

This '237' Retiree Served Both King and Country

By DAVID SIMS | Posted: Monday, March 26, 2012 3:00 pm

Few civil servants can claim to have as fascinating a backstory as Dabney Montgomery, a Housing Authority retiree who served as a Tuskegee Airman in World War II and as Martin Luther King Jr.'s bodyguard on the historic march from Selma to Montgomery.

In addition to his groundbreaking service in the war and his participation in the civil-rights movement, Mr. Montgomery served the city for 33 years, first as a Social Service Investigator in the Department of Social Services, then as a Housing Assistant at the HA, retiring in 1988.

A Visit to White House

While his life took him around the world, he said some of his fondest memories were working with Section 8 tenants. "Anything that they needed, you were there. That's what a Housing Assistant is. I enjoyed that very much," he said in an interview at his house in Harlem.

He was one of the 18 surviving Tuskegee Airmen invited to the White House to meet with President Obama for a screening of the recent film "Red Tails," which dramatizes the story of the first African-American aviators in the U.S. armed forces.

An active member of Teamsters Local 237's retiree division, Mr. Montgomery was first reported on by Nancy B. True in the division's monthly News & Views newsletter. He was born in Selma, Alabama in 1923.

He worked in the supply group for the Tuskegee Airmen from 1943 to 1945, starting at the age of 20, and helped supply pilots with food and clothing at their base in Italy.

The airmen (the 332nd Fighter Group and 477th Bomber Group of the U.S. Army Air Corps) were a segregated unit that became well-known for its high levels of success in escorting bombers on missions in Europe. That success is credited towards the desegregation of the military in 1948.

Mr. Montgomery recalled the tough resolve of the airmen in the face of racial adversity and the European theater of war, as well as unexpected events like the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1944.

'Dust Falling, Germans Shooting'

"We put on gas masks, and it was dark for 12 hours," he recalled in an interview at his home in Harlem. "Imagine, the dust coming down, the Germans shooting...and the War Department stating that Negroes can't fight."

After completing his military duty, Mr. Montgomery recalled returning to America and being forced, while wearing his uniform, to enter a train station in Atlanta through a segregated entrance, reminding him of how little had changed despite his service.

An attempt to register to vote in Selma was also rebuffed—African-Americans needed to have three forms signed by whites and had to own \$1,000 worth of property to get voting access.

From there Mr. Montgomery took a long, circuitous route to working as a civil servant in New York City. He studied religion at Livingston College in North Carolina, then took up studying classical ballet in Boston at the age of 30 before breaking his left foot.

Returning in a Different Role

He later journeyed through Europe and Africa, as a tourist rather than a soldier, visiting occupied Germany as well as Egypt, Turkey and Greece, before ending up in New York, where he has lived since.

He started as a Social Service Investigator, but Mr. Montgomery fondly recalled his work as a Housing Assistant at HA, where he helped preside over the inception of the Section 8 housing program in New York City.

“Section 8 started in my unit with 20 of us, when it was introduced to New York,” he said. “You’d look after tenants’ problems. If they didn’t pay rent, you went out and encouraged them to pay rent. If they had a problem, you went out and helped them with a problem. You were there to give them aid.”

Mr. Montgomery is still active in the Local 237 retiree chapter, as well as his church group, where he has worked with youths for 50 years. Although he has no children of his own, he said he keeps in contact with many of the 2,000 children he’s worked with over the years at the church.

“They call me Uncle Dabs,” he said. “The first kids that I worked with now have gray hair, are retired, and are grandparents. The minister of my church was in my Sunday school class when he was 10 years old.” Mr. Montgomery has been married to his wife Amelia for 42 years.

Accompanied King in Alabama

His incredible life story would not be complete without one final twist—after being repelled by Selma’s segregation and discrimination for many years, he finally returned to the city in 1965 to participate in the legendary civil-rights struggles that are regarded as the crucial point of the movement.

He took part in Martin Luther King’s historic march from Selma to Montgomery, working as one of his 24 bodyguards to counter the frequent death threats the reverend had received.

He has removed and framed the heels of his shoes from the march, as well as an address book featuring the names of Dr. King and his wife Coretta. Thinking back on the adversity he remembered encountering in Selma in his younger years, he recalled visiting more recently.

“Now, the Mayor of Selma is a black man,” he chuckled. “And guess who sits behind that voter

registration desk? A black woman who weighs about 220 pounds!” The message he takes from that, and from his life story, is that “the truth will win,” he said.

Meeting President Obama served as a fitting capstone to both that sentiment and his life, he added. Not that Mr. Montgomery plans to go anywhere anytime soon. “Other than my heart condition, my high blood pressure, my prostate and being 89, I’m fine!”