

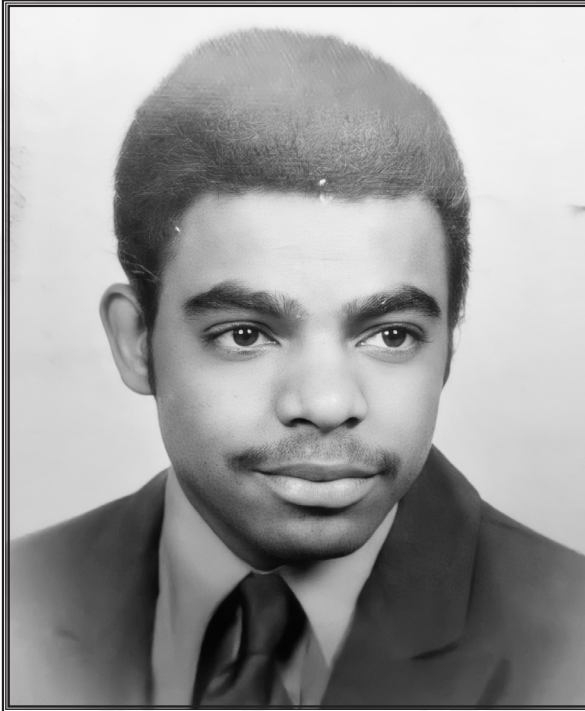
Robert Anthony Washington

U.S. Army, Specialist Fourth Class

1950 - 2020

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Tony Washington in his youth. Ancestry.com

Robert Anthony “Tony” Washington was born October 5, 1950, in Piedmont, West Virginia. He was the second oldest of a blended family of 11, cared for by his parents Leola Glendora (nee Perry) Garland and Robert “Bobby” Johnson. It was a large family to raise in a house on Piedmont’s Water Street on the North Branch of the Potomac River across from Maryland’s river bank just a stone’s throw away.

Despite being a small town of just over 2,000 residents, the Piedmont in which Tony grew up was often starkly divided along racial lines. “As much as we belonged to Piedmont, as much as Piedmont belonged to us, colored people weren’t allowed to own property, not until the 1970s anyway,” wrote eminent historian Henry Louis “Skip” Gates Jr. who was born the same year as Tony and grew up about a quarter-mile away. “Our [segregated] neighborhoods were clearly demarcated, as if by ropes or turnstiles.”

According to Gates’s 1994 memoir, *Colored People*, most of Mineral County’s Black men found employment in the West Virginia Pulp & Paper Company founded in 1888 and located across the river in Luke, Maryland.

Tony and his generation also came of age in the shadow of the 1954 landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court decision, which dismantled decades of segregation in American schools. Realizing the American promise of equality was slow in coming to Piedmont, where integrating schools was, for the first few years, more performative than sincere. “The school board had worked out all sorts of compromises to enable integration in the county to proceed,” wrote Gates. “No dating, of course, no holding hands, no dancing. Not too many colored on the starting lineup of the basketball teams. One colored cheerleader, max. ...Don’t rock the social boat.”

As a child, however, Tony still had many opportunities to grow and excel. He performed in grade

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The Red Sox were evidently little league champions in 1964. Tony is indicated in the front row. Courtesy Mary F. Shipper Library, WVU Potomac State



Tony moved to basketball during his final year of high school. Courtesy Mary F. Shipper Library, WVU Potomac State

school plays and operettas such as *The Phantom Ship* and *The Children of Old Mother Goose*. He played Little League Baseball for the Red Sox and joined Cub Scout Troop 54 alongside Skip Gates. As a teenager, Tony played basketball with the Piedmont High School Lions.

After graduating Piedmont High in 1968 Tony enlisted in the U.S. Army. Piedmont's population had been declining since 1920, and there may have been few job opportunities in the area. Some of Tony's friends, like Skip Gates,

enrolled at Potomac State College in nearby Keyser while the Vietnam War escalated, but Tony chose military service. He may have wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father who was then serving with the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam.

Tony Washington's military service formally began at Fort Knox, Kentucky, where he completed basic training with the rank of corporal in 1970. Soon thereafter, he transferred to Fort Polk, Louisiana, the "home of the combat infantryman," where he underwent jungle training and practiced clearing Vietnamese-style "hooches" in the complex's "Tiger Land" of mock villages constructed to simulate combat in rural Vietnam. By the end of the war, over a million young American men would train in the Louisiana swamp facility, which proclaimed itself "The birthplace of combat infantrymen for Vietnam."

In February 1971 Tony deployed to Binh Duong Province, known as the "communist heartland" of what was then South Vietnam. Washington

initially joined the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) at Phuoc Vinh Base Camp, located roughly 40 miles northeast of Saigon. At this point in the war, U.S. troops were being withdrawn from the country with military responsibility transferring to South Vietnamese forces in a process known

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as “Vietnamization.” Sky Troopers of the 1st Cavalry had mostly departed by the time Washington arrived, leaving its 3rd Brigade to help the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) defend the region from North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) attacks. Washington likely served with the 3rd Brigade during his deployment.



Physical training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, where Tony was first inducted. 1971 Fort Knox yearbook

Throughout 1971 the 3rd Brigade patrolled what became known as “Cav Country,” encompassing portions of Tay Ninh Province, near the Cambodian border, and extending south and east of Saigon to Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province on the South China Sea. The brigade garrisoned remote Fire Support Bases (FSBs) throughout this large region to help ARVN units patrol and combat communist forces. While these bases were often dispersed, the brigade’s air mobility allowed its various units to concentrate whenever necessary to support one another in times of danger.

On September 27, 1971, the 3rd Brigade units concentrated to launch Operation KATUM to withdraw their comrades and equipment from FSB Katum near the Cambodian border. The mission called for the brigade’s units to assemble and form a protective perimeter around the base to keep enemy forces at bay long enough to safely pull out its personnel and material. On the night of September 30, NVA forces approached the perimeter and attempted to fire upon the various helicopters and fixed-wing transport aircraft operating from the base’s airfield. The Sky Troopers called in helicopter and artillery support and fended off the assault with minimal casualties and no damaged aircraft. After five days, the operation concluded and the brigade’s units returned to their respective bases to continue garrisoning the region.

Throughout 1971-1972 the 3rd Brigade’s overall mission was to support ARVN units and help facilitate their transition to assume sole combat responsibility. This was no simple task. They conducted 638 search and destroy missions, 42 road-clearing operations, and 24 ambushes in a five-month period between May and October 1971 alone. At some point during this year, perhaps while conducting one of these missions, Washington received a wound for which he was awarded the Purple Heart. Though the nature of his injury is not a matter of public record at this time, it was enough to send him home. In 1972 the Army honorably discharged Washington and awarded him the Good Conduct Medal, as well as several other service medals and citations for his service in the Vietnam War. As a result of his discharge, Tony left the military around the same time as his father who had served for 24 years.

Washington returned to his home in Mineral County, West Virginia. Along with his father and three-dozen other local veterans he helped form a new Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter—the Aubrey and Robert Stewart Post 5959—in Piedmont. By the following year, the post had grown to well

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over a hundred members and included a Ladies Auxiliary in which Tony's mother volunteered.

In 1980 Tony's first son, Robert Anthony Washington Jr., was born. A daughter, Brea Dawn Washington, came along 10 years later. But joy was often tempered with tragedy. The veteran's half-sister, Debra, and her family perished in a house fire in 1981. And in 1998 Tony was convicted in federal court on a drug distribution charge. He was nonetheless beloved by a large family, including seven grandchildren, and lovingly described as possessing a "mischievous talent [for] making people laugh." His family and friends recall his sense of humor along with his gentleness and kindness.

Tony spent the last two decades of his life living in Clarksburg, West Virginia, with his partner, Janet Lee Jackson, and watching his large gaggle of grandchildren grow up. His father, Robert Johnson, whose footsteps Tony had followed in and out of military service, died in February 2020. Tony himself followed one more time. On November 14, 2020, he passed away at the age of 70. He is buried in the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown.



1st Cavalry troopers land by Huey helicopter for a recon patrol. US Army photo



Washington's service was acknowledged in the hometown newspaper the year before he returned from Vietnam. Courtesy Mary F. Shipper Library, WVU Potomac State

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Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354
(304) 265-2044

Section C4
Site 468

Date of interment: November 23, 2020

About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council
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