

Curator's Statement ABOUT THE EXHIBIT

This exhibit illustrates a desire to honor, remember, and to grow from the courageous experiences of Ensign Jesse Leroy Brown and the people and circumstances that impacted his life.

The struggle for equality, justice and fairness continues. Through stories like that of Ensign Brown, we learn that we are individually and collectively equipped to make a lasting difference.

This revival of the Ensign Jesse L. Brown story came about as a result of a lively discussion that took place between two deacons, Dr. Alzo Reddick and Troy Demps, on a pew in the Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church, Orlando, Florida.

Deacon Troy Demps shared his memories of serving as the steward for Ensign Jesse Brown, at NAS Jacksonville with Dr. Reddick, director of the University of Central Florida, Soldiers to Scholars Program. Dr. Reddick, a military history buff. Dr. Reddick was surprised he had not heard of the first Black Navy Fighter Pilot. He embarked immediately on an effort to get funds for a documentary about Ensign Brown and he was successful. He acquired funding from the Defense International Department at UCF. Professor Anthony Major, director of the UCF Zora Neale Hurston Institute of Documentary Studies produced the documentary and asked me to curate an exhibit.

The *A Pilot Lights the Way: A tribute to Ensign Jesse Leroy Brown* exhibit has traveled to a number of venues including the African American Military Museum, in Jesse Brown's hometown Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The exhibit was on display at the *National Naval Museum* during the momentous celebration of "100 years of Naval Aviation".

A most engaging part of this exhibit is the art of Sanford artist Carl Raphael Purdy, the first African American to open an art gallery on First Street in downtown Sanford, Florida. Purdy's artistic impressions along with contributions from Ensign Browns family and friends add very special elements to this unique presentation.

The Sanford Historical Society, the Sanford Memorial Committee, Sanford Museum curator Alicia Clarke, have been most generous and supportive. A special thanks to the family of Ensign Jesse Brown and members of his squadron VF-32 for their assistance in my efforts to compile the photographs, artifacts and information, presented in this exhibit. Thank you to Toya Flewellyn, EYEESEEIMAGES and Paula Wilson, for their beautiful graphics and to script proofers, Charles and Elaine Jones, Wilhelmina Campbell, Nancy Christensen, Thomas and Tina Flewellyn.

It is an honor and a privilege to participate in the telling of this most important story.

Most Sincerely,
Valada Parker Flewellyn, Curator