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**ROMEO M. WILLIAMS:
TUSKEGEE AIRMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS LAWYER**

By Milton H. Williams, III

Most of us live our daily, ordinary lives without eventful experiences taking place. Others face constant challenges that require them to overcome major obstacles. This paper is about a person who challenged the establishment, and his efforts resulted in a better world for all of us.

Romeo Marcus Williams was born in Marshall, Texas to Milton Williams, Sr. and Josie P. Campbell Williams on June 4, 1919, the second of three sons. His brothers, Milton, Jr. and Joseph, shared the family home on Lothrop Street in the Sunny South section of Marshall. The family later moved to Whetstone Street where the family home still stands. Romeo was a cheerful fellow who others enjoyed being around, and he made friends easily. His friends found that he was loyal, dependable, and quick to play jokes on them. Even though he played his jokes on his friends, none of the pranks were done with an evil spirit.

Romeo finished grade school in 1933 and entered H. B. Pemberton High School, where he played saxophone in the band and was a member of the baseball and football teams. Exhibiting superior scholarship and leadership abilities, he was often left in charge of his classes when teachers needed to be away for a short while. Whenever he was left in charge, the other students reminded the teacher to take the strap because they did not want Romeo to be tempted to administer corporal punishment while the teacher was out. Even though the other students trusted Romeo, they were unsure what the prankster with the sleepy, gray eyes would try while the teacher was away.

Romeo and his brothers enjoyed a fairly comfortable life in Marshall. Their father and mother owned a funeral home that provided a good income for the family. There were several automobiles needed in the business, so the brothers were among the few black youths who had access to a vehicle when needed. As Romeo Williams' nephew, I remember hearing about the double dates that the brothers would have in the mortuary's hearse. The hearse was the vehicle of choice, since the long, flat, enclosed back made it very convenient to relax with a favorite date.

After completing high school, Romeo attended Prairie View A&M College. But he did not enjoy Prairie View; shortly after his freshman year he returned home to attend Bishop College. Romeo joined the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity at Bishop on February 13, 1939, and soon established warm and longstanding relationships with his fraternity brothers. On May 23, 1941, Romeo graduated from Bishop with a Bachelor of Science Degree.

My grandfather, Milton, Sr., was a proud and devoted man. He was especially proud of his sons, and he always wanted them to stay in Marshall and join him in the family business. After graduating from college Romeo did

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work at the funeral home for a short period of time, but what took place on December 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, changed this country and changed the plans that the Williams' had for their sons.

With America at war, every able-bodied male was drafted into the military. According to custom, most Negroes were conscripted for segregated military units designated for support roles. Some black leaders protested this treatment and demanded that black troops be given equal opportunity for training and equal exposure to every aspect of military development. With the support of Senator Harry S Truman, congress agreed to include black soldiers in flight training. After much effort, a flight-training program was established for black soldiers at Tuskegee, Alabama. Even though the country was at war and there was a need for trained military aviators, there were many powerful military and civilian leaders who believed that black soldiers could not learn to fly, and that the Tuskegee experiment would be a failure.

Romeo Williams was the first black East Texas youth to pass the examination for the Army Air Corps administered at Barksdale, Louisiana. On December 13, 1942, Romeo entered the military and was sent to Alabama for flight training, where he became a member of training class 42-K. On December 11, 1943 Romeo graduated, receiving his gold Second Lieutenant bars and his silver pilot's wings.

Romeo did not have the opportunity to fly in combat, but he did ferry aircraft to different bases throughout the country. On September 15, 1945, Romeo was discharged from the military. Even though information indicates that Romeo received flight training at Tuskegee, his discharge papers do not document this fact, and a fire destroyed the records at the military personnel center that would have contained additional information on his military service. Visits to Tuskegee University, the Tuskegee Memorial, the U.S. Air Force Academy, and newspaper clippings saved by my grandmother, provide verification and documentation of Romeo's military experience.

Romeo knew that his accomplishments as an aviator were unique and extraordinary, and Mrs. Josie Williams was proud of the military contributions of her three sons. She had a picture of her sons, together, in their respective military uniforms. Her eldest son, Milton, Jr., wore his Army Air Corps officer dress uniform. Her youngest son, Joseph, was dressed in his Army uniform. Romeo was in his military flight uniform. This picture hung on the wall in the room where I slept. As a young boy, each day I looked at the picture and wondered how Romeo was able to wear a pilot's uniform. I was confused because I had never heard of a Negro flying an airplane. It was not until I was in junior high school that I understood how Romeo had earned the right to wear a pilot's uniform during World War II.

My grandfather was also proud of his sons, but he did not hold any fondness for the military. Milton, Sr. was always outspoken about military service and, if he could have had his way, none of his sons would have worn a uniform. This might have been the reason that none of the brothers spoke about their military service, and military accomplishments they achieved were seldom mentioned.

It is easy to understand my grandfather's feelings toward the military. He and other parents saw their sons' lives placed in harm's way in the service of a country that would not treat them as citizens. In spite of their sacrifices and accomplishments, black soldiers who wore the uniform of the United States armed forces during World War II were treated worse in America than captured German prisoners of war. Many black soldiers experienced feelings of anger and frustration when they returned from war to an ungrateful nation. The frustration and anger only increased when the highly trained Tuskegee Airmen did not have any hopes of obtaining employment as aviation mechanics or pilots after their discharge. The best employment opportunities that most of the veterans could expect were as railroad porters.

After Romeo received his discharge from the military on September 15, 1945, he prepared to enter law school. Because there were no law schools in Texas that would admit Negroes, Romeo enrolled at the law school located at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. He graduated from Lincoln University on June 6, 1949 and moved to Dallas to practice law with the J.W. Durham law firm.

During the seven years that Romeo practiced in Dallas, black attorneys battled frustrations associated with racist attitudes in the legal system. Despite the growing number of African-American barristers, they were still treated as second-class lawyers by their colleagues and judges. To address these issues, C.W. Asberry, L.A. Bedford, C.B. Bunkley, Jr., W.J. Durham, Kenneth F. Holbert, D.B. Mason, Robert Rice, L. Clayton River, U. Simpson Tate, J.L. Turner, Jr. and Romeo Williams met on May 4, 1952 and formed the "Barristers' Club." They met monthly and decided, among other things, to use their organization and the law to battle discrimination.

These lawyers went on to play key roles in dismantling the vestiges of racial discrimination. For instance, Durham served as lead counsel in *Smith v. Allright*, in which the United States Supreme Court held that the all-white Democratic primary in Texas was unconstitutional. Durham also served as lead counsel in *Sweatt v. Painter*, in which the Supreme Court held that the University of Texas' failure to admit Heman Sweatt, an African-American, to the law school because of his race was unconstitutional. The pivotal involvement of African-American lawyers in Dallas also impelled the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to locate its southwest regional office in Dallas early in the 1950's. In 1955, still working to bring racial equality to Dallas, the Durham law firm filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of Albert Bell to integrate the Dallas Independent School District (DISD). Because of this case, federal courts still retain supervisory jurisdiction over DISD.

The demands of being a junior associate with the Durham law firm must have been tremendous, but Romeo enjoyed an active social life as well. Shortly after moving to Dallas, he met Edith Arbuckle, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. S.D. Arbuckle. After a suitable period of courtship, the two married on June 10, 1951. The *Dallas Call*, a local newspaper, carried a story describ-

ing the wedding, which was performed at the bride's home with the Rev. A. R. Nelson officiating. Joseph, Romeo's younger brother, served as the best man, while Attorneys C.B. Bunkley and J.T. Turner served as ushers. In addition to the wedding activities held in Dallas, a reception was held in Marshall to honor the couple. I remember the wedding. The wedding was held in the back yard of the Arbuckle home. Although I was only five years old, I thought it was unusual to have a wedding in the yard. I thought people had to get married in a church. After the Marshall reception, my Uncle Romeo and new Aunt Edith left for a honeymoon visit to New Orleans. Upon their return, they stopped in Marshall and shared some crabs with us that they brought from New Orleans.

For seven years Romeo directed his energies toward the task of winning numerous civil rights cases throughout the state. After several gratifying experiences with veteran attorneys, he thought it was time to return to his hometown of Marshall, which was by then ready for an African-American attorney. So in 1956, Romeo moved from Dallas to Marshall, setting up his office adjacent to the Peoples Funeral Home, which was owned by his parents. Although his Dallas colleagues expressed encouragement, they also offered to pin a "Purple Heart" on his chest in anticipation of the wounds he would incur while trying to establish a law practice in the former "Confederate Capital in exile" – Marshall, Texas.

Although Marshall had two African-American colleges, Bishop and Wiley, located in the community, the city was known as one of the most socially segregated towns in Texas. The colleges were the mainstays of the black community and they both produced some of the most influential black leaders and educators in the country. The colleges seemed to sit in the community as sleeping giants when it came to exerting their influence on local affairs. In March 1960 the sleeping giants began to awaken from their slumber.

In March 1960, I was a sophomore at Pemberton High School. The majority of my time in school I stayed with my grandparents. Each morning my grandfather drove me to school before he went to his office. On this particular day in March, he wanted to leave home early so he could go by his office at the funeral home before he took me to school. Bishop College was across the street from our funeral home. As we approached the college, I could see that there were some signs hanging next to the highway on a fence adjacent to the boy's dormitory. As we got closer, I could read the signs. They read "Freedom Now" and other related civil rights slogans. I was very excited to see the signs and began to ask questions. My grandfather seemed unsurprised. We stopped at the office and my grandfather, my dad, and my Uncle Romeo spoke to one another briefly; then, my grandfather took me to school. As we proceeded to Pemberton, we followed an unusual route that took us past Wiley College. As we approached Wiley, I could see that there were also "Freedom" signs located on its campus. Although I did not appreciate the full impact of what was taking place, I knew that there were some changes blowing in the wind.

During March and April, the *Marshall News Messenger* was full of stories concerning the civil rights activities. A headline on March 27, 1960 read "Sit-ins Staged Here." The sub-headline stated "Negroes Make Three Visits to Counters." The story said that Wiley and Bishop students had attempted to be served at F. W. Woolworth and the bus station lunch counters. After the students were refused service, the lunch counters were closed and the students departed peacefully.

Another headline read "Marshall Normal, Protests Quieted," and "Hose Used on Negroes," and "Demonstration Staged at Wiley." According to this story, between 150 and 175 students had demonstrated on the Wiley campus before marching to the courthouse. At the courthouse, firemen used water hoses to disperse the students. Fifty-seven students were arrested on charges of unlawful assembly, but all were soon released on their own recognizance. The story continued:

Romeo Williams, a Negro attorney here, who told city and county officials Wednesday he had helped to organize the demonstrations said some assistance in providing bonds and fines will be provided by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People but that he did not know the extent to which assistance will be given. Williams indicated additional demonstrations are planned.

Many members of the black community signed property bonds to bail the students out of jail. One black businessman told me that Romeo brought him a bond to sign and that he signed it without reading or questioning. Although the students were the participants in the demonstration, the black community was there to support the students' actions.

The legal cases continued at intervals for weeks, then dragged on over the summer months. Many students left Marshall and returned to their homes, only to be summoned back later for trials at inopportune times. These trials were reportedly more harassing than forthright; the students and their counselors would appear as requested in the morning only to hear that the trials had been delayed until the afternoon. This went on for several days with little being accomplished. This inactivity led up to the most eventful day of the summer of 1960.

On August 16, 1960, I awoke in Houston and prepared to return to Marshall with my mother, an aunt, and a friend. As we headed north along Highway 59, through one small town after another, we saw a number of signs that had been put up by local businesses. Most of these signs indicated that the businesses had facilities for "whites only." One sign that I remember well at a service station indicated that the establishment only sold gasoline to whites. Due to the hostile signs, African Americans had to be careful in planning trips. Several service stations were willing to sell us gasoline, but the attendant indicated that we could not use the rest rooms. When they told us this, we continued along until we could find a more accommodating location.

Upon arriving in Marshall, my mother and I dropped off our companions

and proceeded home. When we got home, my grandfather met us at the car and told us that something had happened to Romeo at the railroad crossing on Evans Street. He said that I should take the ambulance. I drove the ambulance to the crossing and recognized Romeo's car, which had been hit by a switch engine. I got out of the ambulance and went closer until I could see his body, which had been thrown out of his car alongside the tracks. Although I was only a fourteen-year-old boy, I can still remember how I wanted to deny what I saw. I was overcome with emotion, and others at the scene took responsibility for removing Romeo's body to the funeral home.

Later, I discovered that the accident had occurred while Romeo and two students, both of whom had returned to Marshall for the sit-in trials, were coming from the courthouse. One of the students, Mattie Mae Etta Johnson, was also killed. The other, Bernice Halley, was critically and permanently injured.

Romeo's funeral was held on August 20, 1960 at the New Bethel Baptist Church. The crowd overflowed out of the church and many sat outside and listened to the service. Many attorneys, Omega Psi Phi fraternity brothers, and Wiley and Bishop representatives attended. The following are excerpts from some of the remarks made during the funeral service. According to Milton K. Curry, president of Bishop College,

If Attorney Williams had not been aligned with the legal forces defending these young people, he would not have had an occasion to offer the hospitality which resulted in the train of events that have brought him and us to this hour. Yet, who would dare to say that even if he had not been so employed, his natural bent toward equality and human dignity would have still linked his with this Holy crusade to win a new day for democracy and for our Christian faith! For he had been reared in a Christian family and exposed to teaching faculty and administration at Bishop College committed to the complete implementation of the Christian democratic ideal. And therefore, it would not be thought strange by those who knew him and who knew his background that he should yearn for freedom, nor that he should espouse the cause of human dignity.

The response he made to the challenge was well encompassed in the character role he long since chosen for himself. The great use of life is to spend it for something which will outlast it. Attorney Williams won immortality by associating himself with this struggle for freedom, equality, and human dignity.

May we be haunted by the scene of his sudden parting until we rise up in the strength of a vision splendid to remove every vestige of segregation based on race, creed, or color!

The Reverend J. Rollins, pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church, said that

I recall nights, mornings and noon hours of sitting in the Fellowship Hall of the Ebenezer Methodist Church when this man gave himself... If someone was needed at the jail to sign bonds, or to be confronted with inhuman acts and statements that were intended to dampen, if not kill, the spirit of people, Romeo was one who worked and exposed himself to just that, while others were enjoying the comforts of home and the fat of his labor. He

died in the act! This is not a time for speech making, but a time for acting that this man shall not have died in vain! God give us more men to stand for what they believe, regardless of consequences!

After the service, Romeo was buried in the family plot at Powder Mill Cemetery.

Romeo's life and his work as an attorney were affirmed on December 14, 1960, when the Court of Criminal Appeals of Texas reversed and dismissed the convictions of the sit-in students. And in April 1961 the following recognition was awarded to Romeo posthumously:

Bishop College
Marshall, Texas

Distinguished Service Award

To all to whom these presents may come, Greeting
In Recognition of the distinguished service of

ROMEO MARCUS WILLIAMS

in the area of improving human relations through the achievement
of freedom, equality, and human dignity,

Bishop College makes this Award and proudly presents the Alumni Key

Done at Marshall, Texas this 14th day April

Founder's Week, 1961

Milton K. Curry, President