



Black History Month: Our youth write about

# Heroes in the past

Stories were written and contributed by the Nutley High School students, New Jersey. (Back row) Teacher Laura Reilly, Steve Filippi, Taylor Lupo, and Anonio Prata; (Front row) Elise Trivett, Elaine Roghanian, Jenna Mundy, and Virali Dave.

## Jesse Leroy Brown: the first black aviator

By Taylor Lupo, Grade 10

In the mid-19th century, African-Americans faced extraordinary obstacles in their attempts to provide their support to the defense of American freedoms. Few had the tenacity and dedication to this cause as much as Jesse Leroy Brown, the son of a sharecropper who would grow up to become the first African-American to complete Navy pilot training and become a Naval aviator.

As a young boy, Brown excelled both athletically and academically in high school, graduating second in his class from Eureka High School in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He went on to study engineering and become a midshipman at Ohio State University at a time when few African-Americans were enrolled at the school.

In 1947, Brown became a Navy cadet, attending his pre-flight school and flight training before moving to Pensacola, Florida, the first African-American to have earned his wings. In April 1949, he received his commission as Ensign, and he joined the United Nations Force in Korea where he rose to the position of section leader.

On 4 December 1950, Brown was defending U.S. Marine forces near the Chosin Reservoir in Korea when his plane crashed. Despite efforts by fellow aviators, Brown could not be rescued and he died that day in the wreckage of his

plane. It is believed that Brown was the first black naval aviator killed in combat.

Brown's bravery earned him many awards during his life and posthumously. Upon his death, Brown earned the Distinguished Flying Cross. In 1972, the *USS Jesse L. Brown*, a *Knox* class destroyer escort, was dedicated to Brown; it was the first ship named after an African-American. Brown's many achievements have been memorialized in a biography by Theodore Taylor entitled, "*The Flight of Jesse Leroy Brown.*"

## W.A.V.E.S. impact Navy

By Virali David, Grade 9

When she was a child, Harriet Ida Pickens heard about boys turning 18 and joining the U.S. Navy. She, too, wanted to make her contribution to the military. However, Harriet was born in 1909, during a time when only men were allowed to join. However, in 1942, the U.S. Navy permitted women to be a part of the illustrious group; and on 13th of November of that year, Pickens became one of the two first black women to say that she, too, was a member of the U.S. Navy.

Pickens graduated with Frances Wills from the Naval Reserve Midshipman's School in Massachusetts. The following month, the two women were sworn in as the first African-American Navy officers. The women were also

known as W.A.V.E.S., or Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, a program where women served as nurses, office workers, warrant officers, ferry pilots, among other positions.

Pickens served in World War II and was a part of the Works Progress Administration in New York during the New Deal. She died as a result of a stroke in 1969 at the age of 60. Pickens is remembered for breaking barriers that previously had prohibited women and African-Americans from making their contributions to U.S. Navy actions around the world.

## Medger Evers: The Navy honors an Army soldier

*By Antonio Prata, Grade 11*

Unlike many other African-Americans that served in the armed forces, Medgar Evers is remembered more for what he did off the battlefield rather than on it.

Born in Decatur, Mississippi, in 1925, Evers was one of six children. After dropping out of the 10th grade in 1943, Evers was inducted in the U.S. Army with his older brother, Charlie. He served in Normandy, France, during World War II; and in 1946, he was discharged as a sergeant.

Perhaps it was being overseas and fighting for the freedom of American citizens as well as others around the world that prompted Evers to return to the U.S. and battle for the rights of his fellow African-Americans. After the war, he returned to Mississippi where he attended Alcorn College and received his degree in Business Administration. While at Alcorn, Evers married classmate Myrlie Beasley.

The couple moved to Philadelphia, Mississippi, where Evers worked selling insurance. Interested in the Civil Rights Movement that was gaining attention nationwide, 29-year-old Evers moved to the state's capital to become the first state field secretary of the NAACP. Evers' participation in the Movement was strengthened when he was denied admission to the University of Mississippi Law School, which he believed was based solely on racial discrimination.

Evers was instrumental in the local fight for Civil Rights, organizing many boycotts and nonviolent protests. His popularity drew attention from local segregationists who began to target him and his family with death threats.

Evers arrived home on 12 June 1963. Waiting outside, a short distance from Evers' home, was Byron De La Beckwith, a local white supremacist. De La Beckwith shot Evers in the back before Evers reached his front door. Evers died in front of his home.

Twice, all-white juries deadlocked on De La Beckwith's guilt before he was finally found guilty of Evers' murder in 1994, thirty years after the killing.

In October 2009, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus announced that a naval cargo ship has been named after Evers, making it the first vessel named for an African-American under Barack Obama's presidency.

## Wesley A. Brown breaks Naval Academy barriers

*By Jenna Mundy, Grade 11*

Many African-Americans made historical contributions to the U.S. Navy. One famous man is Wesley A. Brown, the first African-American to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy.

LCDR Wesley A. Brown was a student at Dunbar High School in the District of Columbia where his interest in the military contributed to his position as the Cadet Corps Battalion Commander during his senior year.

Brown's military journey began when he was nominated by N.Y. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell for admission to the U.S. Naval Academy. Although Brown was not the first African-American to enter the Academy, he would be the first to graduate, in 1949.

Brown spent the next two decades serving in the Navy's Civil Engineer Corps and spent time in Antarctica, Hawaii, Liberia, the Philippines, and Cuba. His awards include the American Theater Ribbon and the World War II Victory Medal.

Recently, the Academy honored its first African-American graduate by naming a new 140,000 square foot athletic facility the Wesley Brown Field House. The \$45 million complex features athletics, physical education, a medical facility, and personal fitness facilities.

Today, Brown remains active in the D.C. area where he continues to visit high school children as a motivational speaker.

## Dorie Miller steps up to defend injured

*By Elaine Roghanian, Grade 11*

It was 7 December 1941. The Japanese had just attacked Pearl Harbor and the sounds of wounded men pierced the air. Doris "Dorie" Miller, aboard the *USS West Virginia*, was carrying wounded sailors to safer ground when he saw the Japanese planes approaching. According to records, he bravely manned a .50 caliber Browning anti-aircraft machine gun, proudly defending his country in the face of peril. However, Doris Miller was not trained in weaponry use. Miller was a mess attendant, experienced more in food service than actual combat.

Doing something out of the ordinary was not new to Miller. In fact, he was used to overcoming obstacles, winning the title of Heavyweight Boxing Champion of his ship. It was on this ship, the *USS West Virginia*, that Miller faced the greatest challenge of his military career. The U.S. Navy's Web site ([history.navy.mil](http://history.navy.mil)) details Miller's extraordinary feats during the attack on Pearl Harbor:

When the alarms sounded, Miller left behind the laundry he was collecting and headed to his battle station: the anti-aircraft battery magazine on ship. He discovered that

a torpedo had damaged his station, so he went on deck. His large stature enabled him to carry wounded sailors to safety before he was assigned to help the mortally wounded captain of the ship. It was then that he stepped out of his position as cook and grabbed the unoccupied machine gun, shooting at the Japanese planes until he ran out of ammunition. Despite having no training with this weapon, Miller persevered, stating: "It wasn't hard. I just pulled the trigger and she worked fine. I had watched the others with these guns. I guess I fired her for about fifteen minutes."

Catherine Reef, author of *African-Americans in the Military: A to Z of African-Americans*, writes that Miller shot down at least four, and possibly as many as six, Japanese warplanes.

Admiral Chester W. Nimitz presented Miller with the Navy Cross on 1 April 1942. According to Reef, Nimitz said at the time, "This marks the first time in this conflict that such a high tribute has been made in the Pacific Fleet to a member of his race and I'm sure that the future will see others similarly honored for brave acts."

Miller's act of patriotic heroism also earned him the Purple Heart Medal, the American Defense Service Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, Fleet Clasp, and the World War II Victory Medal.

Miller was killed in the line of fire when aboard the *USS Liscome Bay* in 1943. Miller was on board during Operation Galvanic, the capture of Makin and Tarawa Atolls in the Gilbert Islands, when a single torpedo from a Japanese submarine struck the ship. The aircraft bomb magazine exploded, quickly sinking the warship in minutes. Miller was never found after the attack, and was officially presumed dead on 25 November 1994.

The Navy commissioned a frigate in honor of Miller in 1973 called the *USS Miller*. Also, the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority dedicated a bronze commemorative plaque of Miller, located in Miller Family Park on the U.S. Naval Base, Pearl Harbor.

Dorie Miller stood out among those on the *USS West Virginia*. He stepped up to help his country in its time of need; and although he wasn't extensively trained in weaponry, he stepped into the line of fire in defense of his fellow sailors and civilians.

## When logic benefits reason

By Elise Trivett, Grade 11

In the never-ending debate of logic vs. reason, intellectuals strive to point out the differences between the two. However, it is rarely debated about how logic helps reason. This is exactly the case of J. Paul Reason, whose early education enabled him to become a vast success in the U.S. Navy. In fact, Reason was the first African-American man to reach the rank of four-star admiral.

Education is perhaps the most highly regarded thing that a person can have in today's society. People all around the world do not have the opportunities to sit in a classroom

and learn about the world around them. Fortunately, Reason had a strong educational background. Son of Joseph Reason, a professor of Romance languages and director of libraries at Howard University, and Bernice Reason, a science teacher in the District of Columbia public schools, Reason grew up in an academically-oriented home, according to Catherine Reef, author of *African-Americans in the Military*. According to Reef, in his later years, Reason said, in regard to education, "With it, many things are possible. Without it, life gets much harder very quickly."

Not only was Reason's childhood focused on academics, but he also grew up loving the water, according to Reef. In his childhood, he loved fishing, swimming, crabbing and gazing at the sea, especially at family outings to Chesapeake Bay. His love of water from an early age sparked his interest in becoming a member of the Navy.

According to Rudi Williams, author of an American Services Press Release article, "Reason Is Navy's First Black Four-Star Admiral," Reason attended three separate colleges before being accepted to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD.

A favorite anecdote cited by Williams that illustrates Reason's persistence and determination takes place when Reason attempted to continue his education with the Navy in the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program. This intense program would give Reason the knowledge of the engineering behind the growing number of nuclear-powered vessels in the Navy's combatant fleet. Reason was interviewed by Admiral Hyman Rickover, known as the "father" of the nuclear Navy, for a seat in the class. Rickover insisted that Reason raise his class standing twenty ranks before he could be accepted into the program. Reason refused, stating that he could not make this promise, as he had no control over the study habits and grades of the other students ahead of him. Rickover insisted that he make the promise, but Reason again refused despite thinking that this was an ultimatum. The next day, Reason discovered that he was, in fact, accepted into the program.

Throughout his career, Reason served in various parts of the world and was promoted several times, each time gaining more responsibility. In December 1996, he became the first African-American four-star admiral and was given command of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet. In addition to earning many military awards, he also served as a military aide to President Jimmy Carter for two years.

And the "voice" of Reason echoes in the Academy. In 1990, Reason's son, Joseph, graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy; and it is believed that they are the first African-American father and son to graduate from the Academy.

*Editor's Note: We would like to thank the teacher and students of the Nutley High School, New Jersey, who have contributed to this month's featured article.*