

From a White Town, a Black Hero Few Knew
By CHARLIE LeDUFF

SPOKANE, Washington— The day after his son, Lt. Col. Michael P. Anderson, died above East Texas with six other astronauts on the space shuttle Columbia, Mr. Anderson stood on his porch, shaking in the cold. [...] “This world can do nothing to him now,” said Mr. Anderson, 68.

It seems that before his son died, his accomplishments drew little attention in this blue-collar military town, population 195,000.

“It’s too bad, maybe, that we don’t pay enough attention to our heroes until their death,” said Phil Robinson, a butcher who works near the Anderson home. “I didn’t know until this disaster that he came from here. Add in the fact that he’s a black man from a very white town, and I would say we have done him wrong in some ways.” [...]

“There’s no sufficient answer as to why more attention wasn’t paid to his exploits,” said Bevan Maxey, a prominent black lawyer here. “The African-American community here is small [...]. But for those who did know him, it’s a sad day.”

Colonel Anderson had been in space before, on the 1998 Endeavour shuttle mission that docked with Mir, the Russian space station. He was the payload commander on the Columbia, responsible for nearly 100 science experiments on board.

“A few reporters came around after his first time,” his father said. “Not as many as now, since the tragedy happened.”

Spokane is a town supported by the military, government and health care industry. It is 92 percent white, 2 percent black, 2 percent American Indian and 3 percent Latino.

In this country, it is exceedingly difficult for a black person to work his way to the positions that a white person enjoys, the elder Mr. Anderson said. But the way up was not to complain, he said, but to work twice as hard.

“There’s nothing you can’t be,” Mr. Anderson said he told his son, “if you put your mind to it.” [...]

“The United States of America has many, many problems,” his sister told CNN last week. “Racism is one of them. But only in America could he have achieved what he did achieve.”

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Question

Explain the paradoxical situation of the late Michael P. Anderson to “make his way up” in American society.