

# Local Exhibit Salutes Coast Guard's First Chief Journalist

Story and photo by PA2 Jennifer Johnson, D7 Public Affairs

MIAMI -- Nearly 150 guests including friends, family, and admirers attended the Broward County African-American Research Library and Cultural Center in Plantation, Fla., when it opened its doors Jan. 5 to a new exhibit featuring the life's work of the Coast Guard's first chief journalist.



Alex Haley, the Coast Guard's first chief journalist, enlisted in 1939 as a mess attendant. Despite obvious obstacles, Haley persevered and was later awarded the coveted Pulitzer Prize for his novel "Roots: The Saga of an American Family." (Unknown photographer and date)

*The Voyages of Alex Haley: Notebooks and Memoirs of an African-American Writer* is an exhibit that chronicles the struggles and accomplishments of a Pulitzer Prize winning author who began his incredible writing career as a mess attendant in the Coast Guard.

"We are taking time out to recognize one of our service's heroes, said Capt. Ekundayo Faux, commanding officer of the Integrated Support Command Miami, who presented a commemorative plaque to the exhibitors on behalf of the crew of the Coast Guard Cutter *Alex Haley*. "Very few minorities at that time got as far as he did and he serves as an inspiration for those that continue to serve in the Armed Forces today."

The Alex Haley collection contains personal letters, reflective photos, unpublished manuscripts, and original articles published in such magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Playboy*.

"It is like going through someone's history," said Artesia Crawford, an eight-year-old girl who visited the exhibit with her grandfather.

Haley joined the Coast Guard in 1939 when the mess attendant and steward's rate were the only ratings open to minorities. With no official occupational training center, Haley learned his arduous job through veteran's and on-the-job training. However, during long patrols, Haley began using his talent and earning extra money ghost writing expressive letters home for his shipmates.

After serving several years on different ships in the service and seeing action in the Pacific during WWII, Haley began writing about what combat was like for the privately owned Coast Guard Magazine. A number of his articles including *Mail Call*, which depicted how saddened service members were that family members did not write to them, were reprinted in numerous newspapers across the states.

Haley later became a reporter, assistant editor, and finally editor of the Coast Guard's publication, "The Helmsman". In June 1949, the Coast Guard officially recognized Haley's outstanding achievements, changed his rating, and promoted him to journalist, first class.

After retiring as a chief journalist in 1959, Haley went on to pursue a career as a full-time writer. His endless pursuit to learn about his African ancestors was later documented in his novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*.

*Roots* won Haley the Pulitzer Prize in 1976 and broke unprecedented racial barriers when it was televised on ABC as an eight part miniseries in 1977.

"*Roots* was the first major piece that pulled things together and answered questions about our ancestry," said Derek Davis, head of programs and exhibits for AARLCC. "*Roots* was not just someone glossing over a sad time. After seeing *Roots*, it was the first time I started seeing the same faces on TV that I had been seeing in my community."

"One-hundred and 30 million people watched the 8-hour television mini-series *Roots*," said Alicia Antone, assistant director for AARLCC. "It was the first documentary that portrayed the dramatic atrocities black American's went through and at the time it was more watched than *Gone with the Wind*."

Alex Haley died in Seattle in 1992 but his life and accomplishments are still celebrated throughout the Coast Guard. In 1991, the service commissioned a 210-foot medium endurance cutter in his honor that is homeported in Kodiak, Al., created a scholarship fund, which is awarded to eight students seeking a higher education each year, and created an award in his name that recognizes authors who continue to communicate the Coast Guard Story.



Students from the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Hallandale Beach, Fla., enjoy items depicting the illustrious career of Alex Haley while he was a member of the Coast Guard. Coast Guard photograph by PA2 Jennifer Johnson, D7 Public Affairs.

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