

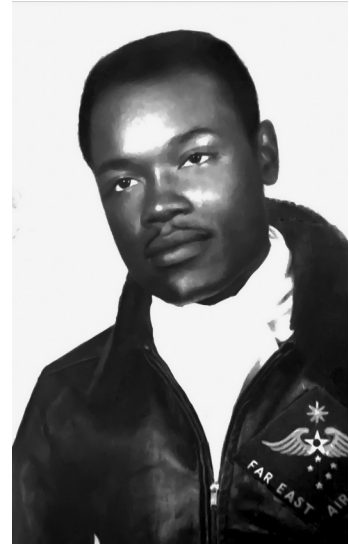


AIR FORCE

Elmer L. Mayberry Jr.

1952 – 1977

U.S., England, Germany, Japan,
The Philippines, Turkey, Thailand,
Vietnam



A Fighter's Spirit: Overcoming the Arena of Life

An Interview with Master Sergeant Elmer L. "Lee" Mayberry Jr.

By Alex Huang, Hamilton High School

The dimly lit gymnasium echoed with the rhythmic thud of leather against flesh as the Air Training Command (ATC) Middleweight Crown contender, Elmer L. "Lee" Mayberry Jr., danced tirelessly within the confines of the ring. Under the glaring overhead lights, his opponent—defending champion Frank Fason—advanced with aggression. Full of anticipation and sweat-coated energy, the ever-growing crowd clamored with each jab the boxers traded, the sounds reverberating off the walls like drumbeats. It was the final round. The score was tied.

Lee sidestepped Frank's barrage of punches with ease. A deft right hook from Lee followed, delivered with the precision of a master boxer, and sent his opponent reeling.

"Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. K.O! Our new ATC Middleweight Champion, Elmer Lee Mayberry!"

The referee's arm slashed through the air, declaring Lee's victory amidst roaring applause. This triumphant moment, like many in his career, served as a metaphor for Lee's life—a testament to his relentless spirit and unyielding determination to transcend adversity, whether during his service in the Air Force, inside the boxing ring, or throughout the arena of life itself.

Master Sergeant Elmer L. Mayberry Jr., known to us fondly as Lee, was born on February 26, 1934, in the small town of Fallis, Oklahoma, as one of nine siblings. Fallis was once a bustling small town home to many African Americans. The town was fueled by cotton and oil exports at the start of the 20th century. However, the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the decline of the railroad led to most

residents leaving by 1950. Raised in this setting, his upbringing was marked by the challenges and vibrant moments typical of a large family.

Life was not without its hurdles; living in a rural town was tough. Growing up poor, Lee often spent his summers helping out on nearby farms, hauling and transporting cotton and hay bales that weighed up to 120 pounds. He also played football and baseball. He credits this farmwork and athletics as where he developed his strength to box later in life.

One of Lee's deepest childhood memories was his battle with polio at the age of 12. Polio is an illness that inflames the nervous system and paralyzes its victims. The first vaccine was developed in 1955 and saw widespread adoption. When Lee first contracted polio, his doctor insisted that he would never walk again. Young Lee refused to accept this.

"Jackie Robinson was my hero and so was Joe Lewis and Sugar Ray Robinson too. I wanted to play baseball, and I wanted to be a world-class boxer, but I knew I wouldn't be able to if I couldn't walk," recalled Lee. While the doctor placed braces on his legs, he would take off the braces secretly every night, defiantly walking across the bedroom in desperate attempts to strengthen his doomed legs. When he went in for a checkup after a few months, his doctor was amazed that he could still walk! Lee remembers this moment vividly.

"He [the doctor] would hit my knee, and my leg would jump out. And then he was talking to my mom. He said, 'You know, I think he's supposed to walk.' Oh, and I'll never forget that. My mom—she didn't know it. And she screamed to the top of her voice when I got up and walked." Lee's fight against the figurative "knockout" of polio was an act of courage and determination that foreshadowed the resilience he would display throughout his life.

After graduating high school, Lee's academic journey took him to Langston University, a historically all-Black college known at the time for its profound impact on African

American education. Lee reminisced that Langston University, a place steeped in history and significance, was the alma mater of the Cudjoe Twins and the Harlem Globetrotters. Every day, he would wake up at 7:00, attend classes, and then work part-time at a furniture warehouse nearby in Guthrie from 4:00 to 11:00 p.m. At Langston, he was a music major and was also actively involved in football, boxing, and the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, which laid the foundation for his military service. However, Lee chose to leave college before completing his degree and join the Air Force in 1952.

Lee's entry into the United States Air Force marked the beginning of an extraordinary journey. Originally, he didn't plan for a long-term military career, just a couple of years. However, life in the Air Force presented him with opportunities and experiences that would extend his service to an incredible 24 years. Lee's choice to join the Air Force was influenced by his reluctance to join the Army and engage in ground combat; that is why he sought out the Air Force's global initiatives.

Lee received his 12 weeks of basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, in 1952. Then, he completed his business school degree while stationed there (the Air Force and the University of Maryland had a collaboration) before serving. When asked about the intensity of training, he shrugged it off. ROTC in college had already exposed him to the realities of enrollment and the military. Lee did bring up the struggle of adjusting to the newfound diversity that came with a military career. "Well, it was [an] adjustment, because, you know, I grew up in all-Black grade school, all-Black high school, all-Black college, and of course now that happened to mix, you know, we had Latinos and American Indians, everybody, and Whites and Blacks."

The 1950s were the cusp between the Jim Crow era and the spark of the Civil Rights movement. Although not a huge issue in the



Mayberry (far back) as purchasing agent serving in Vietnam poses with a group of locals in 1963.

military, racial discrimination was still extremely prevalent in everyday Southern society. While deployed in Shreveport, Louisiana, Lee reminisced how he and one of his best buddies, Paul Harkins, couldn't go downtown and have a beer together without getting thrown in jail. But Lee never saw skin color as anything more than a noun. When asked about it, he said, "It just never made a difference to me. I don't know why."

While on the topic of discrimination, Lee brought up his late wife Patricia (Pat), the forever love of his life. They met at one of Lee's boxing matches in 1956, quickly fell in love, and married in 1958. Forced by her friends to attend the match, Pat originally detested the fighting and violence, yet she "learned to like it" after witnessing Lee's match, as he jokingly claims.

As an interracial couple, Lee and Pat faced numerous societal obstacles. Yet, through it all, their love story was one of resilience and triumph over societal prejudice, mirroring Lee's own stories of resilience throughout his life. As a family, Lee, Pat, and their children moved around together to wherever he was deployed. "I couldn't go south," Lee recalled. "I couldn't go to Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, none of those states. The Air Force restricted that also because of my interracial marriage—they helped me out."

As a purchasing agent in the Air Force, Lee served primarily during the Vietnam War era and was deployed both domestically and internationally. Domestically, he was stationed in San Antonio, Texas; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Denver, Colorado; Shreveport, Louisiana; and Oahu, Hawaii. Internationally, he was sent to England, Germany, Turkey, Japan, Thailand, The Philippines, and Vietnam. The tasks of a purchasing agent primarily involved ordering both common and specialized supplies necessary to the Air Force base to establish the Air Force's material readiness for the operations they carried out. It was common for purchasing agents to handle millions of dollars per year.

Back before trade contracts were standardized, negotiations for more specialized goods, like weapons or chemicals, were done "under the table." Purchasing agents needed to be able to procure coherent deals. Lee reminisces that he was an efficient and successful purchasing agent due to his bubbly, outgoing, confident, and resourceful personality. "I was very good at it because I knew how to talk. And, you know, they—most of the colonels and generals—are straight base. They didn't know how to go out to the table and negotiate and get stuff like I did," Lee asserts.

As a purchasing agent, Lee was even

stationed in Vietnam and other overseas countries during the Vietnam War. While never directly fighting on the front lines, he was critical to the war effort. Without the “brains” of the operation supplying the fight, it would not have been possible for such profound U.S. involvement.

For example, Lee was deployed to the TUSLOG in Ankara, Turkey, to settle a purchasing assignment and was awarded the Base Noncommissioned Officer of the Quarter in October 1968. In the commendation letter from the Air Force Colonel and Commander Leonard S. Smutko, Commander at TUSLOG, Lee was recognized for his “tact, pleasant personality,” his ability to “deal effectively with [his] fellow Americans and Turkish Nationals,” and his “training, leadership, sound judgment, and . . . successful economical operation of . . . duty.”

By the end of his Air Force career, he had been promoted to the rank of master sergeant. He also knew many veterans who fought on the front lines and recalled that many of his friends in combat were changed tremendously by the war. Moreover, he commented on the horrendous experiences of the war. “Shoot, I ain’t never had nobody shoot at me, and so it’s hard to understand how and what they went through, how were you ducking, and if you duck, and where’d you go . . . They go in at 18 years old and they go to a combat area, a zone,

and they’re 20-some years old, and they just come out a completely different person.”

During his last few years in the Air Force, Lee took on the role as a recruiter. He and his family settled in Arizona, crediting his wife’s and kids’ desires to tan in the sun as the reason they moved there. Lee began to recruit and present to nearby high schools and colleges about joining the Air Force. Lee, as a passionate extrovert, exclaimed that he enjoyed recruiting the most during his Air Force career. He met a lot of people who weren’t already attached to the military and relished how his own passion for serving in the military could implore the

younger generation to share the same passion.

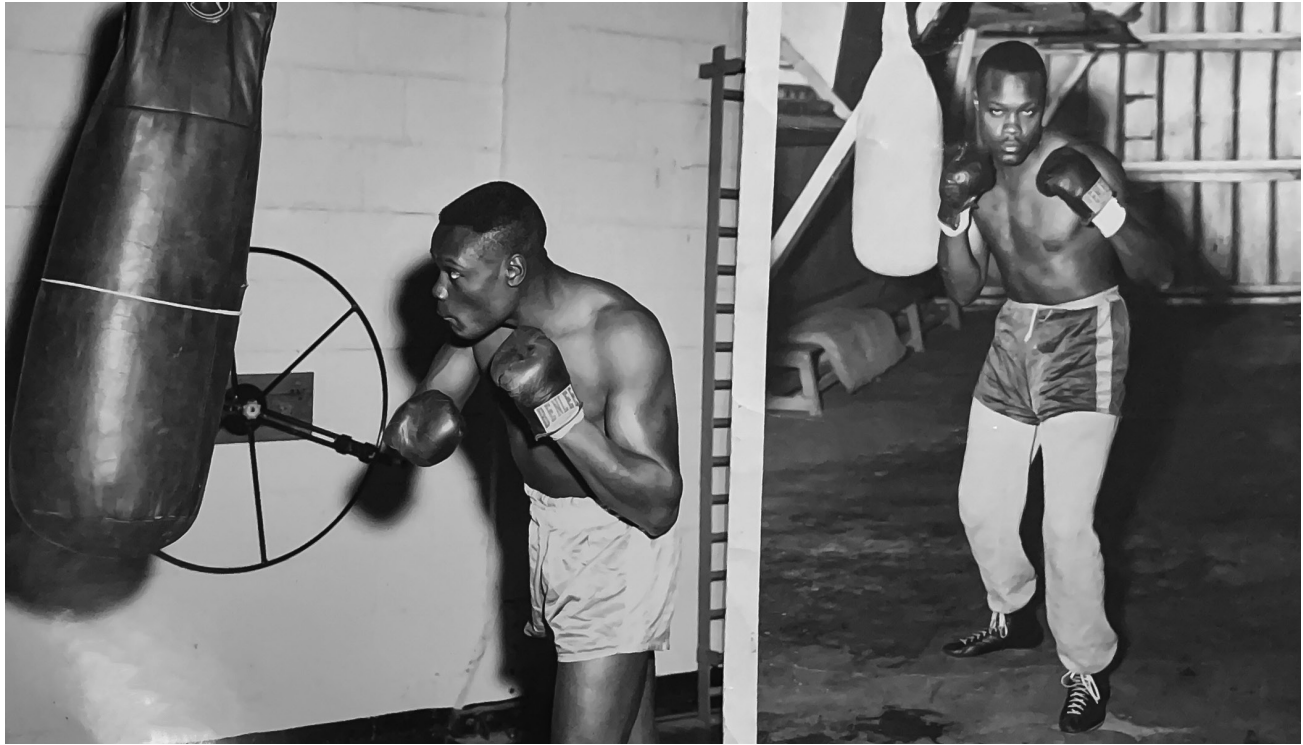
His career was not just notable for the places he traveled and served, but also for what he achieved with his hobbies. Lee, a man of many talents, spent considerable time as a boxer

and DJ both in the Air Force and as a civilian. He DJ’ed radio shows and, on Friday and Sunday nights, hosted free evening jam sessions at the Air Force club. He said that the clubs he hosted were so jam-packed that he often turned away entire crowds on Friday nights.

When asked, Lee revealed some secrets about how to successfully entertain a crowd. “I have a couple of jokes or something and play some popular music. Just entertain the crowd, make them laugh, and you call a few, you know. I knew a lot of people there, and I’d make a joke about somebody, just do things that throw them



Mayberry receives an award from his superior in the early 1960s.



As a US Air Force Middleweight Boxer, Mayberry trained daily for his seasonal Middleweight Championships and Golden Gloves, which he won in 1962.

[the crowd] a little off, like an unexpected record ...”

Lee was also a trained boxer in the Air Force Boxing League. From when he was a boy, his dream was to become a professional boxer. Throughout his time in the Air Force, he traveled around Air Force bases and fought, often made newspaper headlines, and won up to \$200 a night. A newspaper published in October 1959 reported that Lee had competed in Canada (Canadian Championship Tourney, similar to the Golden Gloves in the U.S.), Montana (Montana Golden Gloves), and Colorado (Lowry AFB Golden Gloves). By 1962, he had won at least two middleweight crowns, one at Lackland AFB in Texas.

Lee mentioned one of his greatest life experiences was training and sparring alongside the revered heavyweight champion Sonny Liston. However, he was discouraged from fully diving into the world of professional boxing by Liston, who advised him to “stay in the service,” since boxing was a “vicious and cruel” sport.

Upon earning the Meritorious Service

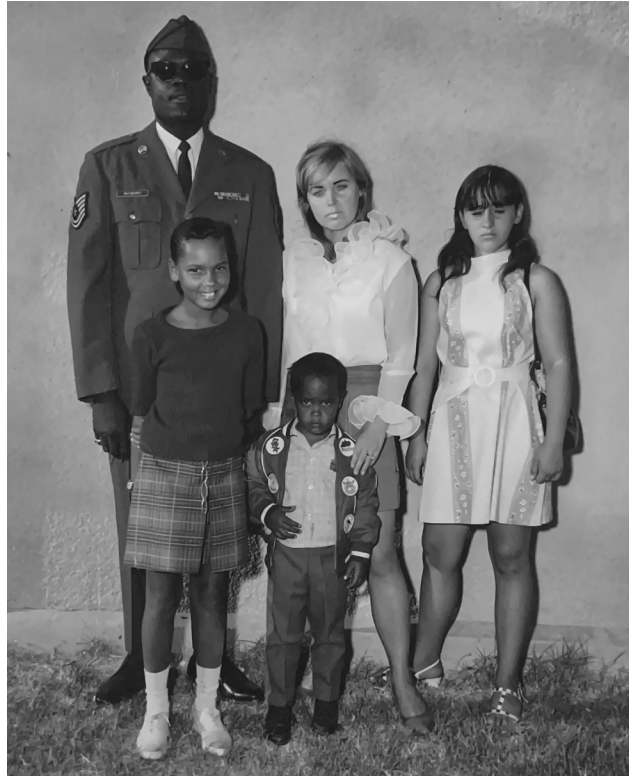
Medal from the ATC Commander General John W. Roberts on December 6, 1977, Master Sergeant Lee retired from the Air Force by the end of 1977. Lee transitioned smoothly into civilian life, channeling the brilliant interpersonal skills he developed as a purchasing agent and recruiter into a career as a successful insurance agent with Allstate. His move allowed him to settle in the sunny state of Arizona, a choice made by his children’s demand for a swimming pool and Pat’s longing for the warm embrace and tan of the sun.

Now, almost 50 years later, Lee, 90, resides at the Gardens of Ocotillo Senior Living, where he is one of the most cherished residents by both the other seniors and the staff for his lighthearted charm, humor, and—most importantly—his interesting stories. He seeks to inspire young, intelligent people to join the Air Force, asserting, “There’s so many options, [and] there’s so many people, and a lot of them very intelligent, that don’t understand and don’t know what’s available in the armed services.”

The possibilities are endless, he contends,

as there are over 280 different career fields in the Air Force. Lee mentioned several aptitude, academic, and physical tests that one must take, which determine the level of freedom they will gain in choosing their career; he emphasized that by obtaining a score of 80 or higher, one was likely to be guaranteed their first choice of work.

Ultimately, Lee's post-military career was not the end, but rather an evolution into another form of service: sharing his experiences and wisdom with those around him. At the wise age of 90, he continues to inspire—through stories, humor, and mentorship. Master Sergeant Elmer L. Mayberry Jr. epitomizes the indomitable human spirit to overcome and achieve greatness, regardless of the challenges life presents.



Mayberry, in uniform, poses for an official family photo in 1970 with his wife Patricia and his three children Debra, Tyrone, and Veronica (left to right).