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WASHINGTON, D.C. - Today, Rep. Anna G. Eshoo commended Leslie "Les" Williams of Belmont, Calif., who was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for his service during World War II as a member of the heroic Tuskegee Airmen.

Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, attended the ceremony in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda where President Bush presented the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest honor Congress can bestow on a civilian, to Williams and some 300 of his fellow Tuskegee Airmen.

"Les Williams and the Tuskegee Airmen are extraordinary Americans who endured discrimination and injustice to serve our country with distinction during World War II," Eshoo said. "Many expected and some even hoped they would fail because they were black. Instead, the Tuskegee Airmen proved their mettle, using their skill, courage and determination to help lead America and its Allies to victory and pave the way for the integration of our Armed Forces.

"Les Williams embodies the perseverance it took to be among the elite Tuskegee Airmen," Eshoo said. "Williams passed the Air Corps entrance exam but was assigned to drive an Army truck because, as he put it, 'I had the wrong skin color.' Distinguishing himself in other ways, Williams won the backing of a general who enabled him to enter pilot training at the Tuskegee Institute. Williams went on to become America's first black bomber pilot and flew scores of training missions across the country.

"I'm grateful to Les Williams and all the Tuskegee Airmen for their service and devotion to our country," Eshoo said. "They are great Americans and they deserve to receive one of the highest honors our country can give."

The Tuskegee Airmen were America's first black military airmen. Between 1942 and 1946, 994 men graduated from the training at the Tuskegee Institute and the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Ala. By the end of World War II, 445 had deployed overseas and about 150 lost their lives in training or combat. Units trained in Tuskegee flew a variety of missions during the war including combat and escort missions over North Africa and Italy.

Williams, 87, was born in San Francisco and attended San Mateo High School and San Mateo Junior College. After the war, he attended Stanford University on the G.I. Bill and opened a dance studio in San Mateo. When he was 55, Williams enrolled at Stanford Law School and practiced law for more than 30 years. Williams and his wife, Elsie, live in Belmont.

In 2006, the 109th Congress approved H.R. 1529 cosponsored by Rep. Eshoo to award the Congressional Gold Medal to the Tuskegee Airmen in recognition of their heroism in World War II. Previous recipients of the award include George Washington, the Wright Brothers, Thomas Edison, Jonas Salk, Jesse Owens, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela and Pope John Paul II.

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