

VFW Celebrates Black History Month

America's largest combat veterans organization commemorates black veterans for their service and contributions to military history

Feb 10, 2025

NAVY NAMES NEW DESTROYER FOR WWII HERO

A Navy veteran who saved 15 of his shipmates during World War II's Guadalcanal campaign is set to have a Navy ship named in his honor. As of October 2024, the Navy had not given a timeline for the commissioning of the USS Charles J. French (DDG-142).

Arkansas native Charles French was aboard the USS Gregory (DD-82) in September 1942 when the Japanese navy attacked the ship, which sank off the northern coast of Guadalcanal. After abandoning the ship, French swam for hours through shark-infested waters while towing a raft of wounded sailors whom he brought to safety. French, known to his fellow sailors as the "Human Tugboat," died in 1956.

In May 2022, Naval Base San Diego honored French by naming a rescue swimmer training pool in his honor.

COAST GUARD PROMOTES FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO REAR ADMIRAL

Rear Admiral (Lower Half) Zeita Merchant was the first black woman in the Coast Guard's 234-year history to achieve the rank.

In April 2024, the Mississippi native was promoted and in June 2024 took command of the Coast Guard Personnel Service Center in Washington, D.C. Merchant has held several leadership roles, including commanding Marine safety units in Chicago and New York, where she became the first black woman in those positions.

FIRST BLACK NASA CANDIDATE FINALLY GOES TO SPACE

Six decades after becoming the first African American to enter the Air Force's Aerospace

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Research Pilot School, Ed Dwight became the oldest person to ever fly in space.

On May 19, 2024, Dwight took flight aboard the Blue Origin's New Shepard-25 capsule. Blue Origin, founded in 2000 by business tycoon Jeff Bezos, is a privately owned aerospace service company. After completing the first phase of the program in the early 1960s, Dwight — from Kansas City, Kansas — was not selected to be an astronaut.

NAVY COMMISSIONS SHIP NAMED FOR MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

The Navy commissioned the USS John L. Canley (ESB-6) on Feb. 17, 2024, in San Diego. The ship honors Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. John Canley, who earned the Medal of Honor during the January-February 1968 Battle of Hue in the Vietnam War.

Canley, of Arkansas, fought off multiple enemy attacks to relieve friendly forces who were surrounded in Hue. Despite being wounded, Canley was able to carry several wounded Marines to safety. Canley, who died in 2022, was presented the Medal of Honor in October 2018, four decades after his actions.

WWII NAVY VETERAN AWARDED CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL

Professional baseball player Larry Doby posthumously received the Congressional Gold Medal on Dec. 13, 2023, which would have been his 100th birthday.

The World War II Navy veteran was the first African American to play in Major League Baseball's American League in 1947. (Jackie Robinson was the first player in the National League.) Doby, originally from South Carolina, was the first player to go directly from the Negro Leagues to the majors. The Baseball Hall of Famer died in 2003.

HONORING BLACK CIVIL WAR VETERANS

In February 2024, 13 African-American Union soldiers were recognized for their service during the U.S. Civil War. For decades, their remains were buried and described as "unknowns" at Mississippi's Vicksburg National Cemetery.

Historians later identified the men, who were soldiers a part of the 1st Mississippi Infantry (African Descent). Volunteers placed U.S. flags at each soldier's gravestone on Feb. 14, 2024, 160 years after they were killed by Confederate forces in an attack at Ross Landing, Arkansas.

TUSKEGEE AIRMAN HONORED WITH STREET SIGN

Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. Ferrier White, who died in World War II, was honored in April 2024 with a street sign in Elyria, Ohio, which was placed on the corner of Maple Street and

Oberlin Road.

The Tuskegee Airman went missing over Europe's Adriatic Sea during a mission on April 5, 1945. White's remains were never recovered.

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