



MESSAGE FROM THE VEEP



The Rescue of Ensign Jesse Brown

By Clarence M. Hatcherson

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THOMAS JEROME HUDNER, JR. was born 31 August 1924 in Fall River, Mass. His father, Thomas Hudner Sr., was a businessman of Irish descent who ran a chain of grocery stores. Thomas Jr. entered the prestigious Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1939.



Following the attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry into World War II Hudner decided to join the military. He entered **the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis** in 1943 and graduated in 1946. By the time

he was commissioned, however, World War II had ended.

After graduation, Hudner served as a communications officer aboard several surface ships. By 1948, Hudner became interested in aviation, and applied to flight school. He was accepted into **Naval Air Station Pensacola** where he completed basic flight training, and was transferred to **Naval Air Station Corpus Christi** where he completed advanced flight training and qualified as a Naval Aviator in August 1949. After a brief posting in Lebanon, Hudner was assigned to **Fighter Squadron 32** aboard the **USS Leyte**, piloting **the F4U-4 Corsair**.

JESSE LEROY BROWN was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in 1926, the son of a poor sharecropper. His home had no electricity, running water or indoor plumbing. Young Jesse Brown growing up in 1940's Mississippi also had to deal with more than his fair share of racism. However, despite all the adversity facing Brown he was inspired at a young age to be a pilot one day; his love of aviation began when he used to stare fascinated at airplanes that would fly over his head as he worked in the cotton fields.

His dream of being a pilot motivated him to do well in school and he did so well in fact that he finished second in his class at Eureka High School and was accepted into **Ohio State University** in 1944. This was a big deal for Brown because at the time most African-Americans were regulated to attending black colleges.

Brown did well in college where he studied engineering and in 1946 enlisted into the **US Navy ROTC program** in order to pursue his childhood ambition of being a pilot. At this time there had never been a black US Navy pilot and there were still plenty of people in the Navy interested in keeping it that way. Brown's own ROTC instructor at Ohio State used racial slurs against him and discouraged him from trying to be a pilot.

Despite this Jesse Brown **entered US Navy flight school in Pensacola**. He was the **only African-American** in a class of 600 students. Brown worked hard at flight school and fought through adversity like he had his entire life and was rewarded by achieving his life's



Photo # 80-G-708014 Ens. Jesse L. Brown

ambition and was issued his flight wings in October 1948. He had in fact become **the US Navy's first African-American pilot**. The following year he would receive naval officer's commission as an Ensign. By this time the new Ensign Brown had married to his wife Daisy and shortly after had their first daughter Pamela.

In 1950 **Ensign Brown** was assigned to the **USS Leyte**. In October 1950 the USS Leyte received orders to deploy to the Sea of Japan as part of the United Nations response to the communist North Korean attack against South Korea. Ensign Brown was assigned to the **32nd Fighter Squadron** flying **F4U-4 Corsairs** while assigned to the **USS Leyte**.

In late November, 1950 the communist Chinese had launched their surprise offensive against the advancing UN troops in North Korea. US Marines and the US 7th Infantry Division in eastern North Korea had found themselves surrounded and cut off by the advancing Chinese hordes in an area known as the Chosin Reservoir.

Corsairs from the 32nd Fighter Squadron swooped down low and fast and strafed every enemy position they could find in support of the soldiers and Marines on the ground. It was after one of these strafings that Ensign Brown called on his radio to say that he was losing oil pressure. Apparently during the strafing one of the enemy's guns had collected a lucky hit that knocked out his airplanes oil pressure.

The area around the Chosin Reservoir is highly mountainous and thus Brown was going to be in for a hard landing and the condition of his airplane

was going to make it only worse. Brown crash landed on the snowy



slopes of steep-mountain at about 5,300 feet in elevation. His plane broke apart on impact and his fellow Corsair pilots initially thought he had to have died in the crash. However, that was not the case as incredibly the hatch of what was left of his plane slowly opened and Brown was waving at people the other pilots to send him help. Brown didn't exit his airplane so this caused the other pilots to realize he must be either pinned in the wreckage or too injured to get out.

Brown's commander radioed in for a helicopter rescue of Brown, but in the meantime the remaining Corsair pilots had to do their best to protect Brown from the Chinese hordes that were swarming over all the hillsides in the area. The Corsairs circled Brown's wreckage and strafed any soldiers in the area. After a half hour, one of the Corsair pilots, **Lt. j.g. Thomas Hudner** decided to take matters into his own hands. Hudner became a good friend with Ensign

Brown during the year they were assigned together on the USS Leyte.

Hudner had been greatly impressed with Brown's life story as well as his flying skills. Lt. j.g. Hudner just couldn't let his good friend die alone on that hillside before the rescue helicopter arrived. It had been thirty minutes and the temperature outside was well below zero. Somebody had to help Brown or he would die before the rescue chopper ever arrived.

In an attempt to save his friend, Hudner without asking permission from his commander, decided to crash land his own plane onto the mountain. Hudner flew his plane into the wind in order to slow his descent as much as possible and then crashed onto the same hillside about 100 yards from Brown's crash site. Hudner's slower descent by flying into the wind had caused him to land his plane without it breaking fully apart like Brown's had. Years later Lt. j.g. Hudner said about the decision to crash his air plane:

"I knew what I had to do. I was not going to leave him down there for the Chinese. Besides, it was 30 degrees below zero on that slope, and he was a fellow aviator. My association with the Marines had rubbed off on me. They don't leave wounded Marines behind."

After the landing, Hudner ran over to Brown's plane to check on his condition. He found Brown still alive but near death from the cold. His hands were completely frozen and he was shivering uncontrollably. He was also in extreme pain from the crash. His Corsair's control panel during the wreck has buckled forward and smashed into his legs pinning him into the aircraft. Hudner gave Brown what extra clothing he could to keep warm and then proceeded to try to extract him from the plane. Hudner did everything he could to try and free Brown, but was unsuccessful. He ran back over to his plane and radioed that the rescue helicopter needs to bring an axe with them to help free Brown from the wreckage.

To make matters worse smoke started coming from the wreckage which threatened to engulf into flames what was left of the plane. Lieutenant Hudner left Brown to try and put out the fire by throwing snow on it which he was only able to minimize but not stop the fire with. About an hour after the wreck the Marine rescue chopper finally arrived and they had brought an axe with

them. Hudner worked with the rescue team to free Brown from the wreckage, but even with the axe they could not get Brown's legs unpinned from the wreckage.

It was approaching sunset and the Marine rescue team informed Lt. j.g. Hudner that their helicopter was not equipped to fly at night and that they would have to leave now. By this time Jesse Brown was barely conscious and the last thing he told his good friend Thomas Hudner was to tell his wife Daisy that he loved her. Hudner and the rescue team flew off and when Hudner reported back to his Captain about what happened he ordered a napalm airstrike on the crash scene of the two Corsairs. A few hours later the two crashed Corsairs were burned with napalm and the frozen body of Ensign Jesse Brown the first African-American Naval pilot was incinerated with it.

Hudner figured he would be reprimanded and his Naval career ended for crashing a perfectly fine Corsair aircraft in a failed attempt to save one



man; a black man at that. However, Lt. j.g. Hudner's command did something totally unexpected; they recommended him for the nation's highest combat award, the Medal of Honor. Additionally the deceased **Ensign**

Brown was awarded the second highest honor for combat pilots, the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Lt. j.g. Hudner was awarded his Medal of Honor on April 13, 1951 by **President Harry Truman** during a ceremony held at the White House. Among all the mostly white Americans that had congregated at the White House to award a white man the Medal of Honor was a

lone young, black female, Daisy Brown. She stood next to Lieutenant Hudner as he was awarded his medal where he relayed to her the message that her husband Jesse Brown wanted him to tell her, that he loved her.

Lt. j.g. Thomas Hudner could save himself, but not his friend. With the light fading, the threat of enemy fire all around him and Brown losing consciousness, the white son of a New England grocery-store magnate made a promise to the black son of a sharecropper: **"We'll come back for you."**



More than 60 years have passed. Hudner is now 88. But he did not forget. He has come back. Hudner, now a retired Navy captain, arrived in Pyongyang on Saturday July 20, with hopes of traveling in the coming week to the region known in North Korea as the Jangjin Reservoir, accompanied by soldiers from the Korean People's Army, to the spot where Brown died in December 1950.

Hudner hopes to bring Brown's remains home to the aviator's 86-year-old widow, Daisy, and their daughter, Pam Knight, who was a toddler when her father died.

Hudner, who turns 89 next month and is in frail health, has braced himself for what he knows will be a difficult journey. **Author Adam Makos**, who intends to make the trip the last chapter of his book about the two men, said Brown's place in history makes it especially important to make the attempt.

"He's a Jackie Robinson in many ways. He's a Joe Louis," he said. **"He's a historic figure, yet he's lying on a Korean mountainside."**

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