

# CIVIL RIGHTS ICON

More than 53 years later,  
James Meredith meets Fort Hood  
soldiers who helped protect him

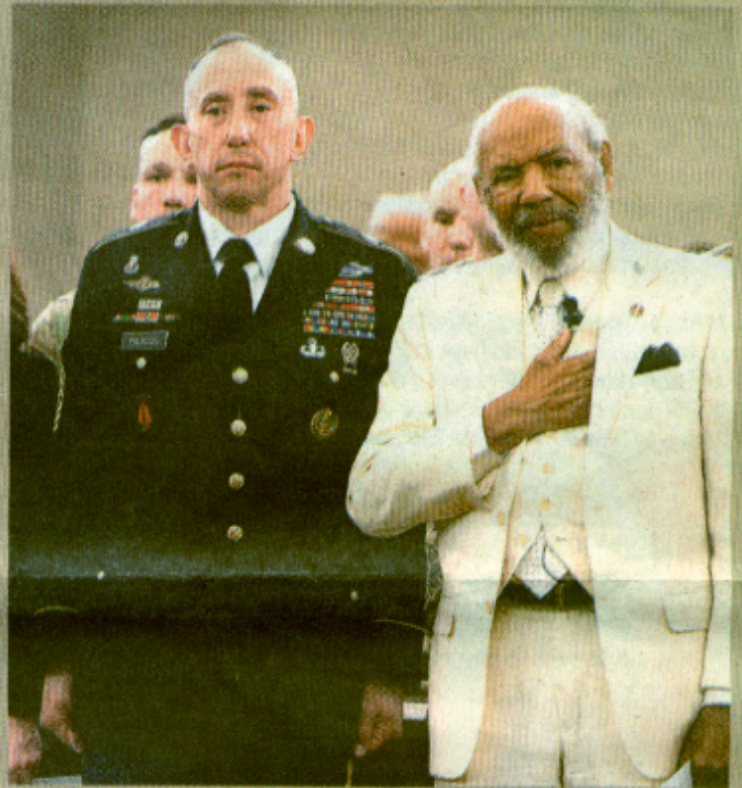
**ONLINE EXTRA:** Watch a video with this story at [KDHnews.com](http://KDHnews.com) and read more about James Meredith's visit to the post in Wednesday's Fort Hood Herald.

BY JACOB BROOKS  
KILLEEN DAILY HERALD

**F**ORT HOOD — James Meredith, whose admittance to the University of Mississippi in 1960s sparked riots in the deeply segregated South, met face to face Thursday with the former Fort Hood soldiers who were sent to the Magnolia State to protect him.

"I noticed they were all taller than me," Meredith

PLEASE SEE **JAMES MEREDITH, A8**



ABOVE: Command Sgt Maj Aldo Palacios with the 85th Civil Affairs Brigade and civil rights icon James Meredith stand during the national anthem Thursday at the opening of III Corps and Fort Hood's African-American/Black History month observance ceremony at Club Hood. AT RIGHT: Meredith leaves Club Hood after III Corps and Fort Hood's African-American/Black History month observance ceremony Thursday.



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PHOTOS BY GABE WOLF | HERALD

# **JAMES MEREDITH:** First visit

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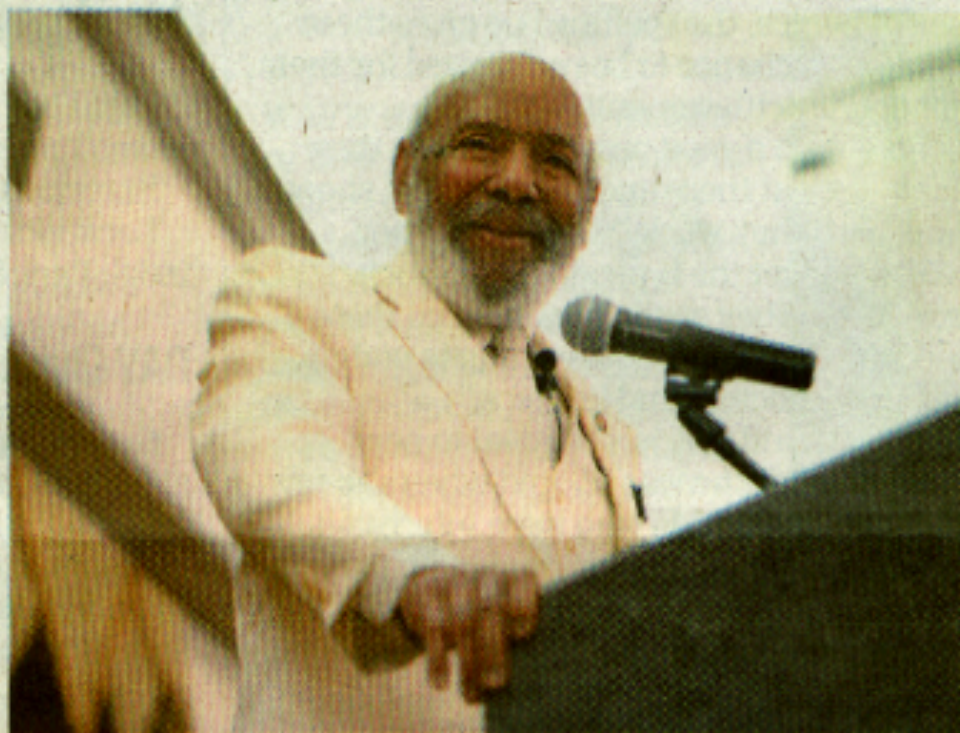
said, jokingly, after meeting three of the Army veterans, all military policemen who deployed out of Fort Hood in 1962 to help quell the riots in Oxford, Miss.

After a Supreme Court decision, Meredith was the first black student to attend Ole Miss, which brought in angry white mobs and a federal response that included hundreds of troops from Fort Hood's 720th Military Police Battalion.

Meredith, 82, said the soldiers were an everyday presence in his life as a student at the university.

"From the time I woke up to the time I left," he said.

He graduated in 1963, and later earned a graduate degree from Columbia University.



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GABE WOLF | HERALD

Civil rights icon James Meredith takes the podium as the guest speaker for III Corps and Fort Hood's Black History month observance ceremony Thursday at Club Hood.

## SERIES OF EVENTS AT POST

Meredith's visit — his first to Fort Hood — was part of a series of events at the post Thursday that began with a breakfast featuring Meredith, several veterans who deployed to Oxford and current soldiers of the 720th.

The featured guest did numerous interviews with media in the morning, and gave the keynote speech at a Fort Hood Black History Month event in the afternoon.

The veterans who went to Oxford — and had never before met Meredith personally — said the deployment 53 years ago made a big impression on their lives.

"I was born and raised on a farm," said Nebraska native George Lewis, 77. He was a 22-year-old specialist when his unit deployed to Oxford. He said he saw black people growing up when his family traveled to Omaha.

"I thought they were just like me," Lewis said. "They just had different skin color."

He didn't understand the deep racial divides that existed in the South until he saw it first hand in 1962.

Fellow veteran Bob Taylor, 73, was a corporal when the unit deployed to Mississippi. He said he enjoyed finally meeting Meredith in person.

"It's an opportunity to see somebody and meet

somebody who was part of my history" and part of the country's history, said Taylor, who after leaving the Army became an officer with the Los Angeles Police Department for nearly three decades. There, he also helped quell the Watts riot in 1965 and the riot after the police officers' acquittal in the Rodney King case in 1992.

"I see James as a person who showed great courage and perseverance for other Americans," Taylor said.

Gary Hackbarth, 77, was a private first class with the Fort Hood battalion in Mississippi. He said the riots had already started when they arrived.

"People were throwing rocks and bricks, and shouting every insult you could think of," he said, adding the soldiers were also targets.

During his speech, Meredith recognized the veterans, who received a standing ovation from the nearly 500 people — mostly current soldiers — attending the event at Club Hood.

"All three of them were stationed at Fort Hood in 1962," Meredith said. "They came to Mississippi and straightened everything out."

Meredith said his efforts to bring about social and cultural changes were shaped by his experiences in the "desegregated" Air Force, when he was an enlisted airman from 1951-1960.

"I raised hell about everything the black troops had to suffer," said Mer-

edith, adding black service members at the time had to use different gates to get on base and were only allowed to watch films at the base movie theater once a week, unlike their white counterparts.

By the time he got out of the Air Force, Meredith said he "planned to break the system of white supremacy."

## SHOT IN 1966

In 1966, Meredith was shot while on a civil rights march from Memphis, Tenn., to Jackson, Miss. The moment was captured in a photo by an Associated Press photographer, who was later awarded the Pulitzer Prize for it.

Spc. Benjamin Brooks, with Fort Hood's 13th Sustainment Command, called Meredith's speech "inspirational."

His takeaway: "Don't stop doing what you're doing if you have hurdles in your way."

Barbara Sias-Chinn, a retired colonel and current Harker Heights resident who grew up in Mississippi, said she remembers seeing a lot of news reports about Meredith when she was little girl.

"I never thought I'd see him at Fort Hood," she said. "He looks good for all that he went through."

Sias-Chinn said Meredith was an inspiration to many blacks, including herself, who were in segregated schools at the time.

"It takes people like that to make the world a better place," she said.