

# William Bennett, 89; served with the Tuskegee Airmen



William "Bucko" Bennett dressed in Masonic regalia.

By [Laurie D. Willis](#)

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In 2007, William "Bucko" Bennett was among a cadre of then unsung airmen called to Washington, where President George W. Bush was on hand as they received the Congressional Gold Medal, one of the nation's highest civilian honors.

"I would like to offer a gesture to help atone for all the unreturned salutes and unforgivable indignities," Bush said. "And so, on behalf of the office I hold and a country that honors you, I salute you for the service to the United States of America."

Yet throughout his adult life, Mr. Bennett spoke little of his days as a vaunted Tuskegee Airman. Even when he did, he shrugged it off as simply having done his duty.

Mr. Bennett, a retired marine engineering technician at the Boston Navy Shipyard in Charlestown, died of heart disease Jan. 19 at Stonehedge Rehabilitation & Skilled Care Center in West Roxbury. He was 89.

"I don't think he saw what he did as a Tuskegee Airman as being all that special," said Laura J. Brown of Lynn, Mr. Bennett's niece. "I think he saw it as his duty as an American."

“I know that his specialty was maintaining the planes,” she said. “He wasn’t a pilot. He was one of the guys who made sure that the planes were fit to go up each and every time. He liked mechanics. That’s what he went to school for, and that’s what he did when he left the Air Force.”

It’s well documented that the Tuskegee Airmen, who helped maintain planes and provided bomber escorts during World War II, were discriminated against at home and abroad. Yet Mr. Bennett did not dwell on that, friends and family say.

“If you asked questions, he’d say certain things and talk about how rough it was for the black servicemen when he first went to Alabama, how rough it was for black men in the South, period,” said his friend, Larry McPherson of Mattapan. “Other than that, he never talked too much about it, but he was very proud to have served as a Tuskegee Airman, and I was very proud knowing him.”

McPherson met Mr. Bennett in 1996, when he joined Mount Zion Lodge No. 15, part of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts Free and Accepted Masons. Both men are past lodge masters.

“To me, Bucko was easy to get along with, but to some people he wasn’t,” McPherson said. “He was kind of rough around the edges, but he loved his Tuskegee Airmen, loved masonry, and loved playing cards, especially pinochle and bid whist. He was the driving force behind me when I came into masonry to make sure I became a worshipful master of Mount Zion Lodge. He was somewhat of a mentor and a tormentor because he was so tough, but he helped me get where I needed to be.”

McPherson said that several years ago when he and Mr. Bennett attended a Shriners’ conference in Charlotte, N.C., he asked his waitress whether she had heard of the Tuskegee Airmen.

“She started going on and on about the Tuskegee Airmen, so I asked her how she’d feel about meeting one of them, and she replied they were all dead,” McPherson said. “I said, ‘You hear that, Bucko; she thinks you’re all dead.’ ”

When the young lady realized she had been serving a Tuskegee Airman she told her co-workers, who rushed to meet Mr. Bennett.

“That was one of the happiest days of his life, to see that this young teenage girl knew so much about the Tuskegee Airmen,” McPherson said. “That really made his day to find out those young kids knew who the Tuskegee Airmen were.”

According to the group’s website, the Tuskegee Airmen “were dedicated, determined young men who enlisted to become America’s first black military airmen, at a time when there were many people who thought that black men lacked intelligence, skill, courage, and patriotism.”

Harvey F. Sanford of Roxbury, a former Tuskegee Airman, remembers Mr. Bennett from their days before the war.

“I knew Bucko beforehand, because we grew up in Roxbury,” said Sanford, 84. “He was a nice young man. We played football in the same area.”

Sanford said that he and Mr. Bennett kept in touch over the years, but by the time he learned about his friend’s death, his services had been held.

Before becoming a Tuskegee Airman, Mr. Bennett was a typical guy, his niece said.

“In his early years, my uncle liked to drive fast cars, hang out with the guys, and he was a standout football player in high school and also in the Air Force,” Brown said. “He often said that his early experiences in football helped shape his life.

“Later he . . . became a member of the Masonic Temple and other social clubs. For a long time, I thought the nickname Bucko suited him because he was tough and very active.”

The son of immigrants from Barbados, Mr. Bennett graduated from Mechanic Arts High School, now John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, in 1940. After graduation, he worked as a marine engineering technician for the Boston Navy Shipyard until he was drafted and sent to Tuskegee, Ala., where the unit was trained.

“After the war, he returned to the shipyard; altogether he worked there for 30 years,” Brown said. “After his retirement in 1973, he spent many years catering in the New England area. He met lots of people, and he was very social. He catered fancy events, so there was an art to the way he did it. He was old school and very precise. He liked to eat, so he got to go to lots of events and eat the best foods. He also made good money doing it.”

Mr. Bennett was married to the former Frances L. Ross for 47 years until she died in 2000. The couple had no children.

“I’m pretty sure he was devastated, but he was a strong guy and not one to give up or show weakness,” Brown said. “I think at first after she died, he spent a lot more time with the fellas, and he became more involved with contributing to charitable organizations. He and his wife were devoted churchgoers, though they didn’t attend the same church. I’m sure he got support from his church family at St. Augustine & St. Martin” in Roxbury.

McPherson said he considered the Bennetts second parents.

“Before his wife passed, she made me promise her that I would always look out for him,” McPherson said. “I’m not the type of guy that would make a promise and not stick with it. Whatever he needed, errands, we’d always do it together.”

Mr. Bennett had a warm, giving side, his friend said. “He gave money to Boys Town and Girls Town for years. I don’t know how much money he actually donated, but he made it a point every year to give to them, and I just found out at his funeral that he brought some prayers books for his church, but he didn’t want anybody to know it. He was humble about stuff like that.”

Mr. Bennett leaves a brother, Merton D. of Roxbury, and a sister, Gloria Scales of Roslindale.

*Laurie D. Willis can be reached at [lauriedwillis@hotmail.com](mailto:lauriedwillis@hotmail.com). ■*

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