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King High Remembers - Harlan Q. Leonard, Jr.

Harlan Q. Leonard Jr. was born on September 30, 1926 in Kansas City, Kansas as the only son of Harlan Q. Sr. and Bernice Leonard. Born with a love of flying, young Leonard would often spend hours at the airport watching the planes come and go. It was this passion that inspired him to join the United States Army Air Force to become a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first enlisted African-American aviators. It was around the military that he built his entire career and life.

Ready to start his life, Leonard graduated high school early and enrolled at UCLA. After one year there, he sensed that his country needed him and decided to join the war effort. Leonard entered pilot training at Tuskegee Army Airfield in 1944, as one of only two trainees to make the cut from basic training. However, World War II ended while he was still in training, so he returned to civilian life in 1945. Subsequently, he returned to UCLA, where he continued his education.

Leonard rejoined the military in 1948 when it became clear that the United States was heading for another armed conflict. He completed his training at Williams Air Force Base in 1949 and was transferred to the 60th Fighter Squadron at Otis Air Force Base with the task of intercepting any threats along the coastline. It was during this time when threats from Russia and its allies were of major concern. Here, he developed a love for the F 51 Mustang, and he still describes it as his favorite aircraft.

Later, he accepted an assignment at Tyndall Air Force Base, where he flew aircraft as simulation enemies to train radar controllers. He spent most of his days there flying and enjoyed it thoroughly. However, he soon saw the opportunity to nurture his second love, engineering, and went to the USAF Institute of Technology, where he received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in electrical engineering. After this, his assignments focused more on engineering rather than flying. In the midst of his education, Leonard worked as a Research and Development Project Officer dealing with nuclear weapon delivery systems.

In 1959, Leonard was assigned to the National Security Agency, or NSA, as an Electronics Engineer. In those days, the NSA was a highly classified organization, not just in their activities but in their very existence. Leonard stated himself that he, even as a military official, had not heard of them. His main duty here was to build circuits for ongoing military projects. This was perhaps his favorite job, as he would engineer a solution, instruct technicians to build it, and spend the rest of his time flying. However, he usually could not tell his family of his day-to-day activities. Nevertheless, he remained in the NSA until 1968, when he retired from the military. He had served for a total of 22 years.

Harlan Q. Leonard Jr. retired at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. As a result of his honorable service, he was awarded the Joint Service Commendation Medal in recognition of his time with the NSA. With a total of 3366 hours of flying time, he received his Command Pilot wings, representing the highest level of flying experience.

His military career as an engineer allowed him to transfer very easily to civilian life; in 1969, he applied for and received a job at IBM, following his passion for engineering. For four years, he worked as a marketing representative for computer systems. In 1973, he left his job at IBM and went to work at Bourns Incorporated, an engineering firm located in Riverside,

California. In both of these jobs, his military experience aided him greatly. He served as a consultant engineer for Bourns until 1994.

Leonard and his wife, Bertha, have been happily married for 61 years and have three daughters. In addition, they also have nine grandchildren, most of which have already graduated college. Clearly, Leonard has passed his success down to his children and grandchildren.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Harlan Leonard is his involvement with the Tuskegee Airmen. As the first inclusion of African-American pilots in the Air Force, the Tuskegee Airmen were a rarity. Before the Civil Rights Movement had even begun, Leonard and his contemporaries paved the way for racial integration in the military. Leonard mentioned that he expected resistance to this integration; however, once the initial step of inclusion had occurred, everything else seemed to fall into place. This was greatly assisted by an executive order for wholesale integration of the armed forces. Today, the Tuskegee Airmen are known worldwide as representatives of racial tolerance and equality and have been highly praised. In fact, the group as a whole was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award given to US citizens, in 2007. The Smithsonian currently possesses the official medal, but all of the airmen, including Leonard, have an official replica issued by Congress. As a member of the group's Los Angeles chapter, Leonard is often asked to attend ceremonies and other special events, such as the Rose Parade of 2010.

Harlan Leonard was a remarkable man. One could say that his life represented a change in eras, and he was certainly one of the first to take advantage of many new opportunities offered to African-Americans. He witnessed a change from intolerance to equality, and it was certainly men like him that accelerated the process of racial acceptance. Even overlooking his contributions as a pathfinder, he still stands out as a very successful engineer and soldier. When

his country needed him the most, he answered the call and joined the military; and when his society needed his skills, he contributed as an engineer. Certainly, anyone could aspire to be like Harlan Q. Leonard.