

Celebrating Iconic Black Veterans

Here are some examples of the most famous African American veterans who built upon their military service with successful second acts in civilian life

Feb 10, 2021

With more than 2 million African Americans serving in the U.S. military today, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, VFW commends their service and sacrifice in protecting our country.

Like many veterans whose military service paved a path to success in civilian life, African American veterans have used the experience and discipline they acquired in the military to attain prominent positions in the civilian world.

Here are some of the best-known African American celebrities whose contributions to popular culture and society began after their discharge from the armed forces.

Morgan Freeman

Service: Air Force

Notable for: Morgan Freeman enlisted in the Air Force in 1955, harboring dreams of becoming a fighter pilot like those he watched on film. His interest in flying led him to turn down a drama scholarship to Jackson State University in Mississippi prior to enlisting. While in the Air Force, Freeman was a radar technician and eventually rose up the ranks to airman 1st class after nearly four years.

He left the Air Force in 1959 and turned his sights back on an acting career, eventually earning his first on-screen appearance during the 1964 TV soap opera “Another World.” Freeman has since gone on to become one of the most recognizable faces and voices in Hollywood, nominated for four Academy Awards and snagging the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in 2005 for his role in Clint Eastwood’s “Million Dollar Baby.”

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Tracy Marrow, aka Ice-T

Service: Army

Notable for: Tracy Marrow, a Newark, New Jersey, native, lost both of his parents at an early age, leading him to bounce among several relatives before settling with an aunt in Los Angeles at 12 years old.

After high school, desperate for a means of income, he joined the Army to support his girlfriend and their daughter.

Marrow served for four years in the 25th Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. Marrow supported his musical interests by purchasing stereo equipment that included turntables, a mixer and speakers while serving as a squad leader.

After the military, Marrow found success as Ice-T in the early days of Hip Hop, becoming a prominent figure of the genre during the 1980s. He would win a Grammy for Best Rap Performance by an artist in 1991 before turning his sights toward acting. He's been in numerous films, which include "New Jack City" (1991), "Johnny Mnemonic" (1995) and "Mean Guns" (1997). Marrow, however, is best known for his long-time role in "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit."

Berry Gordy Jr.

Service: Army

War: Korean War

Notable for: Known as the founder of Motown Records in Detroit, Berry Gordy paved the way for what became a revered Motown sound that included pioneers of music like Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Smokey Robinson and The Temptations.

Gordy, however, spent his early life as a journeyman. He dropped out of school to pursue a career as a boxer, which was cut short after the Army drafted him to serve during the Korean War in 1951.

When his service ended in 1953, Gordy found himself an employee on an assembly line at the Ford Motor Company in Detroit. He began writing music then, which he parlayed into a career by borrowing \$700 from his father to form his own company to make and sell records.

Motown Records earned the distinguished honor of being the most lucrative and highest-earning African American business for more than 25 years. Gordy was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988 and awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Barack Obama in 2016.

David Robinson

Service: Navy

Notable for: The Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame enshrinee was nicknamed “The Admiral” during his career with the San Antonio Spurs of the National Basketball Association. Robinson, who graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, where he majored in mathematics, served in the Navy from 1983 to 1989.

Upon receiving his commission, Robinson was assigned to the Civil Engineering Corps at Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in Georgia. Besides doing engineering work, he also helped the Navy with its recruiting campaigns. The 7-foot-1-inch Robinson was drafted by the Spurs in 1987 and played for the franchise from 1989 until his retirement in 2003.

In his first six seasons, Robinson won Rookie of the Year, MVP and Defensive Player of the Year awards, in addition to a rebounding title, a scoring crown, six All-Star bids, three selections to the All-NBA First Team and three selections to the All-Defensive First Team. A contemporary of Hakeem Olajuwon and Patrick Ewing, Robinson posted career game averages of 21.1 points, 10.6 rebounds and 2.5 blocks as well as winning two NBA championships alongside fellow Hall-of-Famer Tim Duncan.

Renowned for his role as a philanthropist off the court, on March 23, 2003, then-NBA Commissioner David Stern announced that future winners of the NBA Community Assist Award would receive the David Robinson Plaque with the inscription, “Following the standard set by NBA Legend David Robinson, who improved the community piece by piece.”

James Earl Jones

Service: Army

War: Korean War

Notable for: Before voicing Darth Vader in the “Star Wars” movie franchise, James Earl Jones joined the Army in 1953 following his time at the University of Michigan, where he excelled in the Pershing Rifles Drill Team and Scabbard and Blade Honor Society. He did basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., before attending Ranger school and helping establish a

cold weather training command near Leadville, Colorado.

Although Jones considered pursuing a military career, he discharged from the Army as a 1st lieutenant and set his sights on acting. Jones' acting career is draped in success, as he was just the second male African-American actor to receive an Academy Award nomination for his work in "The Great White Hope" (1970).

He also starred in critically acclaimed movies that include "Dr. Strangelove" (1964), "Coming to America" (1988), "Field of Dreams" (1989), "The Hunt for Red October" (1990), "Patriot Games" (1992) and "Clear and Present Danger" (1994). He's received two Tony Awards, an honorary Academy Award, two Emmy Awards and a Grammy Award.

Laurence Tureaud, aka Mr. T

Service: Army

Notable for: Before pounding on Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa in "Rocky III" (1982) and then becoming one of the most beloved TV characters as B.A. Baracus on NBC's "The A-Team" (1983-1987), Laurence Tureaud found himself in the Army.

He enlisted in the Army in 1975 and served in the Military Police Corps, where he was awarded a letter of recommendation by his drill sergeant at Fort McCoy in Wisconsin and elected "Top Trainee of the Cycle" out of 6,000 troops.

After his discharge from the Army in the late 1970s, Tureaud tried out for the National Football League's Green Bay Packers, but a knee injury derailed his hopes of making the roster. The setback sent him back home to Chicago, where he used his Army police training to serve as a bouncer in nightclubs.

It was there that he began growing his "Mr. T" persona, which included the famous gold chains (a nod to all the discarded jewelry he picked up at nightclubs each night) and Mohawk hairdo. His reputation as a bouncer led "Mr. T" into being a personal bodyguard, charging \$3,000 a night to protect celebrities that included Steve McQueen, Diana Ross and Muhammad Ali.

The "Mr. T" persona was chosen for a reality TV competition for bouncers, where he eventually caught the eye of Stallone, who quickly cast him as the notorious antagonist Clubber Lang in "Rocky III."

Tureaud retired from acting after being diagnosed with T-Cell Lymphoma in 1995, although he beat the cancer after undergoing years of treatment. He currently lives in Los Angeles, where he continues to advocate for veterans and cancer survivors.

Elgin Baylor

Service: Army Reserve

Notable for: Before Julius “Dr. J” Erving and Michael Jordan wowed basketball fans with their otherworldly hang-time and athletic grace at the shooting guard position, their predecessor was doing so while fully committed to the Army Reserve.

Elgin Baylor, the Hall of Fame shooting guard for the Los Angeles Lakers of the National Basketball Association, was an 11-time All-Star and averaged 27 points, 13 rebounds and four assists per game in his 14 seasons.

Baylor’s best season, however, came in his 1961-1962 campaign while stationed at Fort Lewis in Washington. While other enlisted soldiers used their weekend passes to go back home, Baylor was driving more than 1,000 miles each weekend to play for the Lakers alongside Jerry West, whose likeness was the inspiration for the NBA’s longtime logo.

During that season, Baylor averaged a career-high 38 points, 19 rebounds and five assists in the 48 games he played. Even though the Lakers eventually lost to the Boston Celtics in the NBA finals, Baylor’s 61-point performance in game five to take a 3-2 series lead remains a single-game finals record to this day.

Harry Belafonte

Service: Navy

War: World War II

Notable for: The longtime musician, actor and activist got his start after enlisting at 19 years old in the Navy during World War II. Belafonte took advantage of his GI Bill to attend The New School for Social Research in New York City.

He used his education to delve into the music scene around New York City. This eventually led to his becoming one of the most successful Jamaican-American pop stars in history. Dubbed the “King of Calypso,” he popularized the Trinidadian-Caribbean musical style for an international audience in the 1950s.

In 1956, Belafonte’s breakthrough album “Calypso” is one of the first LP records by a single artist that sold more than a million copies worldwide. Belafonte’s wide-ranging musical talents led to his recording across an array of genres, which included blues, folk, gospel, show tunes and American standards.

He also starred in several films simultaneously, including Otto Preminger's hit musical "Carmen Jones" (1954), "Island in the Sun" (1957) and Robert Wise's "Odds Against Tomorrow" (1959).

Throughout his prominent music and acting career, Belafonte also served as a voice for the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. A close confidant of Martin Luther King Jr., Belafonte continues to stand for political and humanitarian causes. Since 1987, he has been a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and a celebrity ambassador of the American Civil Liberties Union for juvenile justice issues.

For his career, Belafonte has won two Grammy Awards, a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, an Emmy Award and a Tony Award. He was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 1994, and in 2014, he received the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award at the Academy's 6th Annual Governors Awards.

Sheryl Underwood

Service: Air Force Reserve

Notable for: Sheryl Underwood, a Little Rock, Arkansas, native, moved to Atwater, California, as a teenager, where she graduated from high school in 1981 and attended Fresno City College.

Following her college graduation, Underwood enlisted in the Air Force Reserve, where she served for two years while continuing her education. Today, she holds a bachelor's degree in liberal arts from the University of Illinois at Chicago, a master's degree in media management/mass communication from Governors State University in Chicago, and an attorney assistant certificate from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

Despite her prowess in the classroom, Underwood pursued a career in comedy, springing into the standup comedy scene by becoming the first female finalist in the 1989 Miller Light Comedy Search. From there, Underwood's comedy trajectory earned her minor roles in movies such as "I Got the Hook-Up" (1998) and "Beauty Shop" (2005) and guest spots in television programs that include "Def Comedy Jam," "Holla," "The Young and the Restless," "The Bold and the Beautiful," Fox News' "Fox and Friends," and "The View."

In 2011, Underwood joined CBS' Emmy award-winning morning show "The Talk" as a co-host. Underwood also owns and operates Pack Rat Productions, Inc., and Pack Rat Foundation for Education (PRFFE), helping raise money for students pursuing higher education at historically black colleges and universities.

Underwood's philanthropy and activism includes founding the African American Female Comedian Association, along with being a member of both the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Council of Negro Women.

Jimi Hendrix

Service: Army

Notable for: Before becoming arguably the greatest guitarist in rock-n-roll history, James Marshall Hendrix of Seattle found himself with an ultimatum. A troubled childhood and a run-in with the law led a judge to give Hendrix a choice between serving two years in prison or joining the Army.

On May 31, 1961, he enlisted and was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division out of Fort Campbell in Kentucky. Although he had enlisted for three years of service, an ankle injury during a parachute jumping exercise earned him a discharge after just one year.

Hendrix then spent several years honing his guitar skills in the U.S. before exploding on the London music scene in 1966 with his band, The Jimi Hendrix Experience.

During that time, Hendrix's career, although just a four-year odyssey of mainstream glory, propelled him into rock-n-roll lore, becoming one of the most celebrated musicians of the 20th century.

Hendrix was the recipient of several music awards during his lifetime and posthumously, which includes Grammy Hall of Fame Awards in 1999 and 2009, a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1992 and the NME Award for Most Missed in 1976.

The guitarist, known for playing his signature right-handed Stratocaster guitar upside down, was described by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland as "arguably the greatest instrumentalist in the history of rock music."

This article is part of the VFW's initiative to celebrate African-American service members and veterans in honor of Black History Month. It is featured in the February 2021 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.