

Not Forgotten: A Tuskegee Airmen, POW, and FAA Employee

Edgar Lewis Bolden was a father of ten, one of the original Tuskegee Airmen, an aerospace engineer, and a long-term FAA employee. Bolden died in Portland, Oregon in 2007 at the age of 85. Few, however, know of his accomplishments. Not one to brag or live on his past accomplishments or focus on past discrimination, Bolden focused on the here and now, on making his part of the world a better place.



Armstrong High School, c. 1942
Courtesy: Library of Congress

Bolden was born on June 1, 1921, in Arlington, Virginia. Because of Virginia's strict segregation laws, he travelled into Washington, DC, every day to attend high school. Armstrong Manual Training School was one of two high schools in DC that admitted black students. From its founding, Armstrong operated as an important institution for DC's African American community and worked to improve the quality of life for its students.

Built between 1900 and 1902, the school's original name called Manual Training School #2. It served as the African American counterpart to Manual Training School #1, which served white students. In 1903, Manual Training School #2 became Armstrong Manual Training School in honor of General Samuel Chapel Armstrong, a white commander of an African American Civil War

regiment and founder of the Hampton Institute, attended by Booker T. Washington.

After completing high school, Bolden registered for the draft in February 1942. Although he did not list a job title, he indicated he worked at the Washington (DC) Navy Yard. At twenty-one years old, he joined the Army Air Corps and took flight training at Tuskegee Air Field in Tuskegee, Alabama. He graduated on December 5, 1943, as a second lieutenant with a rating as a single-engine pilot (class number



Tuskegee Cadet Class 43-5
Courtesy: Ancestry.com



Bolden (center) at Tuskegee
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

43-K-SE, serial number 0439271). He flew a single-engine P-47.

Upon graduation, he joined the 332nd Fighter Group, commonly known as the Tuskegee Airmen. The Air Corps called the late 1943-1944 graduates replacement pilots, because they deployed in place of a returning airman.

From 1941 to 1946, 992 pilots were trained at Tuskegee. Four hundred and fifty men deployed

overseas, and 150 lost their lives in accidents or combat. The toll included 66 pilots killed in action or accidents, 84 killed in training and non-combat missions and 32 captured as prisoners of war (POW).

Bolden was one of those 32 captured and held as a POW. After flying several missions from his base in Italy, the German Luftwaffe shot Bolden's plane down over Linz, Austria. He was held as a POW at Stalag Luft I, near Barth, Germany, a POW camp for captured Allied airmen. The German forces probably shot down Bolden's plane in March 1945 when the 332nd was active in the Linz area, protecting U.S. fighter and reconnaissance aircraft. Russian troops liberated the camp on April 30 1945. On May 7, 1945, Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies in Reims, France, ending the European War.



Stalag Luft 1
Courtesy: The National WW II Museum

With his wartime service over, Bolden enrolled at Howard University College of Engineering. A stellar student, he earned a Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering. He graduated in 1948, and in 1949 the University asked him to teach engineering after one of his professors became ill.

With his teaching duties over, he moved to Dayton, Ohio, to accept an engineering position at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, where he worked from 1949-1952. He then moved to the

Washington, DC, area for a job with the Bureau of Standards. In 1956, he accepted an aerospace engineering job at Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in Camden, New Jersey, and then transferred to RCA in Princeton, New Jersey, where he worked on space and defense communications systems. In 1964, while at RCA, he co-published a paper titled “Redundancy as Applied to Analog Circuitry for Project Relay.”

He joined the FAA in 1969 and held an engineering job in the Systems Research and Development office until his retirement in 1980. It seems few knew of his role as one of the famed Tuskegee Airmen. In 1976, a FAA employee magazine did a story on those airmen who went to work for the agency. The article included the names of twenty-two employees who had trained at Tuskegee. Edgar Bolden’s name was not on the list. The article’s writer had attended a convention of the Tuskegee Airmen in Philadelphia to get information. Mr. Bolden did not attend the reunion. In discussing the Airmen the author accurately said although the Tuskegee Airmen knew of their groundbreaking flights “They don't talk about it much anymore. But they haven't forgotten it either.” Bolden, a wartime pilot and POW, found no need to talk about his wartime experiences. He seemed more interested in concentrating on his current job and raising his large family.



In 1994, Edgar Bolden moved from Washington DC, to Portland Oregon, where he enjoyed a quiet retirement with his oldest son and grandchildren. He enjoyed bridge, golf, painting, and watching the planes take off and land at Portland International Airport.

In a ceremony on March 29, 2007, President George W. Bush and Congress awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian recognition awarded by the U.S. Congress, to the Tuskegee Airmen. The medal recognized their “unique military record that inspired revolutionary reform in the Armed Forces.”