

Radcliff Veterans Center Naming Ceremony

On Thursday, Nov. 9, the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs unveiled the new name of Radcliff Veterans Center.

"We are proud to announce that Kentucky's newest and most advanced veterans home will be named for Master Chief/Master Diver Carl M. Brashear," said KDVA Commissioner Norman Arflack.

The ceremony feature Carl M. Brashear family members and representatives of the [Carl Brashear Foundation](#). The Foundation has worked for several years with veterans groups in the Radcliff area to secure the name of the facility for Carl M. Brashear.

Brashear, a Kentucky native, rose from poverty to singular achievement as the first black Master Diver in the U.S. Navy. The new Carl M. Brashear Radcliff Veterans Center honors Master Chief/Master Diver Brashear's legacy.

From the [foundation's website](#):

Carl M. Brashear, 75, the Navy's first black master deep-sea diver and who later successfully fought to continue his undersea career after he became an amputee, died July 25, 2006 at the Naval Medical Center in Portsmouth, Va. He had respiratory and heart ailments.

Mr. Brashear made several efforts to interest filmmakers in his life story before Cuba Gooding Jr. played him in the 2000 film "Men of Honor." The film was generally true to Mr. Brashear's determination at work even as it overlooked his troubled marriages and alcoholism.

"I put my naval career ahead of my family life," he later said. "That's just the way it was, for better or worse."

A sharecropper's son with minimal formal schooling, Mr. Brashear joined the Navy in 1948 and endured years of racial taunts, even death threats, as he pushed ahead for what he hoped would be a glamorous diving career.

In 1966, he lost half of his left leg in a shipboard accident. After a long struggle in physical therapy and using an artificial leg, he became the Navy's first amputee diver. He retired in 1979 at the top enlisted rank of master chief petty officer.

Carl Maxie Brashear was born Jan. 19, 1931, in Tonieville, Ky. One of eight children, he left school after the seventh grade to help in his family's tobacco, corn and wheat fields. He also worked in a gas station in Sonora, Ky.

Hoping for more adventure, he tried to enlist in the Army in 1948 but was turned away -- months before a presidential order desegregating the armed forces. The Navy took Mr. Brashear but relegated him to the officers' mess.

While on an aircraft carrier in 1950, he saw a mission to salvage a fighter plane that had fallen overboard.

"A Navy diver with helmet and diving suit was sent out to the ship and went down about 50 feet to attach lines to the plane," Mr. Brashear once told a Norfolk reporter. "Everyone on ship was looking at him. No one had ever paid much attention to me. I immediately thought that diving was something I wanted to do."

He began sending letters requesting admission to the Navy salvage diving school, but his notes usually went missing or unanswered.

Although admitted to salvage diving school in 1954, he was constantly harassed by classmates, sometimes with direct threats on his life. He graduated the next year and became a salvage diver, retrieving sunken planes, ships and World War II torpedoes that he would sometimes have to detonate.

In 1960, he completed his general equivalency diploma and entered the Navy's deep-sea diving school in Washington. Mr. Brashear said he failed the school's science tests many times before buckling down and graduating in 1964.

Two years later, he was on the salvage ship USS Hoist off the southeastern coast of Spain. He was helping direct the recovery of a hydrogen bomb resting on a ledge 2,000 feet below the surface of the Mediterranean Sea; the plane ferrying the bomb had crashed in the sea.

During the recovery, a cable on the ship suddenly faltered and caused a steel pipe to tumble to the deck. Mr. Brashear shoved another sailor out of danger, but he was hit in the leg and suffered massive bleeding.

His leg was amputated at the naval hospital in Portsmouth. With support from the hospital commandant, he began a stressful physical therapy course that would allow him not only to resume his career, but also help him reach his ultimate goal of becoming the Navy's first black master diver.

He made dives in a 290-pound suit to depths of 200 feet and tended to his wounds himself to hide the severity of the bleeding.

"Sometimes I would come back from a run and my artificial leg would have a puddle of blood from my stump," he told an interviewer from the U.S. Naval Institute in 1989. "I wouldn't go to sick bay. In that year, if I had gone to sick bay, they would have written me up. . . . I'd go somewhere and hide and soak my leg in a bucket of hot water with salt in it -- an old remedy. Then I'd get up the next morning and run."

In 1967, he persuaded skeptical officials at the Navy's Bureau of Medicine to clear him for diving duty. He qualified in 1970 as a master diver.

After retiring from active duty, he spent several years involved in classified work for the Navy Department. After the biographic film came out in 2000, he was deluged with letters from amputees, and he answered them all. He also began giving inspirational lectures.

His marriages to Junetta Wilcoxson Brashear, Hattie Elam Brashear and Jeanette Brundage Brashear ended in divorce. A son from his first marriage, Shazanta Brashear, died in 1996.

Survivors include three sons from his first marriage, Dawayne Brashear of Newark, Patrick Brashear of Portsmouth and Phillip Brashear of Sandston, Va., a member of the Virginia Army National Guard now stationed in Iraq; three sisters; two brothers; 12 grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

The Radcliff Veterans Center is located at 100 Veterans Drive in Radcliff, KY.