

Meet Richard Overton, the oldest living U.S. veteran

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.10.17

Word Count **801**

Level **810L**



World War II veteran 107-year-old Richard Overton (right) from East Austin, Texas, stands up for the presentation of the colors during a Veterans Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia. Photo by: Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP

For his first 107 years, Richard Overton was not well-known. After he got older and retired from his job, he enjoyed sitting on his porch in Austin, Texas, chatting with his large circle of family and friends.

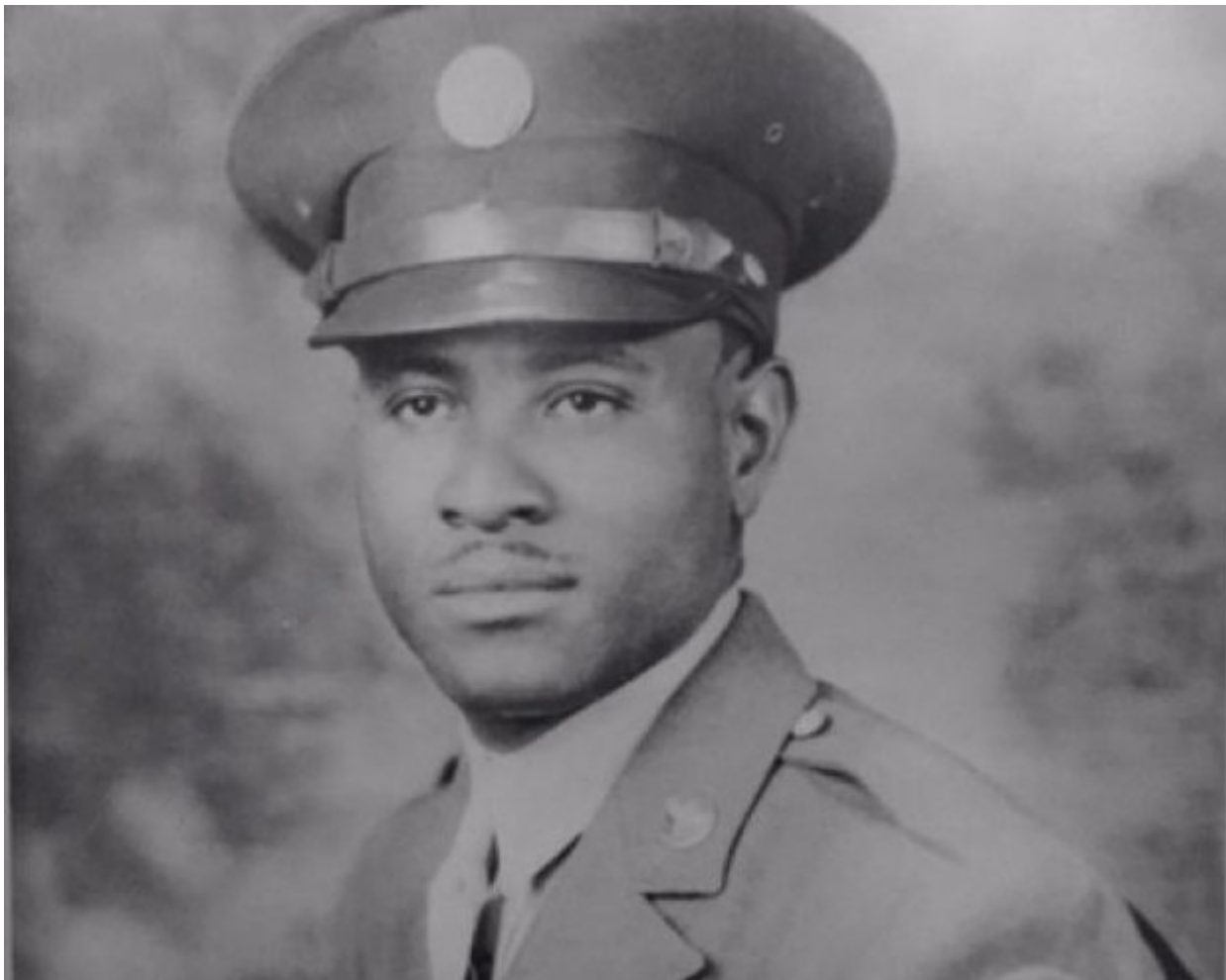
In 2013, he visited Washington, D.C., and suddenly became famous. He became known as the oldest living U.S. veteran. A veteran is someone who has served in the Army. Strangers sent gifts and thanked Overton for his military service. In early 2017, the San Antonio Spurs gave him a basketball jersey with the number 110 on it. That was his age at the time. Now, he is 111 years old and is the oldest living man in the U.S.

Volma Overton Jr. is one of Overton's cousins and visits him every day. He said that Overton likes to "spend time talking to everybody and shaking everybody's hand." Overton enjoys the fame and respect. He needs home care, but his mind is sharp, he still walks and he only recently gave up driving.

Sent To Hawaii To Fight Against Japan

Overton's ancestors were slaves on a Tennessee plantation, but were freed and went to Texas after the Civil War. Overton was born there 40 years later, while Teddy Roosevelt was president. There were almost no automobiles then. Color television was still 50 years away.

Overton was a hardworking teenager and young man. He worked as a cotton picker, home builder and sold furniture.



Overton joined the U.S. Army when he was 36 years old. This was nine months after the United States entered World War II and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. Overton's military unit was the all-black 1887th Engineer Aviation Battalion. They were sent to Hawaii to fight the war against Japan.

Richard B. Frank, a historian, explains that African-American soldiers did not have as many job choices as whites did. Most of them were forced to have supporting roles. For example, Overton's battalion built and took care of airfields, which is where planes land and take off. Overton buried the dead and was a jeep driver. But he was recognized for his expert marksmanship. He also did join some of the fighting, and remembers seeing water that was red with blood during one battle. "It wasn't easy, but I got out all right," Overton said.

Life In Austin After The War

After the war, Overton went back home. Jim Crow laws forced black people to be segregated from white people. This means they had to use different schools, water fountains and other services just because of their skin color.

Overton built his own house in Austin. He returned to the furniture business, and later worked at the state treasury. The treasury is the part of the state government that handles the state's money. His friend and co-worker Martin Wilford remembers that Overton always had a second job, such as selling fruit or cutting yards. Wilford said that Overton is happy-go-lucky and very generous.

Overton married twice, had no children and stayed in great health. At his 95th birthday party, Volma Overton Jr. said, "He moved around fast, talked to everybody."

Moved To Tears By Memorials



Overton became famous during his first trip to Washington D.C. in 2013. He was flown there by Honor Flight Austin. This is a group that flies veterans to the capital to visit memorials built in their honor.

Allen Bergeron works for Honor Flight Austin. He said he first saw Overton "sitting on his front porch with his World War II hat on." When Overton went to see the World War II and Martin Luther King Jr. memorials, they were so beautiful that he cried. As they passed by Arlington National Cemetery, Bergeron heard Overton saying to himself, "God bless those soldiers. How come them? How come I came home? Why me?"



Overton ate Veterans Day breakfast at the White House. President Obama praised Overton in his remarks at Arlington, Virginia. He admired that he held his head high in the face of racism. "His service on the battlefield was not always matched by the respect that he deserved at home," Obama said.

Since becoming famous, Overton has received help. People pay for his home costs. Home Depot and Meals on Wheels fixed up his home and set up his first air conditioner. His street was renamed Richard Overton Avenue. Back at home after being sick for some time, Overton said, "I'm still living and doing good." And, with that, he went back to chatting on his porch.