

# The flight of Jesse Leroy Brown

By Patricia Wyman

My military story comes quite by accident. As I was ambling down the aisles of the Killeen Public Library, I stumbled upon a book that looked quite interesting. Although it begins in Hattiesburg, Miss. and ends in Korea, it surprisingly has a Crockett, Tex. connection.

Jesse Leroy Brown was born in 1926 in Mississippi into a sharecropping family. After excelling in high school, he and his best friend Isaac Heard, Sr. headed off to colleges of choice.

Spending two years at Ohio State, Jesse decided to enlist in the U.S. Naval Reserve. He was accepted and immediately he requested assignment in the pilot program.

Many people frowned on this request, as Jesse was a black man and no man of his race had ever been a naval carrier pilot.

After much persistence, Jesse was allowed to enter the program. Fighting racism and hatred, he earned his wings and became the first black naval aviator.

He joined Fighter Squadron 32 in January 1949 and in October 1950 they joined the Fast Carrier Task Force 77 aboard the USS Leyte to help the United Nations Forces in Korea.

Because Brown was such a superior pilot, he became a section leader, often in the command of pilots with more experience than he did. Sadly, in December 1950, Jesse's plane was hit by gunfire and he crash-landed on a slope in Korea.

Succumbing to his injuries, he was posthumously awarded the Air Medal, the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Purple Heart. Not only was he the first black naval aviator, the only one during his time, he was also the first to lose his life during the Korean War.

The Navy, in his honor, later named a ship for him: the USS Jesse L. Brown.

Only 24 years old at the time of his death, he left behind a young wife and a two-year old daughter.

The beauty of the Internet allowed me to track down Jesse's best friend, Isaac Heard in Charlotte, N.C. We

had a long talk about Jesse, his own career and Crockett. The following is what he told me:

Isaac (Ike) Heard, a teacher at Mary Allen College in Crockett recalls one Saturday, while scrubbing the floor, his radio broadcast the devastating news of Jesse's untimely death.

Heard says he still gets emotional when people speak of Jesse. Ike taught construction at the college from 1949 until 1953 and one of the projects the students made were caskets that were sold in Crockett.

He also relates a time when the president of the school was injured in a car accident and how he was not allowed medical care because of his race.

When he recovered, the president asked Ike and his students to build a hospital on the college grounds. A 20-bd facility became fully operational, not only for the students, but also for residents of Crockett.

Ike's wife Gwen, a Galveston native taught home economics at the same school. They have two children: their son, Isaac, Jr. was born in Crockett and is an Adjunct Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Ike still has the letters that Jesse mailed him and contributed a wealth of information for Theodore Taylor's biography, *The Flight of Jesse Leroy Brown*.

It is a "must read" book and I have plans to donate a copy of the book to the Crockett library in honor of my late grandfather, Gilbert Henry Wyman, Jr.

Submitted by Patricia Wyman of Harker Heights.

