

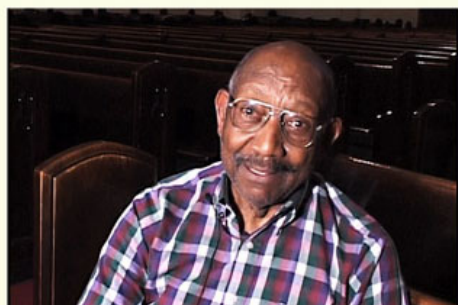


## Tuskegee Airman Dabney Montgomery & "The Force of Ethics in Civil Rights" by David M. Bernstein

I'm moved to write about Tuskegee Airman Dabney Montgomery of Harlem, who celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday on April 18<sup>th</sup>. I first met him in 2004 at the Harlem Book Festival when a friend asked him about the Tuskegee Airmen, whose cap he wore so proudly. The next year, I met him again in my role as cameraman for journalist and Aesthetic Realism Associate Alice Bernstein, when she interviewed him for "The Force of Ethics in Civil Rights," the oral history project of the not-for-profit [Alliance of Ethics & Art](#).

The project's title derives from a statement by Eli Siegel, founder of the education Aesthetic Realism: "Ethics is a force like electricity, steam, the atom — and will have its way." The project's purpose is to preserve little known history in the fight for civil rights, to document the force of ethics working in the lives of ordinary people, and to meet the urgent need in America to understand the cause and answer to racism.

Dabney Montgomery was born in Selma, Alabama when racial segregation was entrenched in the South and also in the US government and military. During World War II, black men were denied leadership roles and skilled training in the armed forces. In 1941, as a result of huge pressure from civil rights organizations, the first all-black pursuit squadron, Tuskegee Airmen, was formed. Dabney Montgomery served from 1943-45 with the 332nd Air Fighter Group of the Tuskegee Airmen, as a ground crewman in Southern Italy. Black pilots flew B-25s and P-51s marked with red tails, as escorts over thousands of bombing missions in Germany. These heroic aviators served with distinction, and never lost a bomber. They were ready to give their lives to stop the Nazis, but back in the United States, they were not allowed to ride in "white" sections of trains. Nazi prisoners of war ate in the dining cars, while African Americans had to clear out to make way for them. This injustice made a deep impression on Dabney Montgomery, and years later he said, "What I learned from Aesthetic Realism, helped me to understand what happened."



Aesthetic Realism explains that the cause of racism, and all human injustice, is *contempt*, "the addition to self through the lessening of something else." Contempt can be attractive to anyone, and Aesthetic Realism teaches us how to recognize and criticize it as the most hurtful tendency in the

**MR. DABNEY N. MONTGOMERY**  
 Decorated WWII Tuskegee Airman;  
 Ground Crewman, Southern Italy 1943-1945;  
 WWII Victory Medal, European African Middle  
 Eastern Service Medal w/ two Bronze Stars;  
 Honorable Service Medal; B. A. Degree  
 Religious Education, 1949;  
 Sphinx Club, Gamma Mu Chapter AΦA Fraternity;  
 Civil Rights Activist, Served as bodyguard for  
 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.;  
 Recipient of the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor  
 March 29, 2007  
 Entered into the Congressional Record, Washington, DC  
 as an AMERICAN HERO, June 4, 2009  
 Nominated by NY State Sen. Bill Perkins, & approved  
 for induction into the NY State Senate Veterans Hall of  
 Fame, May 26, 2012

human mind. It also teaches that real confidence and self-respect come from feeling we take care of ourselves by seeing that the inner lives of other people are as real and as deep as our own.

It has been an exhilarating personal and educational experience for me to accompany Alice Bernstein and videotape her interviews (200 to date) with unsung pioneers of civil rights in the North and in the South. The interview with Dabney Montgomery affected me deeply. It took place at the Mother AME Zion Church in Harlem—the oldest black church in New York State—where he is Church Historian.

I respect the ethical choices Dabney Montgomery made as a young man who experienced racism. As I learned about his life, I thought of myself growing up in the Bronx, feeling that, being white and Jewish, I was among the privileged. Then, in 1956, I enlisted in the Air Force, and experienced anti-Semitism. I was also horrified by the contemptuous way black Airmen were treated by Southern Air Force personnel, and I'm proud that I sometimes broke up fights. But back home, as happened before entering the service, I often got into shouting matches with people in my family. I felt ashamed of the way I

could lash out at others. It wasn't until I began studying [Aesthetic Realism](#) in 1962, that I heard the criticism that enabled my own contemptuous attitude to change. In Aesthetic Realism lessons I had with Eli Siegel, he taught me that I had to want to know the feelings, including the pain, of other people, in order to respect myself. In one class he said to me:

Eli Siegel: You've got this feeling that you are the only person who suffers?  
 David Bernstein: I felt that.  
 ES: Is it true?  
 DB: It's not true.

And Mr. Siegel gave this example: "When you can understand your mother at her most lonely and sad day, and also most angry day, you will have freedom for yourself, because we cannot be free until we are fair to the suffering of other people."

After this lesson, I felt more related to other people, and it made me kinder!

Learning about Dabney Montgomery's life gave me a greater appreciation for what people have endured. The brave choices he made in the military and at home are important to American history. In the interview, he describes his feelings in the 1960's as he watched television in Harlem, and saw John Lewis leading civil rights workers who were attacked with clubs and tear-gas while marching for voting rights in his hometown of Selma, Alabama. His decision to go home, to join that nonviolent fight, and to be a bodyguard for Dr. Martin Luther King, shows the "force of ethics." His activism has continued all these years. A video clip from this interview with Dabney Montgomery is on [YouTube.com](#), along with others, where history is told by people who helped to make it.

My colleagues in the oral history project are proud to salute Dabney Montgomery and wish him a Happy 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday! To learn more, visit [www.Allianceofethicsandart.org](http://www.Allianceofethicsandart.org)



David M. Bernstein is a noted photographer whose work is in museums, galleries, and newspapers nationwide—most recently in books published by the Museum of the City of New York—and in the permanent exhibition of the African Burial Ground National Monument. He is married to author and oral historian Alice Bernstein. The photo shown above, to the right, was taken after the interview with Mr. Montgomery for "The Force of Ethics in Civil Rights."