

THE COURAGEOUS STORY OF JESSE BROWN

BY MIKE HANNON

December 4, 1950, dawned windy and bitterly cold. The bow of the aircraft carrier *USS Leyte* cut sharply through the rolling whitecaps of the Sea of Japan. To the east, a bright slash of pink marked the boundary between the churning black water and the rising sun. On the flight deck a group of six Chance Vought F4U Corsairs, World War II holdovers, awaited the signal to launch.

Belted in the cockpit of one of the powerful fighters, Jesse Leroy Brown completed his pretakeoff checklist. That day, in the early stages of the Korean War, Brown was a 24-year-old ensign. He was born on October 13, 1926, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The son of a sharecropper and a former schoolteacher, Brown's father had taken him to an airshow when he was 6. Transfixed by the sight and sound of old Jennies and Wacos rolling and looping through the cloudless sky, Brown told a friend that he, too, would fly someday.

After graduating from high school, he enrolled at Ohio State University in the fall of 1944, majoring in architectural engineering. Brown learned that the school offered an aviation program. He immediately made an appointment with his counselor, who promptly advised Brown that his color would likely prevent his acceptance into the program. Dismayed but not discouraged, Brown insisted on applying.

Lt. Earl Dawkins, commanding the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps V-5 program, laughed when Brown expressed his desire to be a carrier pilot. "There has never been a black man even to enter selective flight training. Never!"

"Then I'd like to be the first, sir," Brown replied.

Unable to dissuade Brown, Dawkins reluctantly arranged for him to take the test. He passed easily.

In March 1947, Brown reported to the Naval Air Training Command at Glenview, Illinois. There, fate smiled on him in the person of Lt. j.g. Roland Christensen. A clean-cut Nebraskan, Christensen requested Brown as a student. Under Christensen's guidance, Brown quickly mastered the intricacies of primary training. On April 1, he soloed.

After six weeks of training at Ottumwa, Iowa, Brown reported to the naval air station at Pensacola, Florida, for basic flight training. There he came face to face with the full force of racism and discrimination as practiced at that time in the U.S. Navy. Many of Brown's classmates denigrated him with racial slurs and threats of physical violence. A few of his instructors pressured him to quit. During training, and against regulations, Brown married his high-school sweetheart, Daisy Nix. Her love and support enabled Brown to endure the hostile environment at Pensacola. And on October 21, 1948, one week after celebrating his twenty-second birthday, Brown became the first African-American to graduate from the navy's basic flight training program. He was a naval aviator.

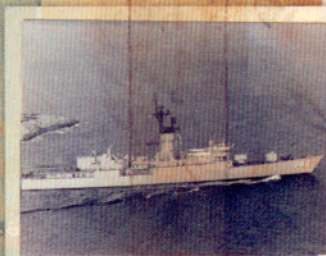
Promoted to ensign, Brown reported to Naval Air Station Quonset Point, Rhode Island, for advanced training. The change in scenery did little to relieve the discrimination. In fact, the gold bars on his shoulders and wings on his chest exacerbated the situation. Enlisted personnel refused to salute him, and some officers profanely expressed their surprise and dismay at seeing a black man with aviator wings.

Within Brown's squadron, however, things were better. Glenn Ferris, a fellow aviator, commented that few in the squadron cared about race: "We were more concerned about a man's flying ability," he said.

Flying the F8F Bearcat, Brown completed training in gunnery, formation flying, night flying, combat tactics, instrument approaches, and basic carrier work. The following April, Brown reported to Fighter Squadron 32 (VF-32) serving aboard the *USS Leyte* (CV-32). VF-32 flew the F4U Corsair, the first American fighter to exceed 400 miles per hour in level flight.

On June 25, 1950, North Korean troops stormed into South Korea, beginning the Korean War. The *Leyte*, recently transferred

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID VOGIN



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from the Atlantic Fleet, joined Task Force 77 at Pearl Harbor. The 19-ship battle group arrived on station off the northeast coast of Korea on October 9.

The *Leyte* swung its bow into the icy wind. The Corsairs of Iroquois Flight throttled up and took off. Aided by the freezing temperature and a 40-knot headwind, the powerful fighters leapt into the air. In rapid succession, Lt. Cmdr. Dick Cevoli, the flight leader; Lt. George Hudson; Lt. j.g. Tom Hudner; and Brown climbed into the frigid gray sky. Lt. j.g. Bill Koenig and Ensign Ralph McQueen followed them.

Hudner and Brown had met at Quonset Point. Two years older than Brown, Hudner was from a well-to-do family from Fall River, Massachusetts. Although there were very few blacks in Fall River, racial prejudice was neither taught nor tolerated in the Hudner household. Hudner had come to naval aviation a year after Brown, having gone directly to the fleet after graduating from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1947.

Brown had trepidations about the Corsair. He had heard of the gull-wing fighter's reputation as a "widow maker." Hudner had flown the F4U in advanced training. "That's not true," he told Brown. "It had some teething problems in the early days, but those have all been worked out. You just have to handle it like any other type you're not familiar with."

Brown still had some concerns, but the more he learned from Hudner, the more comfortable he became. "Just remember, Jesse, you are the boss up there, not the airplane. Every man a tiger, right?"

"Yeah, right." Brown replied, less than convincingly. "Every man a tiger."

Cevoli led the flight in a wide arc around the task force and set course for the Chosin Reservoir. Cruising at 220 knots, the flight made landfall about a half-hour after takeoff. Chosin Reservoir sat in a bowl just west of the Hangyong Mountains. The craggy range ran roughly north/south from Hungnam to the Russian border. With peaks reaching as high as 9,000 feet, it was a tough spot for the low-flying attack aircraft.

Iroquois Flight's targets were enemy troop concentrations advancing on the 2,900-foot airstrip at Hagaru-ri. The strip, hastily built by Marines just days earlier, enabled support aircraft to fly in supplies, replacement troops, and to evacuate the wounded. It had to be held.

An invasion force of 130,000 Communist troops had crossed the Yalu River, threatening to overrun the entire area.

Just 15,000 tired and freezing Americans stood between the invaders and the airstrip.

A few miles from the airstrip, Iroquois Flight descended to 500 feet and began a gentle sweeping turn around the western edge of the reservoir. As they roared through a snow-swept valley, Koenig, astern of the formation, noticed a thin stream of vapor pouring from Brown's Corsair. None of the pilots had noticed enemy small-arms fire. Thinking that Brown had a problem with a fuel valve, Koenig radioed, "Iroquois 1-3, you're dumping fuel."

The Chinese infantry, lacking heavy antiaircraft guns, had taken to lying down in the snow in their white uniforms, and firing barrages at the low-flying airplanes. A shot had hit Brown's fuel line.

As the flight pulled up to cross a ridge, Brown calmly replied, "This is Iroquois 1-3, I'm losing fuel pressure. I have to put her down."

Brown prepared for the wheels-up landing; he lowered his flaps and jettisoned his belly tank and rockets. Hudner called and began walking Brown through his checklist, "Lock your harness, open and lock your canopy...." Brown was too busy to reply, but Hudner saw his canopy slide back.

The rock-strewn mountainside below offered little in the way of a suitable landing site. Brown spotted a small clearing, about a quarter-mile in diameter.

The Corsair slammed down facing uphill. It skidded out of control, carving a jagged path across the frozen ground. The huge propeller and engine cowlings broke away; the nose twisted at a 35-degree angle. It took a few minutes for Brown's head to clear. He felt a searing pain in his right knee, as he desperately struggled to get out of the twisted, smoking wreckage. Something up front was burning, just inches away from 200 gallons of high-octane fuel.

Overhead, Hudner and Koenig circled the downed aviator at treetop level. Cevoli and Hudson, up high, swept the area for signs of enemy troops. They had called in other aircraft to help cover the downed pilot and a helicopter to pick him up.

Finally, Brown waved his arms overhead, signaling his squadronmates that he was alive. Relief swept through the flight.

Concerned by the swirling smoke and unable to contact Brown by radio, Hudner realized that he was either trapped in the wreckage or too injured to get out.

Hudner had a decision to make. Recently, the skipper of VF-32 had ordered that no landings be made in enemy territory to try to rescue a downed aviator. "If we lose one, that's one. We can't afford to lose two."

Hudner, fearing that Brown's airplane would explode, took matters into his own hands. He would not stand by and watch a friend and shipmate burn to death. Hudner did not seek permission from Cevoli. He just radioed his intentions, "I'm going down!"

"Roger," Cevoli responded.

With landing gear up, Hudner slammed into the concrete-like frozen snow. His windscreens, brittle from the cold, shattered on impact. He slid to a stop less than 100 yards from Brown.

"I'm pinned, Tom, I can't get out," Brown said calmly.

Hudner scrambled up to the cockpit and quickly surveyed the situation. The impact had trapped Brown's knee beneath the control panel. "Don't worry, Jesse. We've got a chopper on the way." Hudner jumped to the ground. "I'll be back in a minute, Jesse." He leaned into the cockpit of his airplane and radioed the situation to Cevoli.

"How is Jesse?" Cevoli asked.

"He's got all the heart in the world," Hudner said.

When Hudner got back to Brown, he found the injured man slipping in and out of consciousness. In addition to his badly damaged knee, Hudner figured that Brown was also suffering from internal injuries. Yet, there was no sign of pain or word of complaint from the injured flier.

Brown had been on the ground about an hour when they heard the rescue helicopter approaching. It was growing dark. Hudner talked to Brown, although there really was not much to say—but Hudner wanted his friend to know that everything possible was being done to get him off the mountain.

The chopper finally set down about 100 yards away. Charlie Ward, a U.S. Marine they had met aboard the *Leyte*, was at the controls. Ward left the chopper's engine idling, afraid that it would not restart in the freezing cold.

Now Ward and Hudner went to work. They took turns attacking the Corsair with an axe, but it was useless. There was no way to free Brown from the damaged cockpit.

Darkness was fast approaching, and the helicopter was not equipped for instrument flight. They had to get off the

mountain quickly. Above them, Iroquois flight peeled away, forced to head home as their fuel ran low.

Brown seemed to be rapidly fading away. "Cut my leg off, Tom," he said.

"I can't do that, Jesse. I don't have a knife that would do it." Hudner was heartsick. He had resigned himself to the fact that Brown was going to die. But he was determined that his squadronmate not die alone.

Brown nodded his head in stoic understanding. A few minutes later he opened his eyes, "Tell Daisy how much I love her."

"I will," Hudner promised.

Hudner and Ward, both battle-hardened veterans, wept. In the faint light remaining, they climbed aboard the idling Sikorsky for the solemn trip to Hagaru-ri.

When word of Brown's death reached the *Leyte*, a mixture of shock, disbelief, and sorrow swept through the crew. Captain Sisson, *Leyte's* commanding officer, decided to marshal whatever assets needed to recover Brown's body. But Hudner advised against it, believing that Brown would not want others to risk their lives in a symbolic act. Sisson finally

agreed. He chose, instead, to honor their fallen shipmate with "a warrior's funeral."

On December 7, seven Corsairs and Skyraiders from VF-32, all flown by Brown's friends, launched into the clear, cold sky off the coast of North Korea. Six of the airplanes carried full loads of napalm. The flight made several low passes over the downed Corsairs. Brown's body was still sitting in his airplane, just as Hudner and Ward had left him.

The six napalm-loaded airplanes climbed to 5,000 feet and dove on the downed wrecks. The seventh airplane continued to climb, reaching toward heaven in the traditional tribute to their beloved, now lost, shipmate. Someone recited the Lord's Prayer over the radio as the napalm pods exploded. Sheets of blazing red flames engulfed both aircraft and the remains of Jesse Brown.

In the days immediately following the loss of Brown, the pilots of VF-32 wondered if Hudner would receive a commendation or be court martialed. He had disobeyed an order, lost an airplane, and jeopardized the mission. Everyone understood his intentions, but they also knew that honorable intentions did not always matter. Hudner was ultimately vindicated, and on April 13, 1951, he was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Harry Truman. Daisy Nix Brown, Jesse's widow, and their daughter attended the ceremony.

Ensign Brown was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, and the Purple Heart. In 1973, the U.S. Navy launched the *USS Jesse L. Brown*, a destroyer escort. Hudner spoke briefly at the ceremony, saying, in part, "Jesse died in the wreckage of his airplane with courage and unfathomable dignity."

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