He worked diligently to help others. He gave of himself, his money, and his time. And on top of that, his children tell me that even though their father was so active in the community, he always had time for their questions, to raise them as a father, and to be loving and kind."

Sport's first marriage, to Rosemary Scott, ended in divorce.

When he retired to Georgia, Sport continued to work with community organizations, including a group that distributes food to homeless people in downtown Atlanta.

"Mr. Sport only required three to four hours sleep a night," his wife said. "While all of us were sleeping, Mr. Sport was up working. He'd get up at 4:30 in the morning, take his shower, and be ready for his day, and he would not go to bed until midnight or 1 o'clock. And this was into his 70s. He was like an Energizer bunny. I don't know where that man got his energy."

His work, meanwhile, did not go unnoticed. Earlier this year, Sport was honored in Conyers when Mayor Randal Mills proclaimed Feb. 15 Vernon K. Sport Day, according to an account of the ceremony in the Rockdale Citizen.

Sport, the newspaper quoted Mills as saying, "has served -- and continues to serve -- as an inspiration to generations of young people by triumphing over societal obstacles."