

LEON BASS

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



Leon Bass was born to Henry and Nancy Bass on January 23, 1925, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He had four

brothers—Henry, Claude, Harvey, and Marcellus—and one sister, Willabelle. Leon was aware of the prejudice and harsh conditions of Jim Crow segregation his parents faced in South Carolina before moving up North, but he and his siblings experienced little racism growing up. Leon attended an all-Black elementary school, but his middle school was integrated. Because Leon loved to read, Henry brought him the books people left on the train where he worked. Henry was a Pullman Porter, a type of railroad attendant that provided Black workers with economic stability and social prestige during an era of great inequality in employment for Black people.

In 1943, after high school graduation, Leon voluntarily enlisted in the United States Army. He was sent to basic training at Camp Wheeler in Macon, Georgia. After basic training, Leon became a member of the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion, a company of 600 Black soldiers. At this time, the U.S. military remained segregated, as in previous wars. Throughout his time in the army, Leon experienced and witnessed racism, both at the hands of his fellow, white GIs, and in the inequality that pervaded the military ranks.

Leon's battalion was sent to England, and from there to France. The battalion became attached to the Third Army, a military unit commanded by General George S. Patton. Leon's unit built bridges for soldiers, armored vehicles, and tanks to cross during the Battle of the Bulge (1944-45). Leon's battalion was then sent through Luxembourg to Germany. In April 1945, Leon

was told to drive a truck to a concentration camp near the city of Weimar. The camp, Buchenwald, had just been liberated. Leon was aware of Hitler and the Nazis, but he was not aware of concentration camps—what their purpose was, who was held there—and he was shocked by what he saw. Leon had been angry that he and other Black Americans were fighting in World War II for the ideals of freedom and equality that they themselves did not enjoy at home. As a witness to the horrors of Buchenwald and the worst manifestations of hatred, Leon was deeply moved to continue to fight against oppression in all of its forms.

After V-E (Victory in Europe) Day, Leon's unit was disbanded and he was assigned to a dump truck company in the Philippines, where he remained until December 1945. Once he returned to the United States, Leon enrolled at West Chester State College (now West Chester University). He later received his master's and doctoral degrees from Temple University. Leon became a teacher and a principal, and he helped integrate Philadelphia schools after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation. In August 1963, he participated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the historic civil rights demonstration during which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I have a Dream" speech. Leon and his wife, Mary, had two children, four grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

This interview was conducted on August 12, 1998 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.