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 YALE UNIVERSITY
 NEW HAVEN, CONN.

To IDENTIFY

Williams James B 381

NAME

SQUADRON W

SIGNATURE *Donald B. ...*

COMMANDING

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1. Stephen W. Valentino
 2. Robert J. Schering
 3. Arlo Dutton
 4. Donald W. Swales
 5. Robert B. Johnson
 6. David J. Murphy Jr.
 7. Tobias Smith
 8. Clavin E. Rutledge
 9. Leslie C. Sawyer, Jr.
 10. Robert S. Payton, Jr.
 11. William J. Curtis
 12. Theodore G. Larson
 13. Cyril F. Dyer
 14. Alpheus Lewis Jr.
 15. Victor L. Hanson
 16. Luther L. Oliver
 17. Lloyd W. Salvey
 18. Edward A. Young
 19. Clarence A. Young
 20. Frank V. Pendo
 21. Ledy P. Gilliam
 22. Leonard E. Gilliam
 23. Conde Frazier, J.
 24. Norman A. Tolson
 25. Agnew F. Zurek
 26. Rip T. Chapin
 27. Robert L. Day
 28. David L. Day
 29. Charles E. Day
 30. Charles E. Day
 31. Edward P.
 32. Charles
 33. John B.
 34. ...

ROLL

1. Arthur L. Park
 2. Donald C. Harris
 3. James B. Williams
 4. Charles E. ...
 5. William C. ...
 6. John C. ...
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THE FIGHT FOR EQUALITY

By Rick Davis

“The underlying philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of democracy and Christianity, and all of the dialectics of the logicians can not make them lie down together.”

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
From a Nov. 4, 1956, sermon

Editor’s note: James B. Williams, MD’51, MSM’56 (surgery), FACS, was interviewed for this article last October, when he returned to Creighton University’s campus to receive the School of Medicine’s Alumni Merit Award.

— April 12, 1945, Freeman Air Field, Seymour, Ind.

1st Lt. James B. Williams arrived at the base legal office, knowing his military career and possibly his life hung in the balance.

“Jim, I want you to read this and sign it,” said his commanding officer, Maj. John B. Tyson, pushing Base Regulation 85-2 in front of him.

Williams, a young African-American engineering officer, would eventually go on to earn two degrees from Creighton University, open a medical clinic in Chicago, become the Windy

City physician for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and meet with President John F. Kennedy in an effort to integrate the nation’s hospitals.

But on that fateful Thursday in April 1945, he was in a room facing nine other officers, including Maj. Tyson, staring at a neatly typed document titled: “ASSIGNMENT OF HOUSING, MESSING AND RECREATIONAL FACILITIES FOR OFFICERS, FLIGHT OFFICERS AND WARRANT OFFICERS.”

In an official tone, the regulation stipulated that certain supervisory personnel were assigned to use one officers’ club and trainees another.

But Williams knew the document’s intent was to keep the black officers from entering the white officers’ club, tennis courts and swimming pool. All the white officers on base were considered “supervisory personnel,” while all the black officers were labeled



1st Lt. James B. Williams, listed third from the top, was one of 101 black officers at Freeman Air Field placed under arrest in 1945 for refusing to sign a regulation that would have kept the officers’ clubs on base segregated.

“trainees” (no matter their experience or rank).

Williams also knew that, seven days earlier, 61 black officers had entered the “white officers’ club” in a peaceful protest. They were arrested and ordered back to their barracks. The incident prompted the base’s white commander, Col. Robert R. Selway, to draft the regulation.

“I read it, but I can’t sign it,” Williams told Tyson.

“If I don’t have the same rights as you as an officer, then I shouldn’t be one,” he said.

Tyson, a white pilot, was the commanding officer of the 619th Bombardment Squadron, 477th Bombardment Group. Williams considered him a good friend.

Tyson now ordered Williams to sign the regulation. Williams again refused.

“You’re under arrest to quarters,” exclaimed Tyson.

Williams knew that, under the 69th Article of War, disobeying a superior’s direct order during wartime was punishable by death.

“I thought that what we were doing was proper, and I figured it was the only way to approach the segregation that was throughout the military,” Williams said.

The following day, Williams and 100 other black officers who refused to sign Regulation 85-2 were lined up on the tarmac at Freeman Field, not knowing what would happen next.

Some black enlisted airmen tried to take pictures of the scene, but white military police officers confiscated their cameras and destroyed their film. One clever photographer did manage to secretly snap some pictures from a camera he had hidden in a shoe box. One of his photos appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* — one of the nation’s leading black newspapers — under the headline “These 477th Bombardment Officers Bombard Jim Crow.” (Jim Crow laws were established in the South to enforce racial segregation.)

The 101 black officers were placed on a C-47

These 477th Bombardment Officers Bombard Jim Crow



SOME OF THE ONE-HUNDRED-AND-ONE officers recently arrested at Freeman Field, Ind., because they attempted to enter an officers' club from which Negroes had been barred. Here they are with their personal belongings lined up on a ramp. As their names were called they were placed on a C-47 Transport Plane and carried to Godman Field, Ky., for confinement. Photographers of the outfit—the 447th Bombardment Group—were on the scene and snapped pictures—the majority of which were destroyed on the scene by order of Col. Selway.

However, the above and a few others were saved. The officers are first and second lieutenants and flight officers. In the back ground one can see a bus that was the only one used to bring the officers from the barracks to the plane—the others were trucks as you can see to the right of the photo. Meanwhile it is reported, but not officially confirmed, that Col. Selway's command at Godman and Freeman fields will be lifted—pending conclusion of an investigation.

This is one of only a few pictures of the arrested black officers lined up on the tarmac at Freeman Field awaiting transport to Godman Field, Ky., as it appeared in the Pittsburgh Courier. Most of the cameras were confiscated by military police on the scene. The above photo was taken from a camera hidden in a shoe box.



Photo courtesy of Dr. James B. Williams

Williams, far right, reunites with other members of the Tuskegee Airmen at a 1992 reunion.

transport plane and flown to Godman Field, Ky., a training facility located adjacent to Fort Knox. There, they were met by about 75 MPs armed with submachine guns and loaded onto prisoner transport vans.

"We were being transported just as if we were prisoners of war," retired Lt. Col. James C. Warren, another of the black officers arrested at Freeman Field, wrote in his book *The Tuskegee Airmen: Mutiny at Freeman Field*. "The German POWs, walking around without guards, were laughing at us."

The officers were held under house arrest at Godman, relegated to base barracks.

Williams, a native of Las Cruces, N.M., had attended segregated grade and high school. He had taken four years of college (majoring in pre-med) and was teaching in Clovis, N.M., when he was drafted into the military in 1942. While teaching in Clovis, Williams took a night class in airplane mechanics "to occupy the time" and, with the war raging in Europe, "to be prepared in any field that was necessary."

With his pre-med background, Williams was assigned to the medical corps at Camp Pickett, Va., and was selected to attend Medical Administrative Officers Candidate School. But with dreams of becoming a pilot, he went to the Pentagon and requested a transfer to the Army Air Corps (the precursor of the U.S. Air Force). The transfer was approved, but instead of being sent to Tuskegee, Ala., for flight training, Williams was appoint-

ed an aviation cadet and sent to Boca Raton Club, Fla., for basic training. From there, he went to Yale University for technical training, where he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Air Corps.

Williams was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first black aviators to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. Tuskegee fighter pilots racked up impressive records escorting American bombers over Germany during World War II. Author Robert A. Rose, who chronicled their success in his 1976 book *Lonely Eagles*, wrote that Tuskegee pilots never lost a bomber to enemy aircraft during 200 escort missions. No other fighter group would claim such success.

But the 477th Bombardment Group would never see action. The white superior officers of the mostly black bomber group saw to that. Declassified phone transcripts, detailed in Warren's 1995 book, show top brass seemingly more concerned with keeping segregation on base than with preparing troops for combat.

The black servicemen at Freeman Field couldn't turn to the community for support. The town of Seymour, Ind., was rumored to be a headquarters for the Ku Klux Klan. Most merchants in Seymour refused to serve blacks, including those from the base.

"You couldn't even get a Coke or a hamburger (in Seymour)," Williams said. "About the only facilities that were available to us were the ones on base, the two officers' clubs — one designated for white officers and one for blacks."



Photo courtesy of Dr. James B. Williams

Williams, front row, second from right, poses with members of his technical training class at Yale University, where he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Air Corps.

After five days under house arrest at Godman, each of the 101 officers was brought before a panel of officers from the Army Air Force Inspector General's Office, which was conducting a high-level investigation into the case.

"Normally, all you have to do when you're arrested

Photo courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Library



Williams was a member of a National Medical Association delegation that met with President John F. Kennedy in 1963. The delegation urged an amendment to the Hill-Burton Act that would prevent discrimination in hospitals built with federal assistance. Williams is sixth on Kennedy's right.

is give your name, rank and serial number, and say, 'I have counsel,'" Williams said.

But the first lieutenant was determined to speak during his hearing.

"I sat down and we talked," Williams said. "I tried to explain to them why they would never, ever be able to fight a war with a segregated army."

The black officers, fortunately, had Army Regulation 210-10, Paragraph 19, on their side. Although not written to address segregation, it stated that all Army officers be admitted to all officers' clubs on all stations, posts or bases in the Army.

On April 23, 1945 — 10 days after they were first

brought to Godman Field — the black officers were released and returned to Freeman Field. Only one officer was found guilty of any wrongdoing — Lt. Roger C. Terry, who later was found guilty of "jostling a superior officer" while trying to enter the club. (He was sentenced to forfeit \$50 per month for three months.) However, each officer had a two-page, type-written reprimand placed in his official military file.

"It basically stated that we were a disgrace to the race and to the country," Williams said.

The letters of reprimand remained in the files of these officers for 50 years until removed by the Air Force in 1995. The Air Force also set aside the court-martial conviction against Terry.

On Aug. 12, 1995, then Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman presented the official documents to Williams and some of the other officers, finally vindicating them. At the same ceremony, then Assistant Secretary of the Air Force Rodney A. Coleman described the Freeman Field incident as a "bellwether for change with respect to integrating the U.S. military." He said the black officers had taken "a giant step for equality" 10 years before Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus. The Armed Forces were integrated in 1948 by President Harry S. Truman.

"It was a big risk doing what we did," Williams said. "Fortunately, for the good of the country and for our good, it turned out well."

Williams returned to Freeman Field, and, shortly thereafter, the 477th was placed under the command of Col. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., an experienced black officer and a West Point graduate.

The following year, Williams moved with the 477th to Lockbourne Army Air Field in Columbus, Ohio. There, Williams began taking physics classes at night at Ohio State University to complete his pre-med requirements. Williams left the military in 1946 and returned to New Mexico, where, in 1947, he earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from New Mexico State. Now bent on a career as a physician, Williams was accepted to

Creighton's medical school. He earned a medical degree from Creighton in 1951. And, a year later, he was accepted into Creighton's surgical residency program, earning a master of science in medicine (surgery) degree in 1956. In 1957, Williams passed the American Board of Surgery examination on the first attempt, the first Creighton-trained surgery resident believed to have done so. Williams received additional surgical training at the Royal Victoria Hospital at McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

Williams eventually moved on to establish a medical clinic on Chicago's South Side with his brothers, Jasper, a 1953 Creighton School of Medicine graduate and a board certified obstetrician/gynecologist, and Charles, a board certified internist. Williams became president of the Cook County (Ill.) Physicians Association. And, on Aug. 1, 1963, he was one of several physicians with the National Medical Association to meet with President Kennedy to urge an amendment to the Hill-Burton Act that outlawed discrimination in hospitals built with federal assistance.

Williams, who had to have special clearance to enter the White House because of his involvement in the Freeman Field incident, drew the attention of Kennedy.

"He came over and kidded me and said, 'If you don't fight for your rights, you won't get any,'" Williams said.

Williams was well aware of the discrimination taking place in Chicago-area hospitals. When Williams was first put on staff at Illinois Central Hospital, "they were putting black patients in the basement." (In 1992, Williams was named chief of surgery at the hospital, renamed Doctors Hospital of Hyde Park, and, in 1996, the hospital's surgical suite was named in his honor.)



Photo by Monte Kruse, BA'83

Williams stands outside the Williams Clinic, which he founded with his brothers, Jasper, MD'53, and Charles on Chicago's South Side.



Photo by Cheryl St. Michel

Williams accepts the Creighton School of Medicine's 1999 Alumni Merit Award with his wife, Wileen, and children, Brenda Payton Jones and Dr. James Williams II, BS'79, at his side.

Williams felt the sting of racism when he joined the staff at Chicago's St. Bernard Hospital in 1957 as its first African-American surgeon. (He eventually served as the hospital's chief of surgery from 1971-1972.)

"When I first walked into the surgical suite, one of the doctors, a urologist, made the remark, in front of about seven other doctors who were in the room, that, 'Well, the environment around here is getting awfully dark. I'm going to have to find me some other hospital to go to,'" Williams said.

A few years later, Williams was asked to rush to surgery. A patient was bleeding to death on the operating table. When Williams arrived, a priest was giving the patient her last rites. The chief urologist, the one who had insulted Williams, had come upon some complications while taking out the patient's kidney stone, and now he couldn't stop the bleeding.

"I scrubbed and was able to control all bleeding," Williams said.

Williams saved the patient's life. And the urologist?

"He didn't say a thing, and neither did the priest," Williams said. "The priest just walked out.

"Interestingly enough, the urologist's son was one of those who talked me into going to the march on Washington when Martin Luther King gave his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech," Williams said.

Williams served as King's physician when the civil rights leader was in Chicago.

"His attorney was our attorney; that's how I happened to get involved with him," Williams said. Williams said he only made about three calls on Dr.

QUICK ACTION SAVES BABY

It was a quiet, late Sunday afternoon in Chicago, May 1976. Creighton alumnus James B. Williams, MD'51, MS'56, was having dinner with his family, when he received a call from his brother, Jasper, MD'53.

A woman, eight months pregnant, had been shot in the abdomen during a struggle with robbers outside her South Side apartment, Jasper told him.

Dinner would have to wait. Williams hurried out the door and rushed to St. Bernard Hospital.

There, the mother, Denise Ruffin, was conscious but in shock.

Ruffin had been hosting a family birthday party for her 3-year-old son, when some neighborhood youngsters informed her that her uncle was being robbed.

Ruffin and two of her sisters, armed with a big stick and a baseball bat, rushed outside and confronted three of the muggers in a nearby alley.

During an ensuing fight, one of the robbers pulled out a .38-caliber pistol and shot Ruffin point-blank in the upper abdomen. She crumpled to the ground. The assailants fled, having robbed Ruffin's uncle of 90 cents.

Ruffin was rushed to St. Bernard. The bullet had ripped through her abdominal wall and

penetrated her uterus. Immediate surgery was necessary. Even then, the odds of saving the unborn baby were slim.

Jasper, the mother's gynecologist, performed an emergency Caesarean section. He then handed the limp 3-pound, 12-ounce baby to



Williams shows a .38-caliber bullet, the kind that ripped through Kevin Ruffin's unborn body, next to the infant.

James, the Creighton-educated surgeon.

"When I first saw him, I thought he was dead," Williams said. "He had no heart beat, no breathing."

The .38-caliber bullet had entered the baby's right flank, slammed through his tiny liver

and colon, grazed his kidney, passed through his chest (collapsing his right lung), and lodged in the soft tissue behind the humerus in his right arm.

"I could see the hole in the chest, where the bullet came out," Williams said. "It was a pretty good-sized hole."

A hospital spokesman compared the bullet to a baseball tearing through an adult.

Williams started CPR, and the baby began to breathe. He then performed surgery on the baby's thorax to control the bleeding, closed the wound in the chest and inserted a chest tube to re-expand the right lung. He also removed the bullet from the right arm.

The newborn was then rushed to the Premature Intensive Care Center at the Illinois Research Hospital of the University of Illinois School of Medicine, where Williams was on the teaching staff. Tiny Kevin Ruffin was released from the hospital six months later into the arms of his now-healed mother, a miracle of modern medicine and quick-acting physicians.

"The baby was the first baby in the world, reported in medical literature, to survive a gunshot wound to the abdomen and chest in utero," Williams said.

A testament not only to the resolve of the newborn, but to the exceptional, swift care of two dedicated Creighton doctors.

Photo courtesy of Dr. James B. Williams

King, but it was enough to warrant some attention from the FBI.

"I knew my phones were tapped," Williams said. "I would pick up the phone and I would hear this click. J. Edgar Hoover (the director of the FBI at the time) hated King with a passion."

Williams and his wife, Willeen, made it a point to hear Dr. King whenever he spoke in Chicago. King also accepted Williams' invitation to speak to the Cook County Physicians Association. "He was such a very articulate minister," Williams said.

Now 80, Williams has retired from the medical profession. He and Willeen have homes in Chicago and New Mexico. Their daughter, Brenda Payton Jones, is a columnist for the *Oakland Tribune* in Oakland, Calif., and




*Dr. James B. and Willeen Williams.
The two have been married for 49 years.*

their son, Dr. James Williams II, BS'79, is a colorectal surgeon in Albuquerque, N.M. The soft-spoken but determined physician has seen plenty of progress in civil rights, but he also knows the battle for equality is far from over.

"We still have people at some hospitals who say they would never train any blacks in specialties such as, for example, surgery," Williams said. "Today that exists."

In the words of Dr. King:

"We have come a long, long way, but we have a long, long way to go."

— *About the author: Rick Davis is editor of Creighton University Magazine. He can be reached via e-mail at rcd@creighton.edu.* 



Willeen Williams shakes hands with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., during one of King's visits to Chicago. Behind her in line is Dr. Williams' mother, Clara, and Dr. Williams. Williams served as King's physician when the civil rights leader was in Chicago.