

## Men of Honor – Carl Brashear (US Navy) and Phillip Brashear (USN, US Army)

By Gary Lehman

### **Man of Honor: Carl Brashear**

*Dive News Network* (DNN) caught up to Carl Brashear's son Phillip in Richmond, Virginia to talk about the Carl Brashear Foundation and about his father's US Navy career, his life and times and achievements. Some of our readers have seen and will remember the fine film *Men Of Honor* (2000) starring Cuba Gooding as Seaman (ultimately Master Chief Petty Officer and Master Diver) Carl Brashear, with Robert De Niro as his antagonist-turned champion Master Chief Bill Sunday, and actress Aunjanue Ellis as Carl's wife Junetta Brashear. The film did an exemplary job portraying the inspiring life of Master Diver Brashear.

And what an exalted life -- shimmering with achieving full human potential and the triumph of the human spirit! It will be a singular privilege in this article to recount Carl's life and journey. We can all draw inspiration from Carl Brashear, his intrepid determination and ultimate success in the face of multiple, overwhelming odds. His life offers a lighted pathway for us to pursue our personal

commitment to achieve maximum potential in our own lives. *Haze Gray and UNDERWAY!*



*Master Chief Petty Officer  
Carl Brashear*

Carl's historic life achievement was to become the US Navy's first African-American Master Diver, first to earn the rank of Master Chief Petty Officer -- the highest enlisted sailor position in the United States Navy. Only one percent of all enlisted sailors ever reach this pinnacle of US Navy ratings.

### **From Rural Kentucky to the US Navy**

Carl was born a sharecropper's son in rural Kentucky in 1931 at the height of the Depression, and joined the US Navy in 1948 at age 17 at the insistence of his parents. Directing their son to leave the subsistence farm where he worked the land so arduously with his brothers and family was a huge sacrifice for his parents, but their desire for Carl to have a better life impelled them to send him off to make the best possible life for himself.

President Harry Truman desegregated the US Armed Services in 1948, and while this was a major advance for racial equality providing opportunities for people of color, this legislation did little to suppress -- and actually inflamed - the pervasive racism which lived in the hearts of much of the leadership and enlisted ranks of the US Navy. The film *Men of Honor* has many searing, painful scenes depicting the racism encountered by sailor Brashear. Phillip advised during our interview that the racism portrayed in the film was a "once over lightly" for the racism that Carl experienced; it was much worse than shown in the film.



*C. Brashear with Cuba Gooding*

### **Carl Brashear's Early Life in the US Navy**

Carl loved swimming in local ponds and lakes as a youngster growing up in rural Kentucky, and he proved to be a strong, exceptionally fast swimmer. In 1950 while assigned to US Navy ship ARS-40 USS

*Hoist*, Carl witnessed the rescue of a downed pilot by a Navy diver. At that point a dream was born: Carl would become a US Navy diver. Carl's exalted reality in the Navy however, was grilling hamburgers for his shipmates aboard *USS Hoist* - a far cry from his dreams of glory in the US Navy. Working in the galley merely earned him the humiliating title of "cookie" (a mocking appellation which infuriated him and which he had to endure from his officer superiors for years). But racist name calling was the least of his concerns, compared to the abusive racism-inspired 'team building' and 'disciplinary actions' meted out to him. Worse, he received actual death threats from his shipmates who threatened to drown him; threats to that effect were posted on his bunk bed after he finally earned the opportunity to train to become a US Navy salvage diver.

### **A Day in the Life of a US Navy Diver...**

*Dive News Network (DNN)* readership includes divers, and as such we have good understanding about the complexities of deep/technical/wreck dives. We understand and internalize decompression concepts and tables; understand and manage breathing gas mixtures; master all the complicated equipment both in usage and maintenance; divers must have autonomic understanding of dive procedures; absolutely must avoid entanglement or entrapment in wreckage or other underwater structures as a matter of life and death; and must be perpetually mindful of the critical nature of timing in everything we do while diving. In short, being a technical/wreck confined-space diver is *not for the faint of heart* - considering the dual requirements of multiple task management and exceptional situational awareness. These can spell the difference between a successful dive mission or... a lonely, cold, panic-stricken death. Consider that being a US Navy diver is *orders of magnitude* more dangerous and complex than the dives we 'recreational' divers encounter. US Navy divers are assigned a variety of missions including harbor channel clearing and demolitions; experience repeated exposure saturation diving; perform underwater repair including welding and construction; engage in rescue operations including submarine crew rescue (and recovery); encounter the worst-imaginable hazardous and toxic materials and radioactive materials; Navy divers must recover live ammunition and heavy weapons ordnance from accidents and ships sinking; must provide discretionary (covert) operations support (sometimes in combat conditions). US Navy divers are considered to the premier underwater environment subject matter experts. US Navy divers are not missioned to photograph underwater landscapes, seahorses or marveling at manta ray 'fly-bys'-- they are there to successfully execute complex and inherently dangerous missions. Murphy is a constant companion to Navy (and all) divers, and the complicated and outright hazardous tasks performed combine with Murphy to create an exceptionally challenging mission set.



### **Carl Brashear: "It's not a sin to get knocked down, it's a sin to stay down..."**

Brashear was finally accepted for US Navy diver training after requesting the assignment for several years, but the rigorous training required to conduct the Navy diver mission represent a likely insurmountable obstacle for a diver with limited academic skills. K-12 schooling for an African-American sharecropper's child in rural Kentucky in post-depression America was vastly substandard. Imagine the challenge of studying the details of Boyle's Law, memorizing US Navy decompression tables, and mentally calculating diving decompression obligations – all subjects about as alien to Carl's Kentucky childhood as life on Mars! The complexity of that level of technical material is daunting for *everyone*, and much more so for an individual not accustomed to cut-throat competitive exams. When Brashear

showed up to the US Navy Diving School in picturesque Bayonne, New Jersey, his academic challenges were only one of multiple strikes against him, which taken together predicted a high likelihood of a rapid dismantling of his quest to become a Navy diver.

At this point let's consider the challenges arrayed against Carl Brashear: he was from a *poor family*, who could offer no political, social influence or economic privilege which might be leveraged in support of Brashear's experience in the US Navy. He did not have a *strong elementary or high school education*, which placed him at a disadvantage relative to all his shipmates and the Navy officers to whom he reported and who assessed his performance. And on top of these obstacles, we layer on the eliminationist shroud of *racism* in the US Navy at that point in US history.

Carl Brashear – through his personal commitment to professional and technical excellence, faith in his abilities, and steadfast courage and level-headedness under personal trial and dangerously threatening underwater situations – was not to be denied his ascent to his goal of Master Diver!

Thus, Carl's defining quote: ***"It's not a sin to get knocked down, it's a sin to stay down..."***

Brashear's challenges didn't end with poverty, scholastic challenges, and racism. These Carl overcame, and following his graduation from US Navy Diving and Salvage School in 1954 after six years in the Navy as the first African-American US Navy diver, he earned the respect and trust of his shipmates and fellow divers for his successes in his diving missions. These included recovering live ammunition from murky North Atlantic waters and recovering multiple bodies of lost Blue Angel airmen. Thus - against all odds - Carl had come up to flank speed in his Navy diving career. In 1966 however, Carl's circumstances were about to radically change for the worse...

#### **A Double-Tragedy Strikes... or, 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going...'**

The United States and the Soviet Union were at the height of the Cold War in 1966, and each country amassed massive nuclear strike capabilities delivered by bombers, submarine-launched or land-based missiles. Constant training by the crews was required to hone the skills to successfully execute a nuclear response; these exercises included air-to-air refueling of B52 jet bombers by aerial tanker aircraft. This is a dangerous venture, and mistakes can lead to tragedy. Thus, it was on January 17, 1966: a B52 bomber had a mid-air collision with a KC135 aerial tanker while refueling over the Mediterranean Sea over the coast of Spain. The KC135 blew apart, killing the four crew members and the B52 broke apart in mid-air. Three of the four hydrogen bombs fell onto farmland near the Spanish town of Palomares (causing radioactive contamination, but no explosion) and the fourth hydrogen bomb fell somewhere into the Mediterranean. After two and a half months of intensive US Navy searching, the bomb was located in 2,500' of water by deep submersible *Alvin*. Brashear was awarded the Navy's highest non-combat award – the *Navy and Marine Corps Medal* – for his courage and performance excellence in the Navy's effort to find the missing bomb. However, tragedy was to strike again. Brashear was managing the recovery crew operations topside on the deck of the *USS Hoist* while the recovered bomb was being retrieved, when a tow line broke. Brashear saw the accident about to happen and pushed a crewman out of harm's way just in the nick of time, but took the full brunt of a flying pipe which hit his left leg, shattering it in multiple places. He almost died from loss of blood on the deck. He survived, but after months of medical treatment, his left foot and leg became necrotic from loss of blood flow, and gangrene set in. The leg had to be amputated. Navy brass directed that this effectively ended Brashear's diving career - and set the stage for a medical discharge.



Master Diver Brashear with prosthetic leg

Carl Brashear was to have none of that. He wanted to continue to dive. He had his sights set on the becoming the Navy's first African-American Master Diver, and on earning the highest enlisted rank in the US Navy – Master Chief Petty Officer. In April 1968, after over two years of recovery, intensive physical training and rehabilitation, Brashear became the first amputee to be certified (actually Brashear's *second* certification) as a US Navy diver! In 1970 he became the Navy's first African-American Master Diver and one year later, achieved the highest rank of MCPO (E9). Thus, Carl Brashear overcame *yet another* (literally) crippling challenge, physical disability of an amputated leg. During the final part of his career, Carl supervised a team of divers aboard *USS Recovery* ARS-43. He was revered as a leader, and his team knew that Carl understood their job, had their back, would advocate

for them -- and keep them safe. These divers were his surrogate children while he was aboard the ship.



C. Brashear being congratulated by an Admiral aboard *USS Recovery*

### Phillip Brashear and the legacy of Carl Brashear

During DNN's meeting with Carl Brashear's son Phillip, the discussion also revealed some aspects of Carl's life which are not as well-known as his legendary Navy career. Some of these were obliquely hinted at in the film.

Despite the triumph of the human spirit which Carl marshalled to overcome poverty, illiteracy, racism and physical disability – Phillip reminds us that *his father was not a 'mythical' figure...* but was all-too human, with human weaknesses. As his father's career started to wind down in the mid to late 1970's, Carl himself started to reflect back on roads taken, and those *not* taken. He realized belatedly and with some regret that he had sacrificed his family relationships, subordinating them to his Navy diving career. There is a searing scene in the film *Men of Honor* in which Carl's wife Junetta confronts Carl in his hospital room with this insight, and sadly walks away. This may have been part of a process and turning point in their marriage, for they divorced some years later; Carl was married three times. And then there was the alcoholism. These are painful truths for us all to acknowledge about legendary Carl Brashear, but important in order to establish "Carl Brashear" as a human being. After serving more than thirty years in the US Navy, Carl passed away in 2006 at age 75. Before he passed, he successfully completed his final mission – returning to his family.

*Phillip's insight is this: the true testament and powerful legacy of the 'real' Carl Brashear – is that he was **not** a mythical god, but rather a human being who - unlike any other American hero in American history, overcame five major adversities to achieve his dreams, namely: poverty, illiteracy, pervasive racism, physical disability and alcoholism. In this light, Carl would proclaim "It's not a sin to get knocked down, it's a sin to stay down..."*

## The Carl Brashear Foundation

Reflecting back on Carl Brashear, a question surfaces: what message would Carl have for young people today? Phillip believes that Carl's answer to that question would have changed over the course of his father's life, mirroring his father's personal growth over the years. Initially, the answer would have been *"Never Give Up, and Never let anyone steal your dreams"*.

Carl never wavered from that personal commitment to excellence, and directing those close to him to expend the energy and effort necessary to achieving their individual goals. However, Carl's answer would become enriched with his additional life insights: that commitment to education, loving your family, extending a helping hand to those in your community who are in need, and calling out social injustice and abusive behavior in whatever form – are building blocks for a fulfilling life in the spirit of 'Love Thy Neighbor'. Phillip also believes that his father would enjoin young people to *look up from their smartphones now and then* (and actually speak to each other, instead of texting!).

Phillip Brashear is the President of the Foundation ( [www.carlbrashear.org](http://www.carlbrashear.org) ), and oversees extensive community outreach in various initiatives in pursuit of these objectives. Outreach includes presentations to area schools to inspire high schoolers to learn what Carl accomplished under adversity -



*US Army Reserve Chinook pilot Phillip Brashear,  
President of Carl Brashear Foundation*

and to realize that they too, can and should strive to achieve their personal best; the Foundation also makes presentations to numerous armed services teams all over the country; provides and supports human and family services to veterans and their families; delivers the message of empowerment to African-Americans through various advocacy programs and organizations. Collectively, the Foundation energetically brings the message of Carl Brashear's success against all odds, revealing the human capacity to achieve personal best to people all across our country.

## Carl and Phillip Brashear: Lightning Strikes Twice!

Phillip is Carl Brashear's son, but they also share a life experience! After graduating high school Phillip joined the Navy like his father before him, and worked as a crewman aboard Navy helicopters with a minesweeping and anti-submarine warfare mission. He decided he wanted to go to flight school, but that was not an option for him in the Navy because he did not have a college degree. After mustering out of the Navy, he joined the Virginia Army National Guard (which did not have a college degree requirement for piloting helicopters) and Phillip qualified as pilot. He flew Hueys, Blackhawks and eventually was cross-trained to fly multi-rotor Chinooks, serving in Bolivia on peacekeeping assignments, helping to build community centers, schools, hospitals and infrastructure. He also served in Bosnia as a member of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission, conducting infrastructure development, logistical and discretionary missions; and while in Iraq, performed a variety of missions including troop transport, equipment relocation, VIP transport, air assault, and discretionary missions. It should be noted that in many cases Navy divers are responsible primarily for their own well-being or small numbers of other divers on that particular mission; Phillip's "Blackhawk driver" responsibilities frequently had a different, but exceedingly high stress and danger level. For example, Phillip had to stay cool and dodge anti-aircraft fire and surface to air missiles being shot at *his* Blackhawk, and execute low-level penetrations into hostile areas (sometimes at night in snow, sleet or

dust storms) - and hoping that coalition forces would not mistake him for an incoming enemy. Sudden panic underwater will end up in a bad day for an individual... but is a horrible prospect if flying a Blackhawk with a platoon of soldiers in the back... *DNN* says 'Hats Off' to Phillip for his valorous service!

In June 2014 Phillip took the required annual instrument flying checkout certification -- and scored so highly that he celebrated by engaging in a rigorous 4-mile run the following morning! After his run, he had his annual flight physical assessment. To his surprise, he was diagnosed with a cardiac condition known as Atrial Fibrillation. Unfortunately for Phillip, A-Fib is a flight career 'show-stopper'. Army brass said Phillip's flight career was honorably concluded. But *Phillip is Carl's son*, and 'no more flying' was just *not an option*. Phillip's Army Flight Surgeon referred him to a Navy cardiologist, who during the examination, *recognized Phillip's last name*, and realized with incredulity that he had treated Phillip's father Carl some years earlier. The stage was therefore set for Phillip to follow in his father's footsteps to plan with his doctor how to somehow - *find a way* - to keep flying. And they did. The 'Frankenstein' procedure was used to shock Phillip's cardiac rhythm back to normal (*It's ALIVE!*), and Phillip still is flying those tricked-out Chinooks. With their faith and steadfast commitment to personal excellence and fulfilling their dreams, these Brashears just keep getting back up; resiliency in adversity is in the DNA of this family!



*US Army Reserve Pilot Phillip Brashear and his Chinook helicopter*

#### ***And On a Personal Note...***

Phillip remembers with great excitement the 2011 conference (attended by *Beneath The Sea* founder Zig Zighahn and Women Divers Hall of Fame members US Navy Captain Bobbie Scholley and Vreni Roduner) at the Mariners' Museum at Newport News ( [www.marinersmuseum.org](http://www.marinersmuseum.org) ), documenting the recovery of the turret of the Civil War era (Union) ironclad warship *USS Monitor* off the bottom at Hampton Roads, Virginia. (The turret is now being preserved in the Museum). Being on the Department of Defense-funded NOAA teams in 2001 and 2002 directing the salvage the *USS Monitor's* turret under heavily-heaving seas was Bobbie Scholley's most famous mission in her storied US Navy career, and involved twenty dives to 240ft on surface-supplied mixed gases to manage her team during the salvage (read more at: [sanctuaries.noaa.gov/news/features/barbara\\_scholley.html](http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/news/features/barbara_scholley.html) ).

*And of course, DNN* also asked Phillip if he or any members of his family are divers! Phillip demurred on that, but did indicate that he enjoys snorkeling. And therein, friends, is our opportunity with Phillip. He admits to enjoying warm, blue water with pretty, colorful fish -- a nice break from instrument flying through anti-aircraft fire at night in driving sleet with a load of leathernecks in the passenger compartment -- so let's collectively encourage Phillip that *if ever he decides* while on vacation to trade his flight suit for a wetsuit, and his flight goggles for a face mask and fins, we will be there for him - and gladly help him *discover our and his father's world* -- up close and personal!



*Phillip Brashear and the author, Richmond, Virginia December 2016*

*Dive News Network* and all our readership thank Phillip for his service to our nation, and for his success in bringing his father's inspiring message to new generations. Our nation pays respects to Carl Brashear – a true American and human hero -- for his determined perseverance through multiple adversities to find success and achieve his personal best and dreams.