



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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LEROY ANDREW “BOOTS” BATTLE, Sr. (1921 ~ 2015)



2nd Lt. LeRoy A. Battle, Jr. circa 1945

LeRoy A. “Boots” Battle, Sr. was born on December 31, 1921 in Harlem, New York to Walter Battle and Margie Goldwire Battle. His parents’ families had moved North during the Great Migration from the South. He got his nickname as a toddler when he stepped into his uncle’s fishing boots one day and refused to get out of them. His parents separated the summer after his fifth-grade year. He and his mother then moved to Brooklyn, NY where they lived with his aunt and grandparents. During the Depression, he did odd jobs around beauty salons owned by his aunt and mother.

He developed his life-long interest in drumming while living in Brooklyn, where his beloved scoutmaster arranged for lessons at the Harlem YMCA. As a seventh grader, LeRoy got his own drum set, later becoming a music instructor. He attended Alexander Hamilton High School, playing the drums in the school orchestra and marching band. As a high-school senior, he played at the Three Deuces Club and ultimately joined a traveling show that took him throughout the South, where the group usually had to sleep and eat on their tour bus.

He was inducted into the military on August 25, 1943 at Camp Upton, NY. He was sent to Keesler Field (MS) for Basic Training, then to Tuskegee Institute (AL) for Aviation Cadet Training. He completed a 6-week gunnery program at Tyndall Field (FL) and Bombardier-Navigator training at Midland Army Air Field (TX), graduating and earning his wings on November 4, 1944. He was assigned to the 477th Bombardment Group, and relocated first to Godman Field (KY) and ultimately Freeman Field (IN) for advanced training, which was better suited for B-25 medium range bomber aircraft.

At Freeman Field, he took part in a peaceful protest against an unlawful order issued by the Base Commander. LeRoy was one of the first 19 of 104 Black officers arrested on April 11, 1945 for attempting to enter the illegally designated "all-White" Officers Club, an incident known as the ‘Freeman Field Mutiny’. He wrote the following about this very courageous and principled act of civil disobedience in his autobiography:

“We were very cognizant of the fact that, theoretically, because this was during wartime, we could be brought up on charges of treason, or mutiny, and consequently executed. There was a very real danger that this could happen. The idea of people taking aggressive civil rights actions was not yet established in the public mind, much less in the context of the military with its far greater restrictions on personal liberties. Bear in mind that our actions came 10 years before Rosa Parks refused to give her seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, and more than 20 years before Martin Luther King, Jr. marched on Washington. Still, we were committed to our cause, and believed that whatever the outcome, we had no choice but to proceed as we did.”

After receiving a formal reprimand (finally expunged in 1995), LeRoy was sent to Walterboro Army Airfield (SC), then to Tuskegee Army Air Field (AL), and finally to Maxwell Field (AL) for Final Clearance. He was honorably discharged from the service on October 13, 1945 and immediately enrolled at the Julliard School of Music. In 1946, he transferred to Morgan State College (later Morgan State University), where he graduated in June 1950 with a major in Instrumental Music. He went on to earn his Master of Education degree from the University of Maryland in 1961.

LeRoy taught music at the Frederick Douglass Elementary-Junior-Senior High School in Upper Marlboro, MD for 22 years and is credited with raising the profile of the Frederick Douglass Music Department by consistently leading the High School Band to first-place wins in numerous competitions. In February 2003, LeRoy was inducted into the Maryland Music Educators Association Hall of Fame.

LeRoy's first marriage ended in divorce. In 1958, he married Alice Elizabeth Holt (d. 2014) and had two children, LeRoy A. Battle, Jr. and Lisa Battle-Singleton, MD. He had one son from his first marriage, Lamont T. Battle.

LeRoy performed as house drummer at the Three Deuces and Downbeat clubs, where he accompanied Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Nat "King" Cole, Billie Holiday, Pearl Bailey, and many other notables. In addition, he played with "Tee" Carson and Buck Hill in Washington, DC and is credited with engineering Eva Cassidy's final live album, "Live at Blues Alley" in 1996. After pushing hard for desegregation, he was a drummer with the Redskins Marching Band for 17 years. He also led his own jazz ensemble, "Roy Battle and the Altones."

LeRoy was a frequent speaker with the East Coast Chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. and was among the honorees in attendance at the 2007 Congressional Gold Medal presentation by President Bush at the U.S. Capitol. Modest in speaking about his role and the danger he faced in the Freeman Field Mutiny, LeRoy is the author of *Easier Said: The Autobiography of LeRoy A. Battle*. His second book was entitled "And The Beat Goes On...Remembrances of a Cosmopolite." At the time of his death on March 28, 2015, he was the proud grandfather of five and a member of the Adams United Methodist Church in Harwood, MD.

MILITARY LOCATIONS / ASSIGNMENTS

Camp Upton, NY
Keesler Field, MS
Tuskegee Institute, AL
Tyndall Field, FL
Midland Army Air Field, TX
Godman Field, KY
Freeman Field, IN
Walterboro Army Airfield, SC
Tuskegee Army Air Field, AL
Maxwell Field, AL

CAMPAIGNS / WARS

World War II

CIVILIAN AWARDS / HONORS

Congressional Gold Medal (awarded collectively)



LeRoy A. Battle, Jr. at age 92