

# CHICAGO LAWYER®

## MED-MAL MATTERS

**O**n Oct. 5, the Department of Veterans Affairs honored an extraordinary former soldier as its Veteran of the Day. That veteran never saw combat or received any medals for valor, but in our eyes, she is among the bravest and most inspiring people ever to wear the country's uniform or grace its courtrooms. In an era when institutionalized discrimination was alive and well, she was one of the first women of any race to be commissioned an officer in the Army, then she graduated from law school and became an outstanding trial lawyer and civil rights pioneer. She died in May at the age of 104.

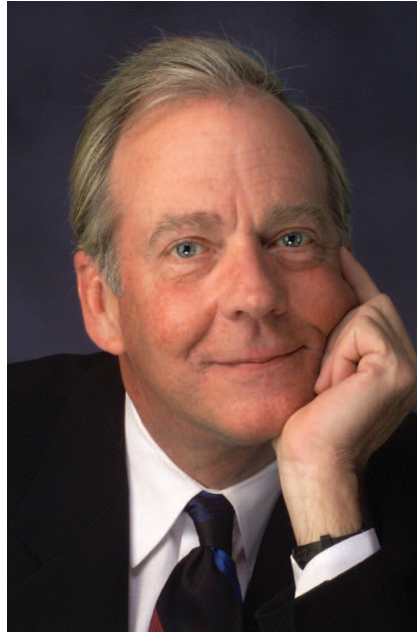
Dovey Johnson Roundtree was born in 1914, in Charlotte, N.C. She worked her way through Spellman College in Atlanta by holding down three jobs and, in 1941, ended up in Washington, D.C. As the *New York Times* has reported, in 1942 she joined the nascent Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, one of only 40 black women in the initial cohort. During the war, she was eventually promoted to captain and worked to recruit black soldiers.

In a formally segregated Army, according to the *Times*, she risked being court-martialed by confronting her white commanders on segregationist practices like "colored only" tables in mess halls — and won. During a recruiting trip through the South in 1943, Roundtree, while in uniform, was forced to give up her bus seat to a white Marine and threatened with arrest when she protested. She would later write that these experiences led to an interest in the law as a "tool of social justice" and after the war, she attended Howard University's law school in Washington on the GI Bill.

According to the *ABA Journal*, while in law school, Roundtree worked with Thurgood Marshall and other NAACP lawyers on *Brown v. Board of Education*. She graduated in 1950, one of only five women in her class.

After graduation, Roundtree went into practice with classmate Julius Winfield Robertson. Committed to helping disenfranchised clients, times were lean at Robertson & Roundtree at first. As Roundtree later wrote: "We worked for eggs and collard greens."

Soon after they hung out their shingle, however, they took a soon-to-be landmark case with facts all too familiar to Roundtree: *Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Co.* Sarah Keys was a black enlisted soldier in the Women's Army Corps. In 1952, she



## TRIAL LAWYER HERO

Roundtree a pioneer for women, equality

By **THOMAS A. DEMETRIO** and **KENNETH T. LUMB**

traveled by bus from Fort Dix, N.J., to her home in North Carolina. In Roanoke, N.C. the driver ordered her to give up her seat to a white Marine. Keys politely refused and was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct.

In the *Keys* case, Roundtree sought to dismantle the separate but equal doctrine, born of the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* opinion from 1896. Though the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia dismissed the case on jurisdictional grounds, Roundtree was not deterred.

Because the facts involved public transportation across state lines, she adjusted her aim and filed a complaint with the Interstate Commerce Commission. After the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, she argued that the ruling barring discrimination in public schools applied with equal force to public interstate transportation.

In 1955, the commission agreed and issued a decision banning segregation in interstate bus travel.

As important as she was to the civil rights movement, however, Dovey Johnson Roundtree was first and foremost a great trial lawyer. She labored in obscurity day after day, defending and

giving voice to those who could not defend themselves. In 1965, some of that obscurity was blown away — at least among other trial lawyers — when she won the acquittal of a poor black man accused of murdering a well-connected white Washington socialite rumored to be a mistress of John F. Kennedy.

Though Roundtree has received many awards, including the ABA's Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award, and she has been honored at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, hers is not a household name. As the *Times* stated in her obituary, for all her accomplishments, Roundtree "remained, by temperament, choice and political circumstance, comparatively unknown."

We hope now Capt. Roundtree is a little less unknown. CL

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