

1st Black Graduate Joins Elite Group Groundbreaking Honors D.C. Resident

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When Wesley Brown first walked through the gates of the U.S. Naval Academy in 1945, a solitary black man in an all-white school, he hardly could have imagined that more than 60 years later, hundreds of people would pay him tribute by breaking ground on a building bearing his name.

Back then, he was simply interested in surviving. If the torrid Annapolis summer, the punishing physical exercise and the demands of a rigorous course of study were not enough, Brown also had to deal with the torments inflicted by bigoted upperclassmen who wanted him to fail.

Brown, a modest young man from Dunbar High School in the District, was not the first African American to attend the academy. There had been five before him, but they were all forced out. Not Brown.

"Somebody asked me once, did I ever think of quitting," Brown recalled yesterday. "I said, 'Yes. Every day.' "

But he didn't, and at age 78, the first black man to graduate from the Naval Academy secured a place in the pantheon of U.S. naval heroes yesterday.

Brown, a District resident who retired from the Navy as a lieutenant commander, joined the likes of William F. Halsey Jr. and Chester W. Nimitz, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Hyman G. Rickover with a rare honor: having a Naval Academy building named after him.

The groundbreaking for the \$45 million, 140,000-square-foot Wesley Brown Field House was a somewhat un-military affair. After a series of speeches, a motley collection of military retirees, civilian engineers, naval officers and children picked at a small pile of dirt with golden shovels as a swarm of admirers closed in to take pictures. But the Navy took it seriously. The event was attended by

Adm. Michael G. Mullen, chief of naval operations and the Navy's top officer, as well as the school's superintendent, Vice Adm. Rodney P. Rempt.

Both officers showered Brown with praise as he sat on a tent-covered stage basking in the moment. In addition to the academy honor, it was declared Wesley Brown Day in the District. ("I haven't had much sleep all week just thinking about it," he said later.)

Mullen noted that the state-of-the-art gymnasium set up overlooking the Severn River would complement Halsey Field House, an athletic facility named after one of the Navy's most famous admirals in World War II.

Mullen said that Brown, a 1949 graduate and a veteran of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars, had fought a battle of his own at the academy.

"Wesley Brown represents the service as well as anybody that put on the uniform," Mullen said. "What a heroic step, what a courageous move, and what a lasting contribution he made. . . . I think it is appropriate that this field house is named after an individual who has fought a war all his life to improve the Navy and the nation."

Now, nearly 23 percent of the academy's students belong to minority groups. Almost 1,600 African Americans have graduated since Brown took that first step, including a host of admirals and aviators, plus others such as basketball player David Robinson and talk show host Montel Williams.

Shun T. White, an African American plebe from Memphis who watched the ceremony, thought back to what he had endured during his tough first summer at the academy and compared it with what Brown went through.

"I can't even imagine," he said.

Brown's story was not particularly well known until the publication last year of Robert J. Schneller Jr.'s book, "Breaking the Color Barrier: The U.S. Naval Academy's First Black Midshipmen and the Struggle for Racial Equality." The Navy historian described the effort of a group of Southern upperclassmen to force Brown out of the

academy by piling him with demerits and ensuring that he was ostracized by his peers.

Brown, who originally wanted to attend the Army's academy at West Point, N.Y., has always played down those difficulties, and yesterday, in the presence of his wife, children and grandchildren, he did the same, only noting that he was glad to still be around.

"It doesn't happen very often to have a building named for you while you are alive," he said.