

P-51 flyover a final farewell for a Tuskegee Airman

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As a final farewell gesture for Marion Rodgers, a formation of P-51 Mustangs, the peerless World War II long-range fighter-bombers, flew over his memorial service Wednesday in Colorado Springs.

It was a fitting tribute for one of the last of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first black aviators in the U.S. armed forces who trained in Tuskegee, Ala. They flew more than 15,000 combat sorties, were awarded 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses and helped pave the way for the integration of the military in 1948.

Among those seeing him off was his daughter, Denise Vosburgh, who cared for him in his later years

"I always felt love, respect and, finally, admiration for him," she said.

"The admiration developed later," she explained. It was not until Rodgers' twilight years that he opened up to his family, allowing his daughter to see him as an elite flier.

Vosburgh smiled as one of her father's Tuskegee companions walked up to her and shared his condolences.

"See," she said. "They are a unique group."

Two surviving Tuskegee Airmen were in the warbirds overhead, flying a final mission for their brother-in-arms.



The funeral of longtime Colorado Springs resident Tuskegee Airman Marion "Rodge" Rodgers was held at the Shrine of Remembrance on Wednesday, December 13, 2017. The flag from his casket is presented to his daughter, Denise Vosburgh and grandson (second from right) Ethan Vosburgh. Fellow Tuskegee Airman from the Korean War, Loran Smith, wipes a tear during the presentation of the flag. (Photo by Jerilee Bennett, The Gazette)

Rodgers, 96, died Dec. 5 in Colorado Springs, where he had lived since retiring as a lieutenant colonel after 22 years in the Air Force.

He was born Sept. 23, 1921, in Detroit. He lived with his mother in Dublin, Ga., until about age 8, when he moved with his brother to New Jersey. His love of aviation was born there while watching a damaged biplane be repaired, later telling an interviewer, "I was hooked," when he saw the plane fly.

"I think that he had a very tough childhood," his daughter said. "If it could happen to somebody, it probably happened to him."

Rodgers overcame adversity. He ran track and boxed as an amateur at Madison Square Garden.

When World War II broke out, Rodgers signed up for and was selected for flight training, earning his wings as an Army Air Forces pilot in 1944.

He flew 69 combat missions in World War II over France, Romania, Hungary and Germany with the 332nd Fighter Group. The pilots painted the tails of their P-47s and P-51s red, earning the nickname the "Red Tails," immortalized in the movie of the same name.

Rodgers went on to command the 99th Squadron and also flew B-29s in Korea, after which he worked for NASA and NORAD.

"He was ridiculously disciplined," Vosburgh said.

He and his wife, Suzanne, who died in 2013, were involved in civil rights, community activism and grass-roots politics.

From 1965 to 1985, Rodgers hosted a bi-weekly television presentation on KKTV, "Involvement," highlighting leaders and entertainers.

He ran 25 Bolder Boulder 10K races and seven Pikes Peak Ascents. His 25-foot-by-45-foot HAM radio antennae crowned his house and connected him to the world, long before the internet.

As the Wednesday morning service concluded, Vosburgh stood quietly to the side and reminisced about the final moments she shared with her father.

She smiled as she nodded, "I saw that he had no regrets."