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Cover Page Footnote

Written for WRT 114

Chu: The Things Worth Living For

The Things Worth Living For

Colton Chu



The light shines through the floor-to-ceiling windows into the sunroom where my grandfather and I now sit. Many plants face the windows, looking happy and properly nurtured by my grandmother. The sound of birds chirping is muffled by the glass, and the fountain outside looks still. It's always been quiet here, but as my life gets busier, I notice the quiet more and more. My grandfather, the subject of my interview, is 97 at the time of this writing and has a very nice life. He and my grandmother have been retired for many years and spend almost all their time in their comfortable house. She has put most of her time into house maintenance and gardening, while my grandfather still tries to find ways to work on the things he cares about. His calm nature might fool you into not realizing who he really is: a fighter at heart. The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of African American pilots. Their job was to prove to the United States that Black soldiers could succeed in the air corps. A select group

of Black teenagers were admitted to the program, located in Tuskegee, Alabama. Hal May, my grandfather, was one of those select soldiers. The first thing he told me during our interview was that he was thankful for the color of his skin.

“We didn’t call ourselves Black. We called ourselves colored at that time,” he said. His whole childhood, Hal had felt equal to others. Growing up in upstate New York, he was a minority, which caused him to stand out a bit. But walking down the street, going to school, hanging out with friends, he always felt welcomed by those around him. He said he was “one of everybody.” No one made him feel ashamed or out of place because of the color of his skin, and that’s what he was used to. But there’s a moment in everybody’s life when they realize that the world is a lot bigger than they previously thought.

In order to get to the training grounds in Tuskegee, Hal took the railroad down to Alabama. The train ran from his home-



Layout by Yusra Khazaleh. "Tuskegee army flying school - Public domain map." <https://jenikirbyhistorygetarchive.net/amp/media/tuskegee-army-flying-school-75e433>.

town in the north to just about as far south as you could get. With every mile, Hal traveled farther from his welcoming hometown into the unknown. "I was in a different world, a different country," he says. To him, the world had just gotten a whole lot bigger and a whole lot scarier. As they switched trains in Cincinnati, Hal began to get on the train like everyone else when someone stopped him and ushered him to the colored section. He had never seen segregation before. "I knew that I better not get off that train. Because if I did, I wouldn't know how to act. I would act as if I was equal to everybody." He tucked his feet together, tried to take up less space, and if his mouth opened, it would only be to give a response. "If I didn't act how they wanted and if I didn't call them 'sir,' they would've put me in prison." Back home, even if he didn't know them, everyone was so caring; people could feel like family. But here, everyone felt like a stranger. At least to him.

In Tuskegee, their job was to train to be pilots, but they knew they weren't just training for fun. They had a purpose, an enemy to take down that was preaching and spreading cruel and evil ideology. Thinking about it made Hal's mind hazy. He had visions of being up in his plane, fighting for America and for the world, and an overwhelming smile came to his face as he imagined the good that would come from his success. "Love your creator and love each other," Hal says. "That was the message of Jesus." Hal's father was a minister and, as was to be expected, he had grown up with a notable religious influence. But he never felt like religion had been forced upon him, the subject matter of generosity, love, and acceptance had just always connected with him. "It's a very simple message," he says. That's why the rest of the world seemed so crooked to him.

When Hal got to Tuskegee, he was out of place for the first time. In the new environment, he was hazed by the older guys. Not in

a malicious way, though.

In retelling the story, he laughs as he recalls the phrases they would make him recite at any given moment. I won't even bother to transcribe them, as it would take up multiple pages. But if you couldn't say them when asked, you were forced to do however many push-ups they wanted that day.

I'm a big believer in found family, the idea that the relationships we build can be as strong, if not stronger, than the ones connecting us by blood. I would guess my grandpa is a strong believer in this as well. Everywhere he goes, he looks for that sort of connection. He'll be talking to a stranger in line at the airport and give them the same undivided attention that he gives me when he asks how school's going.

When the war ended without his having seen combat, the young Hal was given a choice: He could either continue his training with the air corps or go to college.

The reason Hal wanted so badly to be a Tuskegee Airman in the first place was his love for flying. As a boy, he spent his time building model airplanes and flying them whenever he got the chance. So as you can imagine, flying a real plane in a real cockpit with real controls almost felt too good to be true. If you were up in the sky flying planes every day with friendly people to whom you were surprisingly similar, how could you not bond? Hal made friends with many but was especially close with his three roommates.

They hung out, flew together, and sang songs. When they had finished training for the day but still didn't want to go home, they would all sing together. One aviation cadet in particular from the Deep South would take

the lead. My grandfather laughs and scratches his head as he remembers the words to one of the songs.

My old missus promised me

Raise a ruckus tonight

That when she died, she'd set me free

Raise a ruckus tonight

She lived so long that her head got bald

Raise a ruckus tonight

I don't give up hope of her dying at all

Raise a ruckus tonight.

Singing wasn't the limit to their activities, though. Being pilots and spending most of their days flying, they would often entertain themselves by having simulated dogfights, which involve aerial combat between two planes at close range. Activities like this would work to create bonds that Hal would

cherish for life. These connections and other things he would pick up would serve as the first stepping stone to his later endeavors.

When the war ended without his having seen combat, the young Hal was given a choice: He could either continue his training with the air corps or go to college. He chose college and attended Harvard Medical School with the intent of becoming a doctor. The decision was a difficult one. Hal had to take the train back across the country and leave the place where he had spent a significant portion of his life. Along with Alabama, he'd be leaving his friends and his love of flying behind, but his passion to serve others prevailed. He wanted to see good done around him and figured this was the first

step. It was the first domino to fall to start an amazing chain reaction of kindness and generosity—this dream shone brighter than any plane flying across the sky. So he closed the chapter on Tuskegee and boarded the train.

Hal's decision to be a doctor was driven largely by the compass that God had provided him, the Bible: "I didn't want to be a doctor here in the United States. I wanted to go to Africa or India because they didn't have enough doctors." However, Hal's mission was temporarily halted with his diagnosis of keratoconus, a condition that attacks one's cornea, causing the curved dome shape to slip into a cone. My worried mother has had me tested for this condition much more than any kid really needs. The effects of the condition are often catastrophic if not treated properly and right away. Unfortunately, my grandfather was not in that camp of lucky kids to be treated properly. He quickly became legally blind during his residency at Mass General Hospital.

It's a known fact that surgeons can't be blind. No matter how you try to spin it, there's just no way around it. It's just a cold hard truth. "God," Hal said. He was disappointed. His dream felt dead before it had even come to life. And he had wanted so badly to see it grow. He was upset, but he didn't let it discourage him: "If you give me my sight, I'll be a surgeon. But if you don't give me my sight, I'll be a minister." Many might feel hateful toward God at this point. Many might turn their back on him, or curse God out, or do anything they wanted without regard for the consequences of their actions. Hal never saw it that way. "Thy will be done," he'd always say, reciting words from

the Lord's Prayer.

Throughout his life, Hal has always had a mission. It was those four words. They have guided him through all hardships, and at all crossroads, and he has always been satisfied with his life. "There's a lot you can do if you're blind," he'd say. But his life in medicine wasn't over yet, and his dream lived on. Treatment on his eyes worked and helped to slow the process of his becoming blind. He became a surgeon and practiced in Haiti for many years.

As I look at my grandfather, I can see each one of his years, almost a century, in his eyes, but not in his expression. He always seemed to look ahead. It's his nature to keep moving forward and doing more. To continue. He would say he does it because that's what God wants him to do. I just think it's his character. Even if he had never seen a Bible in his life, I think he'd be out there in soup kitchens and performing surgeries, helping in any way he can think of.

Currently he is the founder of an organization named Family whose main goal is to expand opportunities for disenfranchised youth. He believes young people are the most important to focus on and that if they are provided with necessary resources like food, good education, and clothing, the world will be put on a much better track. While some might say that devoting your life to the service of others and to "God's will" is giving up your life, I'd guess my grandfather doesn't see it like that at all. I believe he looks at it as living life to its fullest potential. But either way, as he said about the war and serving with the Tuskegee Airmen, "*Some things are worth dying for.*"