

Portrait of a Veteran: Both Sides Now

Staff Sergeant Allen Gooden, Jr.

In 1991, The Buckingham Beacon published an article entitled, "Lifelong Teacher Allen Gooden, Jr." The emboldened caption, which accompanied this article, was a quote by Mr.

Gooden: "I just couldn't get over the fact that I was serving in the armed forces with the goal of protecting my country. I was fighting for the freedom



Staff Sergeant Allen Gooden, Jr., of the 1873rd EAB, U.S. Air Force, ca. 1943

of the same man, who had the gun in my stomach." The title and caption offer a glimpse into Allen Gooden's amazing life of service to country and community. But on a deeper level, the title and caption offer a glimpse into an area which Joni Mitchell sung about in the late 60's - *Both Sides Now*. While Allen was providing service and protection to the country, he saw both sides of life - a side which abounded with prejudice and discrimination - but also he saw a side which caused him to realize that despite its shortcomings this country also provided many blessings and opportunities.

Allen Gooden, Jr, one of seven children, was born to Allen Sr. and Jenny L. Jones Gooden on September 19, 1914 . His father was a contractor in a foundry that made parts for stoves and furniture. Even though he could not read or write, Gooden Sr. was very good with math and could quickly figure out the salaries for the 20 people that worked under him. Young Allen and his siblings would sometimes go to the foundry to delivery their father's lunch. Allen grew up in Rhimes Quarter of North Birmingham, AL, and remarked about it: "You had to have sense and self-preservation to make it there."

Allen was educated in the public schools of Birmingham. English and history were his favorite subjects. Being a loner, he often ate lunch in the classroom with his teacher. One of the most pleasant memories that he recalls from his school days involved his English teacher, Mrs. Mahalia Morris. Knowing that his mother had died when he was six, Mrs. Morris gave a tie and handkerchief to young Allen for his birthday. Mrs. Morris also gave Allen a part in one of the school plays. Even after over sixty years, Allen can still remember part of his dialogue. While in school, Allen played on the football and basketball teams. He graduated from Industrial High School where the curriculum provided academic courses and courses in printing, drafting and mechanics.

After graduation from Industrial High, Allen attended Alabama State College

in Montgomery and graduated from there in 1937. It was after graduation that Allen truly began to see life from both sides - great blessings and opportunities coupled with prejudice and discrimination. He was blessed with a job in the Birmingham public school system. His father delighted in seeing his young son dressed in shirt and tie as he headed out to work, but since African American employees in the Alabama schools were not paid as much as their white counterparts, Allen barely made enough to pay his transportation costs to and from work.

Maybe because of his familiarity with life on both sides, young Allen was not especially fazed by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Because of his outspokenness - a characteristic which he had exhibited throughout his life - Allen expressed his feelings about the Japanese attack to some of his friends. He remarked that the draft officials "weren't smart enough to keep me." Allen should have realized that comment didn't qualify as one that made sense or lead to self-preservation especially when coming from one, who had from birth looked at life from both sides. The draft board apparently decided to show the college-educated Allen just how smart he really was

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because a short time later, Allen received a special invitation- a draft notice. He reported to Ft. Benning, GA, where he was inducted into the U.S. Army at the age of 25.

After his induction, Allen was sent first to Ft. Leonard Wood, MO, for 13-14 weeks of basic training followed by additional training at Virginia State College in Petersburg, more training in Arizona, and finally more training at McDell Field in Tampa, FL. During this period of training, young Allen truly saw life from both sides. On the side of blessings and beauty, while at Virginia State, he met his wife-to-be, Christine Shelton of Buckingham County, VA. On the side of harsh reality, Allen experienced more prejudice, bigotry and discrimination. Despite being dressed to protect America, he realized that there were places that he couldn't go and even simple things that he could not do because of his race throughout the South. Some parts of Petersburg, VA, were off-limits to African Americans, but even more glaring examples were to be experienced as young Mr. Gooden defended his country. During a trip from St. Petersburg, FL, to Arizona, Allen's train had to stop on a side track in Texas while another train passed. Since he had had a few drinks, young Gooden informed some MPs that he was getting off the train to get a Coke during the wait. As he disembarked and entered a cafeteria a few block away, he spied some German POWs. Allen approached the counter and requested the drink. Without looking at him, the manager of the res-

taurant handed the young soldier the drink but told him that he could not drink it inside the station. Upon hearing this all too familiar but now somewhat unexpected remark, Allen did not reach for the drink as it was handed to him. It crashed to the floor, breaking into numerous pieces. The manager "hit the ceiling" as the German POWs laughed as they received the best food and serving conditions.

Later, while in Tucson, AZ, Gooden and his friend learned about some drafting positions that were open to soldiers. When the two young African Americans went to apply for a position, enlisted men and officers passed by and gawked at them as they waited. Someone eventually asked them why they were there, and, during the course of the conversation, they were told that the positions had already been filled. Upon returning to Tampa, the young African American soldiers knew or learned as Life taught them about both sides that there were certain streets that they couldn't go on, certain types of training that they couldn't receive, and certain activities that they couldn't participate in. Even the Mayor of Tampa insisted that the "black soldiers not be allowed to go swimming in certain areas because it would contaminate the water." Allen chalked up all of these harsh lessons about both sides of life to ignorance and what had been taught to children by their parents. This inner doctrine or philosophy helped him to live with discriminatory, bigoted and prejudicial treatment.

However, the twenty plus years that Gooden had spent developing his phi-



In Tampa, Sgt. Gooden (center) and fellow African American soldiers were not allowed to swim in public pools because of racial prejudice.

losophy on bigotry hardly prepared him for the incident, later described in the Buckingham Beacon, which gave him perhaps his most difficult glimpse of life from both sides. It was the practice of young black soldiers stationed in Tampa to travel by bus to St. Petersburg on weekends. The bus would usually be crowded with civilians and soldiers, black and white. During one of these trips, young Gooden sat down in a seat in the white section of the bus that became vacant. Immediately the driver stopped the bus and told Allen he would have to get up. One of the white passengers - a man with a limp - came back to where he was sitting, pulled out a 45 pistol and stuck it in the young soldier's stomach. He sneeringly asked, "You're not gonna get up?" Gooden's fellow soldiers, both black and white — some knowing of their exposure to life from both sides and all seeing the irony of the man's prejudiced actions—loudly told Allen not to get up. But because of his exposure to life's harsh lessons and because his inner doctrine and knowledge of the role of ignorance in the man's prejudice,

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young Allen got up, requested that his fare be returned, and then got off the bus. But perhaps the most senseless and cruel glimpse of life from both sides came as the young African Americans in Gooden's unit left Tampa. As their train left the station, the melodious strains of "Bye, Bye .Blackbird" served as a recession. However, even with such a bigoted send-off, Mr. Gooden, was allowed a glimpse of the beauty and blessings of life also. Just two weeks prior to that Tampa departure, he had married Christine Shelton in a Tampa wedding ceremony.

Allen traveled to California to embark for duty with the 1873rd Combat Engineers in New Guinea. The trip was made on a Norwegian ship, which didn't have any escort ships for protection even though it was well-known that Japanese ships and submarines were in that part of the Pacific. To avoid attack from Japanese vessels, their ship changed course whenever they received notice of hostile ships in the area. As they were passing through a narrow channel while approaching Australia, Allen and his fellow soldiers became aware of a destroyer with guns aimed at the Norwegian vessel. After fifteen harrowing minutes, they received notice that the destroyer was a U.S. Naval vessel. The trip to Finch Haven, New Guinea lasted 21 days. Gooden and his fellow troops landed behind enemy lines, but some other Americans found them and redirected them to in front of the line. The officers in young Gooden's troop were called "90-day wonders" because they had received only 90

days of Officer's training and "really didn't know much." Allen achieved the rank of Staff Sergeant and while serving in the South Pacific, was in charge of the drafting department. His unit drew up plans for bridges, ramps and roads and also repaired airstrips.

Allen continued witnessing life from both sides upon arriving in New Guinea and later Okinawa. The land was a tropical paradise dotted with



The tropical beauty of New Guinea, illustrated by this tranquil scene of a mountain stream, was marred by the horrors of war.

coconut groves and beautiful beaches but was marred with the gruesomeness of war - dead bodies. Daily rains watered the beautiful forests and sweet-smelling flowers. But this beauty was the hiding place for poisonous snakes and often shaken by small earthquakes. In New Guinea, Allen was stationed on a bay that was a beautiful site for swimming. On the bay's other side, however, was one of the most heavily fortified places occupied by the Japanese. The sounds of the tropical paradise were often masked by the 155s shot by the Japanese - a sound like a train running through the air. Staff Sergeant Gooden's unit didn't shoot often at the enemy but was defended by the Navy.

In Okinawa, low-flying kamikaze planes would sometimes dash across the tropical skies and attack people on the ground. Upon arriving in Okinawa, Allen's unit, the 1873rd, was immediately deployed to make repairs to a 3-mile wide, 5-mile long air strip on Ie-Shima. The ocean breeze in this tropical paradise was nice, but mosquitoes loved to attack during the relative coolness of the evening, and so mosquito nets were required. On one occasion, Staff Sergeant Gooden and his fellow soldiers were caught behind a high wall at the landing craft during a Japanese attack. They had to wait until Allied planes took down most of the Japanese. One newsman, Ernie Pyle, stuck his head out of the fox-



Guy Harrison, Sgt. Gooden's friend and fellow soldier, poses next to the monument honoring Ernie Pyle, a reporter killed during an attack on Ie Shima on 18 April 1945.

hole and was killed. During the entire time spent in the South Pacific, young Staff Sergeant Gooden never liked digging foxholes, but one night in the tropical paradise, he awakened to find the skies lit up from bombing. He immediately crawled into a foxhole with another

soldier. Another time in Okinawa, Staff Sergeant Gooden was tasked to draft a cemetery. As he drew up the plans amidst the horrors and miseries of the war in that tropical paradise, he wondered “whether I’d be in one of them.” Perhaps in order to cope with these vast contrasts, the soldiers received an alcohol ration, but enterprising soldiers discovered that coconut juice would ferment when in contact with the hot sand.

As life showed both sides in a horrific fashion on the battlefield, Staff Sergeant Gooden also met natives in both New Guinea and Okinawa that taught him extraordinary lessons. He met one native, who carried a “big stick” and sported red and purple hair. Since he had witnessed natives climbing trees and collecting coconuts for soldiers, Allen requested that this weird individual do the same for him. He was astounded when the native, in perfect English, told him “Soldier, I do not climb trees for pecuniary compensation.” During subsequent conversations, Allen discovered that the native had been educated in England, Germany and France, that he was a Christian and was very knowledgeable of American history and customs in the United States.



Sgt. Gooden’s unit met many New Guinea natives. Exposure to some of them taught the young Sergeant about the dangers of pre-judging individuals.



This unique double exposure was captioned by Sgt. Gooden: “Me & Me. Yes, this is what happens after living in the jungle too long!”

Allen learned about some of the native customs and lifestyles and that the life expectancy in the village was 35-40 years. Upon expressing his surprise at the short life span, the native shared his philosophy of life with the young Staff Sergeant: “The length of life doesn’t matter but what matters is what you do with the time you do live.” As a result of his encounter with this native, Allen, who for his entire life had been the victim of prejudice and discrimination, learned the importance of not judging people by their appearance. Natives in Okinawa were nice to the soldiers, but one of the natives told Staff Sergeant Gooden of the tremendous losses that his people had suffered and wondered “what the Americans wanted from them. “

Staff Sergeant Gooden was discharged from the Army in January 1946 at

Camp Shelby, MS. It was here that life continued to show both sides — sides that still hadn’t changed despite his experiences and service to the country. He decided to cross the road to a cafeteria in order to get a sandwich. Just as before — just as it was at the time of his birth even — the young African American soldier had to go to the back of the building to place his order, and the food was stuck out to him through a back window. When he arrived back at his home and was still in uniform, two young MPs very curtly told him, “Soldier, move on.” In a fashion similar to that in which he had spoken to the draft official a few years before, Allen told the MPs, “ Son, I’ve Sergeant Gooden couldn’t help but wonder, “After all that we have been through in this war, is this what we are coming back to?”

spent more time in the latrine than you've spent in the service." Allen also told them that they no longer had any authority over him since he had been discharged. His tenure in the Army and his experiences in general, taught Allen "a lot about mistakes that were made" and "mistakes that we are making now."

After his discharge, Mr. Gooden was met by his wife in Birmingham, AL. The young veteran was faced with the side of life which produced blessings. He had a choice of two jobs: one with the Department of Interior in which he would travel up and down the East Coast examining coastal erosion and one in Colorado as a draftsman that paid a wage twelve times that which would be received in the East. Before making his final decision, the young couple traveled to Buckingham County. Besides visiting his in-laws, Allen wanted to draw up house plans and help them construct a new house to replace their former home which had been destroyed by fire while he was in the service. When he arrived in Buckingham, the young city man thought that Buckingham was the "most God forsaken place he had ever seen- dirt roads, mud, no electricity. If you wanted water, you had to go out to the well." After helping the in-laws and trying to decide which job to take, Allen decided to continue his education since the government would pay his tuition as an ex-serviceman. He enrolled at Penn State, but the decision to go there was hard. It meant Allen had to leave his wife and young children in Buckingham to care for her parents. After Penn

State, Allen studied for a while at Columbia University in New York City but again was troubled by having to leave his wife in Buckingham. Because of his ties through his wife to Buckingham, Allen finally decided to accept a job as the principal of Buckingham Elementary School despite the allure of the Colorado job.

Life continued to show Allen Gooden the side of life with blessings and beauty as his family grew. Eventually the couple was blessed with seven children: Rodney, Joyce, Jacqueline, Allen Cortez, Orestes, Basil and Jennifer. Blessings were shown as all of his children graduated from college and began productive lives. Blessings



Three of Sgt. Gooden's children—Basil, Joyce, and Orestes—followed in his footsteps and served in the U.S. Armed Forces.

were shown through his 14 grandchildren and two great grandchildren, who have received degrees and pursued various professions. Blessings were shown as Allen continued his studies at Virginia State and the University of Virginia where he received his Masters Degree in Education Administration from Virginia State during the 1960's. Blessings were shown as Allen influenced the lives of students as the Principal of Buckingham County Schools for 33 years. As principal, Allen was very strict because he was trying to teach respect toward

self and toward others - lessons that might prevent some of his students from seeing as much of the harsh side of life as Allen himself had witnessed.

In addition to his role as a principal, Allen Gooden has also been a blessing to many others through his service in various capacities. He has been active in promoting Boy Scout activities in Buckingham County. He has served on the Virginia State Board of Social Services, the Buckingham Department of Social Services, the Board of Directors of Central VA Community Health Center, the Buckingham County School Board, the Farmers Home Administration and the Buckingham Correctional Center Advisory Board. After having witnessed life from both sides - the side of prejudice and discrimination and also the side of blessings and beauty - Allen says that he has come to realize that in spite of its faults the United States is "the greatest country in the world." He has come to realize that the lessons taught by life - the sides, glimpses, realities shown to individuals by life - also apply to countries. Allen also has come to realize that the power experienced by countries comes in cycles and is fleeting: "All great superpowers have come and gone."

All of Allen's realizations- all of the lessons that life has taught him — are best expressed by his words: "We have to learn to live and think of human beings as human beings. The life you live speaks for itself."

Photos of Sergeant Gooden's WWII Service
in New Guinea and Okinawa



Sergeant Allen Gooden, Jr., served as a draftsman in the 1873rd EAB in Okinawa. The unit drew up plans for bridges, ramps, and air strips



A runway on Ie Shima constructed by the 1873rd EAB. It was also where the Japanese military and civilian envoys landed on 19 August 1945 to change planes. The Japanese party was enroute to General MacArthur's headquarters in Manila to receive instructions concerning surrender and occupation arrangements.



Sgt Gooden and members of the 1873rd EAB, USAF. Sgt. Gooden is located on the first row (seated), third from right.



Sgt. Gooden and 1873rd EAB built roads through the tropical jungles of New Guinea in 1943. The War gave Gooden glimpses of life there from both sides such as the above tropical paradise scene in New Guinea.

Both Sides of Life in New Guinea During WWII—Beauty and Horror

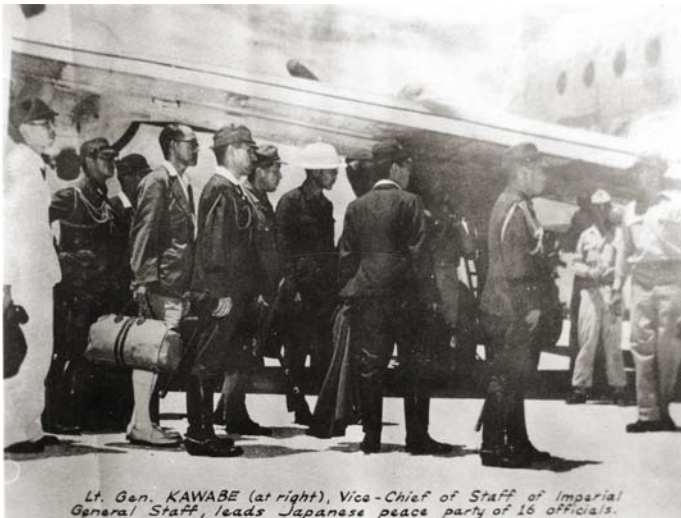


Gooden's wartime caption for this photo reads: "Should I agree that all good Japs are dead Japs?" Sgt. Gooden's commanding officer came across this captioned photo in a scrapbook the young soldier was keeping. The officer remarked: "You will never make a good soldier. You are too much of a philosopher." Could the caption also reflect the lessons learned by the young Sergeant as a result of seeing life from both sides?"



Sergeant Gooden drew up plans for cemeteries such as this Army one in a cleared New Guinea field. Having witnessed some of war's horrors, Allen wondered if he would end up at rest in a similar ceme-

Japanese Surrender Party Lands on Ie Shima, 19 August 1945



Sgt. Gooden was on Ie Shima when a delegation of Japanese military and civilian envoys arrived on 19 August 1945. The Japanese were enroute to General MacArthur's headquarters in Manila to receive instructions about their impending surrender and occupation.



Shown above are the Japanese crewmen of two specially-marked Mitsubishi G4M-1 ("Betty") aircraft, which brought envoys from Japan to Ie Shima, Ryukyu Islands, on 19 August 1945. The delegation was then transferred to a USAAF C-54 and flown to Manila, to accept surrender terms.