

The power of one Buffalo soldier, husband, father — and a catalyst for change

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Ret. 1st Sgt. Albert Curley served as a 9th Cavalry Buffalo Soldier on Fort Riley from 1940 until 1944, when the regiment was deactivated and the Army became integrated.

Four combat units were then established, and Albert was transferred to the 92nd Infantry Division.

He dedicated a total of 28 years of service to the Army — and the country — fighting in World War II, Vietnam and Japan.

And while his service and sacrifice have been honored through a Bronze Star, Purple Heart, and an otherwise highly decorated uniform, it's also been plagued with memories of mistreatment and disrespect.

"When he went to his deployment station before traveling overseas, he was on a train," said



Mike Sellman • The Daily Union

Ret. 1st Sgt. Albert Curley is interviewed at the Convention and Visitors Bureau via webcam by his grandson Albert Curley III in Los Angeles.

Albert's son, who traveled to Junction City from Maryland to take part in an interview with his father to be broadcast on You-

Tube. "The German prisoners of war were at the front of the train — the people killing Americans. But the black soldiers were at the

back. Then, when they'd stop at the PX to shop, the white American soldiers could shop first. Then the POWs, and last, the black sol-

diers. Store workers wouldn't touch them. They had to place their money on the counter, and collect their change there. But the POWs? — no problem."

Moments like this, and those of Italian soldiers stealing their shoes and claiming black soldiers had tails, are embedded in Albert's mind, though he doesn't speak about them often.

Equally, he doesn't boast about his accolades, either. Then-Secretary of State Colin Powell met Albert, giving him a signed photograph that reads, "It's because of you that I am where I am."

But, as his son said, Albert doesn't know what a hero is. He's humble, yet strong — quiet, yet powerful — and when he does speak, there's history and passion in his voice.

Albert received his bronze star and purple heart after being wounded in action.

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After successfully “cleaning out” two German machine-gun nests, he was hit attempting the third.

“They shot me up — all up the left side,” Albert said. “Then, they patched me up and sent me back out.”

Despite his wounds — both emotional and physical — Albert was, and is, a fighter. He had reason to continue on. When he joined the Army, he knew how bad it was.

He came to Fort Riley knowing the regiments were segregated and that black soldiers, and black families, were treated differently, and housed separately.

But looking back on his time at war, knowing he had enemies — both behind him and in front of him — somewhere in Albert’s heart, the decision was made to fight for this country anyway.

Why? Why fight for a country whose government was treating him like a lesser citizen?

“For change,” he said. “Thinking maybe they’ll change. Maybe I’ll represent a change — a change so maybe blacks could rent a house where they wanted in Junction City. It was different places for Negroes and whites then. So, I

thought, maybe if I go out and produce — I can produce — a change.”

When asked if he feels that change has happened, Albert’s response was swift.

“No,” he said. “The young negroes won’t let it change. The young kids, they go away and want to stay to themselves. Or, they mess up and get a gun. People are watching for the Negroes. They won’t let it change. I feel the people who’ve come up in my age, they wanted change. They wanted to advance themselves. They went to colleges, and went everywhere and looked for good jobs. But the young Negroes, they want to be separated now.”

But there are those who have changed — those who understand the fight Albert and other Buffalo Soldiers gave, and the different kind of fight required today.

Albert has fond memories of marrying his wife, Consuelo, at the black USO, and raising his son Al, Jr. and daughter, Lorita (who has since passed away) in the historic black housing, Pawnee Park. Remembering the bad, but rejoicing in the good, seems to be a way of life for Albert.

It was in positive recognition of the walking, talking heroes alive today — whose stories must be told, lest we forget — that moti-

Ret. 1st Sgt. Albert Curley’s impact on this “one”

While it’s certainly not the norm for a reporter to express his or her own feelings in an article, I admit I can’t help it in this case. Albert Curley, to me, is a symbol of all things great about The United States of America. He’s proof of the existence of good men. He’s evidence that marriage is to be cherished and valued, and that the importance of family should be placed above all else. He’s a walking reminder of the unfair, inhumane and completely unacceptable treatment of an entire people by their government — something that should not be forgotten — because when we forget our mistakes, we repeat them. While I don’t expect everyone to have the same view I do, I, personally, can’t help but be moved by the greatness of this one man, let alone the generations that follow in his footsteps. And because I am “moved,” it implies action. When a person feels moved, or compelled, they do something about it. I will take the time to share his, and America’s true story with my children, so they may teach their children, so my family — which is all I can control — never forgets, or repeats such hurtful treatment of our own people. We must all fight for change. It cannot be the responsibility of a select few.

vated Al, Jr. and his son, Albert’s grandson, to conduct a series of interviews with heroes.

Albert Curley III conducted a live streamed interview with his grandfather from California, where he now lives, while the retired first sergeant sat inside the offices of the Junction City Area Chamber of Commerce.

Albert walked in wearing his perfectly-pressed dress uniform, which still fit like a glove, despite his 93-year-old frame and the added cane he kept at his side.

That interview, given last week, was the first in the series, and can be found on YouTube. It’s titled “A

Buffalo Soldier’s story — First Sergeant (Ret) Albert Curley.”

Al, Jr. said he knew the time was now for these important interviews.

“My son and I felt after five or six years of discussion — not enough is being done to recognize these folks,” he said. “We decided to do interviews of heroes. My son owns businesses in California, and suggested doing the interviews from afar. We know there’s more Buffalo Soldiers, but we only find them in the obituaries. But we know there’s more than are going to the reunions. If we could

find them, we’d want to do a biography on each of them.”

Albert’s internationally-beamed interview had watchers from all over the world, including Italy, where Al, Jr. said there is great interest in the Buffalo Soldiers.

Stories like those of Albert and his family are not just “stories,” but lessons in history and in the profound effect one man can have on generations to come, if not an entire country.

“The schoolbooks don’t have these stories in them,” Al, Jr. said. “We run the risk of these stories being lost.”

Not only did Albert do his part to change America, and literally fight for what this country stands for, but he passed his beliefs onto his children as well.

“From Dad I’ve learned strength, honor — to be humble and honest — always tell the truth, no matter if it harms you ... and to stand up for family and stand up for your rights,” Al, Jr. said.

To listen now to the words of a man who was a Buffalo Soldier, and realize he’s not just a page in a history book that speaks of happenings from hundreds of years ago — but a living, breathing, able-bodied, man who lives today — can be a life changing experience — and precisely the kind of change Albert has always fought for.