

A man once insulted, now exalted
In the 1940s, Midshipman Wesley Brown considered quitting every day. Now, the Naval Academy honors him.

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Looking out on the future site of a massive field house to be named in his honor, Wesley Brown, the first African-American graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, marveled at how much times have changed since he entered the school in 1945.

"I couldn't have ever conceived of anything like this," he said yesterday after a groundbreaking ceremony in his honor. "There's a certain euphoria I'm feeling now, and I haven't come back down yet. I guess I haven't had much sleep all week, just thinking about it."

Brown looked on yesterday as the academy's gospel choir sang in his honor, high-ranking Navy officials thanked him for his sacrifice and perseverance and more than 1,000 people – from family members to current midshipmen – applauded his place in history.

They all gathered around a stage next to what will become the Wesley Brown Field House, a 140,000-square-foot, \$45 million complex in the northeast corner of the Annapolis military college, overlooking the Severn River. Set to be completed in about two years, academy officials said the building would be one of the premier sports facilities in the nation.

Adm. Michael G. Mullen, who as chief of naval operations is the highest-ranking officer in the Navy, said Brown represents service to the nation "as well as anybody that has ever put on a uniform, in ways that we know, and for many of us, in ways that we don't know."

Mullen said that like other Navy heroes for whom buildings are named at the academy, Brown "has fought a war his whole life for all of us to improve what we are as individuals and to improve who we are, both as a Navy and as a nation."

Born and raised in Washington, Brown, 78, entered the academy in 1945 after five other African-American midshipmen had failed to finish their first year there. Upon arriving, he faced many of the same pressures of his predecessors, particularly a campaign by white midshipmen to "skin him out on demerits," citing him speciously for poor conduct, a messy room or unkempt uniform.

However, with the help of loyal friends and academy leaders, Brown made it through the first year and eventually graduated one year after President Harry S. Truman desegregated the military by executive order. He finished 370th out of nearly 800 graduates, gaining news media attention nationwide.

He said yesterday that he thought about quitting every day at the academy, but always changed his mind after sleeping on it.

Brown decided to enter the Civil Engineer Corps, and in his 20-year Navy career he traveled the world, designing houses, roads, wharves and plants in places as varied as Boston, Liberia, Antarctica, the Philippines and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He retired in 1969 with the rank of lieutenant commander. He lives in Washington.

Vice Adm. Rodney P. Rempt, the superintendent of the academy, said the field house would signify "equal treatment in the path that he broke for thousands of future officers."

He said that today, nearly 23 percent of midshipmen are minorities.

"The issues you faced are mostly behind us," he said. "The brigade is focused on treating each other well, on what we call dignity and respect. Back then, we didn't get it. But I can tell you, we get it now, thanks in large measure to your personal efforts on getting us in the right path so many years ago."

The academy has 272 African-American students, about 6.2 percent of the total midshipmen, and the school has graduated 1,585 black midshipmen since 1949. In past years, Navy leaders sought to increase the numbers of African-Americans at the academy, but despite aggressive recruiting efforts, many of those goals were not met. Last year, Rempt named the school's first

African-American commandant of midshipmen, Capt. Bruce Grooms.

Despite those challenges, Yasmin Sauls, an African-American and captain of the indoor track team, said she believed the academy has come a long way thanks to Brown and those after him.

"This is a momentous part of history, because this is the first building on the yard to be named after an African-American," she said at the ceremony. "This building represents the continued dedication of the academy to promote diversity. ... Congratulations, Commander Brown, and I will always appreciate the opportunity you have given me to be a midshipman and part of the Naval Academy."