



Jesse LeRoy Brown

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by Victoria McAfee

A Man of Courage and Commitment

Jesse LeRoy Brown was the first African-American aviator in the U.S. Navy and the first African-American naval officer killed in the Korean War at the young age of 24.

On October 13, 1926, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Jesse was born to Julia and John Brown. He grew up, along with his six brothers and sisters, in a strong Christian family. Brown's mother taught regular school and Sunday school while his father served as a deacon in the small Baptist church they attended. Both sang in the church choir, and as soon as Brown became of age he joined his parents—he loved to sing. His parents strongly encouraged schooling and homework, so Brown and his siblings walked three miles to school each day.

The family also believed in hard work. They all pitched in harvesting corn and picking cotton. Those who knew Brown during his youth described him as witty but serious and intelligent. He was very athletic and a member of the school basketball, football, and track and field teams.

However, Brown's dream from a very young age was to fly an airplane. When he was six years old, his father took him to an air show, and Brown often visited a dirt airfield near his home, where he would wave his straw hat at the pilots and shout, "I'm going to be up there some day." At 13, he took a job as a paperboy for the local black newspaper, allowing him to read an article about why African-American aviators could not be in the U.S. Army Air Corps since they did not have the necessary intelligence. Brown was so upset he cut out the article, pasted it on his bedroom wall, and wrote a protest letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

While still in high school, he met the love of his life, Daisy Brown Nix. They later married and had one daughter, Pamela. Daisy prayed constantly for Brown and he regarded her as one of his main supporters.

Brown graduated as salutatorian of Eureka High School in 1944 and decided to attend Ohio State University. He attempted several times to apply to the school's aviation program, but was denied because of his color. During his second year in college, he learned of a training program for pilots. Despite resistance from recruiters, Brown passed the entrance exams and enlisted in the Naval Reserve in 1946. A small monthly stipend allowed him to quit his jobs and complete the program. He made it through although he encountered overt racism and incredible opposition as the only black among the 600 airmen training at Pensacola (Florida) Naval Air Station. But in October of 1948, he was given his Naval Aviator Badge and his picture appeared in *Life* magazine.

Throughout his training and career, with each progressive step, he always gave God all the credit. After one

training, he prayed, "Lord God, I'm going to fly... like a bird... a kite." He openly declared, "I trust God and turn my case and myself to His keeping." Wherever he moved as an aviator, he and his family always found a Baptist church to attend and drew strength from the old songs, high spirited services, and the pride of the people in the pews.

Brown would soon have his courage and flying ability tested in Korea. At the end of World War II, the Korean peninsula was divided between the United States in the south and the Soviet Union in the north at the 38th Parallel. While South Korea voted to establish a democracy, the North refused, and in June of 1950, the Communist North Korean army invaded democratic South Korea. The North Koreans easily overwhelmed the South Korean Army, and the country turned to the United Nations for help. Sixteen countries sent forces to Korea, though the United States accounted for about 90% of the fighting force.

Brown was assigned to the USS *Leyte* and sent to the Korean Peninsula. He flew at least 20 combat missions before his aircraft was shot down and crashed on a mountain top in December 1950. His friend, Thomas J. Hudner, Jr., who was flying behind him, watched the tragedy from his plane. Hudner intentionally crashed his plane next to Brown's with the intention of helping his air mate. Shortly after both planes crashed, Lieutenant Charles Ward came with a helicopter to rescue both men, but they could not pry Brown out of the cockpit—his legs were pinned, and the men were not able to pull him out. Brown kept going in and out of consciousness until he slumped over and died.

Brown gave Hudner one request before he died: "Tell Daisy I love her." The night before he had written his wife a long letter repeatedly declaring his love for her, but he also attempted to bolster her faith: "Don't be discouraged, Angel," he wrote. "Believe in God ... with all your might and I know that things will work out all right. We need Him now like never. Have faith with me, darling."

Hudner escaped on the helicopter and begged his superiors to allow him to go back to the plane and at least attempt to retrieve the body, but the location was too dangerous. The Navy performed what is called a "warrior's funeral" as pilots bombed the plane two days later to keep it out of enemy hands. They recited the Lord's Prayer over the radio as Brown's body was consumed by flames.

In February 1973, the U.S. Navy commissioned a frigate the USS *Jesse L. Brown*. Daisy, their daughter Pamela, and Hudner were part of the ceremonies.

As Hudner later reflected on his fellow airman and friend, he penned these words: "Jesse Brown...made his dreams come true... won his fight, gained his wings, flew off carriers, defying those who attempted to keep a black man out of cockpits. He was gone now and certainly in heaven, a kinder place in which Jesse truly believed and had said so."

"A Christian soldier, a gentleman, a shipmate, and friend. His courage and faith ... shone like a beacon for all to see." — Quotes from Jesse Brown's shipmates.



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