James B. Williams, 97, MLK doctor, was in Freeman Field Mutiny
Maureen O'Donnell

In an era when African-Americans were held firmly down by laws and attitudes, Dr. James B. Williams not only graduated from medical school and co-founded a Chicago clinic, he also became a Tuskegee Airman and risked his life in a World War II protest over separate, unequal facilities for black aviators.

The so-called Freeman Field Mutiny near Seymour, Indiana, occurred a decade before Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus and is viewed as a stepping-stone for the civil rights movement and integration of the armed forces.

Dr. Williams, 97, who became a physician for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Chicago and met with President John F. Kennedy to urge him to withhold federal funding from discriminatory hospitals, died Nov. 23 in Las Cruces, New Mexico, where he’d retired with Willeen, his wife of 65 years.

Dr. Williams was one of the Tuskegee Airmen arrested in the Freeman Field Mutiny, said Daniel L. Haulman, chief historian with the Air Force Historical Research Agency. The protest was organized in part by Air Force Lt. Coleman Young, later elected the first black mayor of Detroit. It also drew intervention from then-NAACP special counsel Thurgood Marshall, who would become the nation’s first African-American Supreme Court justice.

It began in early April 1945, when 61 black officers, frustrated over base segregation, attempted to enter the white officers’ club. They were barred and arrested. Within days, a commander formalized the separate clubs by issuing a
new base regulation. Dr. Williams, then a first lieutenant and engineering officer, was among 101 African-Americans who refused to sign it.

He later recalled how he responded to the signature demand, saying in a 2000 interview with the magazine at Creighton University in Nebraska, where he attended medical school, “If I don’t have the same rights as you as an officer, then I shouldn’t be one.”

For the airmen, the risk couldn’t have been higher.

“It would be accurate to say disobeying a direct order could have resulted in not only court-martial, and the maximum penalty could have been death,” said Haulman, who works at Alabama’s Maxwell Air Force Base.

“I thought that what we were doing was proper, and I figured it was the only way to approach the segregation that was throughout the military,” Dr. Williams told writer Rick Davis in Creighton Magazine.

“The news of the arrests of the black officers spread like wildfire in the black press, and the War Department came under scrutiny for inconsistent policy,” Haulman wrote in an account of the incident.

Dr. Williams told Creighton Magazine that, at his hearing, “I tried to explain to them why they would never, ever be able to fight a war with a segregated army.”

Most of the African-American officers were released with reprimands — “black marks on their records that would haunt them for many years to come,” Haulman said.

“For 50 years, there was a letter in the files,” until it was finally removed in 1995, said his daughter Brenda Payton Jones, a former columnist with the Oakland Tribune.

Twelve years later, he and other surviving Tuskegee Airmen received the Congressional Gold Medal. Fourteen years later, Dr. Williams was among the airmen who were guests of honor at the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

“It was a big risk doing what we did,” he told Creighton Magazine. “Fortunately, for the good of the country and for our good, it turned out well.”

James B. Williams was born in El Paso, Texas, and grew up outside of Las Cruces, New Mexico. His mother Clara Belle Williams graduated in 1937 from New Mexico State University, the first African-American to do so. She and her husband Jasper were teachers.

“My dad really enjoyed growing up out in the middle of nowhere and riding horses and not having to take a bath and shooting rattlesnakes,” Brenda Payton Jones said.

receiving a chemistry degree from New Mexico State University in 1947, he earned a medical degree from Creighton in 1951 and became a general surgeon.

He met Willeen Brown while training in Lincoln, Neb. “When he was leaving, he said, ‘I’ve got to go to Chicago to do my internship, and I can’t go without you,’ ” their daughter said.

In Chicago, he was the first African-American physician at St. Bernard’s Hospital, according to thehistorymakers.com, a video and oral history collection. He co-founded a medical clinic at 408 E. Marquette
Rd. with his mother and his brothers: obstetrician-gynecologist Dr. Jasper F. Williams and Dr. Charles L. Williams, an internist.

He also served as a doctor to blues giant Muddy Waters. When MLK visited Chicago, he cared for the civil rights leader. Dr. Williams “was 100 percent sure that the [home] phone was tapped because of that association,” his daughter said. “There would be a slight delay when you picked up the phone.”

In reprisal, she said, Dr. Williams would make negative remarks about FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover for the benefit of the operatives he assumed were listening in.

He met President Kennedy on a trip to Washington with the National Medical Association. His daughter said that when Kennedy shook Dr. Williams’ hand, he told him, “‘When you don’t stand up for your rights, you’ll never get them,’ which he interpreted to mean that Kennedy had been briefed” about the Tuskegee protest.

He treated everyone with dignity, said his son, Dr. James B. Williams II, a colorectal surgeon who, as a little boy, accompanied his dad on rounds at St. Bernard’s. When his father entered the hospital, he’d greet a Haitian custodian with “Bonjour, monsieur.” And thanks to the Spanish he learned in New Mexico, he could converse with the hospital’s Mexican chef. “There was absolutely no difference in the way he talked to the doctors and nurses as that janitor and the chef,” his son said.

He and Willeen Williams raised their family in Hyde Park. Summer vacations were spent on motor-home trips and fishing, sometimes at Canada’s Lake Louise. In a nod to his New Mexican upbringing, “He loved anything with chiles,” his daughter said. He also enjoyed his boat, Estrellita (Little Star), docked at Burnham Harbor.

In addition to his wife and children, he is survived by three grandchildren. Services have been held. His family scattered some of his ashes near Las Cruces on the old family land he called “the Mesa.”

Dr. James B. Williams received the Creighton School of Medicine 1999 Alumni Merit Award. He is joined by his wife, Willeen, their daughter Brenda Payton Jones and son Dr. James B. Williams II.
Air Force 1st Lt. James B. Williams, who became a Chicago physician. | Creighton University photo illustration

Dr. James B. Williams (center, in bow tie and glasses) looks on as his wife, Willeen, greets one of his patients, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. | Family photo

Dr. James B. Williams (second from left) with President John F. Kennedy during a White House visit by the National Medical Association to urge JFK to bar racial discrimination at hospitals receiving federal funds. | Family photo
Dr. James B. Williams. | Family photo