

Veteran now fights with education

WWII pilot maintains optimism despite lifetime of racism

ADAMS from page 1

justice.

But all was not well in America. Adams, now a well-respected leader in the Lincoln community, was returning from a distinguished record of service in the war.

Based in Italy, he had served as an intelligence officer of the 332nd fighter group, an all-black group of airmen who had been trained at Tuskegee Air Base in Tuskegee, Ala.

Their success had been astonishing.

In more than 1,500 missions flown over Europe and North Africa, the Tuskegee airmen lost just 98 pilots. And of the bombers who flew missions under the group's escort, not one was lost.

The Tuskegee airmen were the only group to achieve the latter distinction.

"We were determined, and we wanted to fly," Adams said. "It was something they tried to keep us from having, but we were good at it; we were darned good."

But when Adams and the rest of the Tuskegee airmen returned to the United States, they encountered the effluvia that permeated

American society and threatened to undermine its democratic ideals: racial prejudice.

Upon his return, Adams reported to Fort Shanks, N.Y., for logistics duty. Despite their wartime success, he said, black officers were treated like second-class citizens on the base.

White and black officers were segregated. Black officers were not allowed in the white officers' club and were assigned to separate mess halls. And black officers at Fort Shanks and around the country were unhappy.

"We were saying, 'German bullets were shooting at us like anyone else.'"

But in response to protests by black officers at other U.S. bases, military leaders only tightened restrictions.

Blacks were confined to parts of the base surrounded by barbed wire fences. Although white officers were free to roam, black officers were quarantined.

And most humiliating of all, Adams said, he and other black officers were placed under the guard of German prisoners of war. The German POWs were allowed freedom of movement on the base

“

We used to say, when we were up in the air, 'I'm free.'"

PAUL ADAMS
WWII veteran

and were even treated to nights on the town by United Service Organization workers, Adams said. "We were prisoners."

Not just for black people

Adams' treatment upon his return from World War II was one of many experiences that could have left him an angry, embittered man.

But those who know Adams said he is quite the opposite: a positive, charismatic leader steadfast in his devout Christianity and dedication to justice.

The Rev. Don Coleman, president of Lincoln's Mad Dads, said Adams is invaluable as the group's board chairman.

Coleman said children are always enthusiastic when Adams comes to visit and tell them about his life.

"He's just a great communicator for kids," he said. "With adults, he's very tender, and with people who are hurting or in pain."

Adams is "upbeat about the things that are going on," Coleman said, and inspires people simply by his presence.

"He's so full of wisdom and fun to be around," he said. "He's my hero."

Leola Bullock, a longtime Lincoln civil rights leader, has known Adams since the early 1960s. When Adams was president of the Lincoln NAACP in 1963-64, they worked together to fight housing and employment discrimination.

She said his leadership stemmed from his positive outlook and commitment to justice.

"I think it's because of his belief in equal justice for all people," she said.

Adams used his experiences with prejudice to inspire a lifetime commitment to improving society, said Annie Scott, Lincoln's Scott Middle School principal.

"He hasn't forgotten it," she said. "He has put it in a perspective where he can continually make use of it."

Scott said Adams is a refreshing example of one who is loyal to his family, country and principles.

"He really is a patriotic person," she said. "He holds his country in high esteem and passes that on to young people."

"I think he has strong values for what's right, not just for black people, but for everybody. A whole lot of people would do well to pattern their lives after him."

Free when flying

Driven by a desire for excellence, Adams has wrestled with and conquered prejudice many times.

As a boy in Greenville, S.C., he dreamed of being a fighter pilot, but knew he probably never would have a chance because he was black.

But in 1940, at the urging of first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the U.S. War Department instituted a program to train black fighter pilots at the Tuskegee Air Base.

The idea met resistance among civilians and military officials, but the Tuskegee program got off the ground. Eleanor Roosevelt visited the base and flew with a black pilot to help prove blacks could fly war planes.

A friend's father saw an adver-

tisement for the Tuskegee program and told Adams about it. Adams knew he would have to serve in the military at some point, and the Tuskegee program offered the chance to earn \$75 per month instead of the \$21 regular enlisted men received.

So in 1942, after graduating from South Carolina State A&M College, Adams enlisted at Tuskegee determined to achieve his boyhood dream.

Tuskegee was in the heart of the Jim Crow South, and the combination of a racist society and military power structure made for a particularly vicious racism, Adams said.

Drill sergeants were just as prejudiced as anyone else, he said, and called blacks "any name he wanted to call you."

"You had to want to be a pilot," he said. "You had to fight prejudice to stay in there, where you were treated like dogs, or worse."

But Adams persevered. After nine months of training, he graduated from Tuskegee in April 1943. At graduation, he was accompanied by his wife-to-be, Alda Thompson.

Before leaving for the war, Adams reported to Selfridge Air Base in Detroit. Shortly before he arrived, a base commander there had been court-martialed for shooting to death a black man assigned as his driver, saying he "didn't want any nigger driving me."

Adams completed his duties in Detroit and left for World War II on Christmas Day, 1943.

He arrived in Naples, Italy, and began his service in Europe. Although he served as an intelligence officer and flew no war missions, his duties were vital to the success of the 332nd fighter group.

He served in nine major campaigns and was awarded the Commendation Medal and three Oak Leaf Clusters.

Adams said many white bomber pilots initially resented entrusting their lives to the Tuskegee airmen's escort. But when their abilities became apparent, they were in demand.

Adams attributed his group's success to determination, valor and the desire of the fighters to prove they were as good as anyone else.

And the Tuskegee airmen were not disheartened at having to fight for a country that often treated them poorly, he said.

"We did it for ourselves, our race and our country," he said. "We thought we were fighting for our country just as much as anyone else."

Amid a bloody, catastrophic war, when tensions for the Tuskegee airmen were compounded by racial prejudice, flying was a release.

"We used to say, when we were up in the air, 'I'm free,'" Adams said. "I was completely free and could do what I wanted. I was free of all pressures."

The lone officer

When the war ended, Adams returned home and served briefly at Fort Shanks, N.Y. He left the military in 1945 and married the next year.

He rejoined the Army Air Forces in 1946 and soon participated in the military's integration.

When President Harry Truman integrated the military, no more than one black officer was sta-

tioned at each base. At Travis Air Force Base near Oakland, Calif., Adams was that lone officer.

"It was hard on us, but that was the only way to break it up," he said.

In 1962, Adams came to Lincoln to serve as deputy commander of the Lincoln Air Force Base. Despite his outstanding military record, he faced discrimination. He was denied access to the American Legion and many of the city's restaurants, hotels, motels and bars.

After Adams retired from the military, he taught industrial arts at Lincoln High School, where he started multicultural student programs.

In 1965, when he attempted to buy a house in east Lincoln, he faced another racial spat.

Neighborhood residents drew up a petition to block Adams' purchase, claiming his presence would reduce property values. Petitioners tried to convince Adams' banker Adams couldn't repay the loan.

But Adams' real estate agent stood firm. The agent proved Adams' military pension, not including his teaching salary, was greater than many of the petitioners' incomes.

The petition effort failed, and Adams still lives in the house.

Adams, who retired from teaching in 1982, is active in his church, the Quinn Chapel. He has participated in Mad Dads since its Lincoln inception in 1992.

"Lincoln is not the worst place in the world, or I wouldn't be here," he said. "But it's not the best place in the world, either."

No place for prejudice

Adams said race relations have improved, but more must be done.

He said he is disturbed by evidence of increased Ku Klux Klan and white supremacist activities. He also cited the flap over University of Nebraska-Lincoln English Professor David Hibler's e-mail as evidence of racial tensions.

As America pushes ahead in the quest for equality, Adams said, education will be crucial.

Well-educated citizens happy with their place in society generally are not prejudiced, Adams said. Most prejudice is practiced by those on the bottom rung who enhance their self-esteem by treating others as inferior, he said.

"It's only through ignorance that people act that way," he said.

Education can promote a better society and improve race relations by challenging prejudicial attitudes, he said.

"You can pass laws, but you can't change a person's heart and feelings," he said.

Adams said affirmative action programs are not reverse discrimination but a chance for those discriminated against to reach their potential.

"Let whites be in slavery for 100 years, then come tell me about reverse discrimination," he said.

But Adams said he is committed to maintaining his positive outlook. Holding on to anger, instead of seeking self-improvement, can only make tensions worse, he said.

"You can't go forward with a load of prejudice and hatred," he said. "You've got to shed them and pick up new things."

Diversity in History

Editor's note: Each day during Black History Month, the Daily Nebraskan will tell the story of a minority who made an important contribution in America's history.

Because his family was the only black family on his Cairo, Ga., residential block;

Because he went on to become the first black athlete at the University of California Los Angeles to win varsity letters in four sports: baseball, basketball, football and track;

Because, in 1947, he took a chance and challenged the deeply rooted racial hatred in both the North and the South by simply playing a game for the Brooklyn Dodgers;

Because opposing players against the integration of black baseball players tossed black cats on the field in front of him;

Because, in the same year, he broke the Major League Baseball's color barrier and was named National League Rookie of the Year;

Because the Rev. Jesse Jackson said, "When Jackie took the field, something within us reminded us of our birthright to be free;"

Because his former teammate Duke Snider said, "He was the greatest competitor I have ever seen";

Because, in 1997, Major League Baseball honored him by agreeing to never give another player his jersey number, 42;

Jack Roosevelt Robinson not only opened the door for blacks to play Major League Baseball in the United States, but also helped all young black men and women who dreamed of playing professional sports achieve their dreams.

Daily Nebraskan

Editor: Paula Lavigne
Managing Editor: Chad Lorenz
Associate News Editor: Erin Schulte
Associate News Editor: Ted Taylor
Assignment Editor: Erin Gibson
Opinion Editor: Joshua Gillin
Sports Editor: David Wilson
A&E Editor: Jeff Randall
Copy Desk Chiefs: Bryce Glenn
Photo Director: Ryan Soderlin
Design Co-Chiefs: Jamie Ziegler
Tony Toth
Art Director: Matt Hancy
Online Editor: Gregg Stearns

Questions? Comments? Ask for the appropriate section editor at (402) 472-2588 or e-mail dn@unlinfo.unl.edu.

Asst. Online Editor: Amy Pemberton
General Manager: Dan Shattil
Publications Board: Melissa Myles
Chairwoman: (402) 476-2446
Professional Adviser: Don Walton, (402) 473-7301
Advertising Manager: Nick Patsch, (402) 472-2589
Assistant Ad Manager: Daniel Lam
Classified Ad Manager: Marni Speck

Fax number: (402) 472-1781
World Wide Web: www.unl.edu/DailyNeb
The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448, Monday through Friday during the academic year; weekly during the summer sessions. The public has access to the Publications Board.
Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by calling (402) 472-2588.
Subscriptions are \$55 for one year.
Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln NE 68588-0448. Periodical postage paid at Lincoln, NE.
ALL MATERIAL COPYRIGHT 1998
THE DAILY NEBRASKAN