

Vice Admiral Adam Robinson Jr., MD

Surgeon General of the U.S. Navy
Head of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

From: National Naval Hospital Center, Bethesda, MD
To: Surgeon General of the U.S. Navy

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This interview was conducted by George A. Dawson, MD.

On August 1, 2007, the U.S. Senate confirmed the new surgeon general of the U.S. Navy and director of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED). He assumed these new duties on August 27, 2007.

What was so momentous about this particular occasion, among other issues, was the fact that the person chosen for this extremely critical position in these crucial times for our nation's military forces, their families and supporters is that the person is an African American.

He is Vice Admiral Adam Robinson, Jr.!

In fact, not only was Robinson nominated and confirmed by the U.S. Senate to be the surgeon general of the U.S. Navy and head of BUMED, he was also awarded the prestigious Benjamin Banneker Award for 2007. The award is presented to those African Americans that best represent the Washington, DC-based Benjamin Banneker Institute's mission as mandated, in part, by the U.S. Congress to recognize individual(s) and best practices that seek to inspire an increase in the number of African Americans in the math and science and other technological fields.

Originally hailing from Louisville, KY, Robinson is a 1968 graduate of Louisville's Dupont Manual High School. He went on to pursue his undergraduate degree in political science from Indiana University. He received his degree from there in 1972.

Vice Admiral Robinson is the son of general practitioner Dr. Adam Robinson, Sr. and Hilda Brown Robinson. His father was a graduate of Howard University's medical school. He has a sister who is a practicing psychiatrist, a second sister who has a PhD in Italian, and a third sister who has a lifelong medical condition that prevented her from realizing her American dream. His only brother is a police officer.

During this interview session, Robinson remarked that the one person in his life that made a major impact on his life, outside of his wife, Yuko, was his grandfather,



who set an example in terms of the importance of getting a good education. He noted the trials and tribulations his grandfather had to endure to get to and then maintain some semblance of the American dream. Because his grandfather, having graduated from college in the 1890s, could barely maintain his family on the financial remunerations he was receiving as a public school teacher (and subsequent principal), he later worked for the U.S. Postal Service after passing the Civil Service Exam in 1899, as a way of improving his family's financial circumstances.

(A historical aside: During the late 19th century and into the early 20th century, some African-American physicians were not allowed to train or work at white institutions for the most part. As a result, the economic reality for African-American physicians, as in other spheres of the lives of African Americans, was to disadvantage them to the point where some had to resort to full-time employment at various federal and state agencies. Then, after their daytime employment obligations were satisfied, these physicians were referred to as "sundown doctors" because they often opened their offices in the evenings.)

Robinson went on to remark that what his grandfather accomplished at the time of legal racial separation and privations, for him, was nothing short of remarkable in that his grandfather's three sons, one of whom was Robinson's father, all had college educations. And it

is clear that such a sterling example of accomplishment in one's life—as reflected in Robinson's pedigree—can, with the right circumstances and hard work, represent a springboard to a positively fulfilling life.

Dawson: Vice admiral, how does religion—or more specifically, spirituality—inform your life personally and as a professional?

Robinson: Well, I do not mind talking about spirituality or religion, and my belief in God or a higher being. However, because I am in the Navy, which represents a cross-section of the American society, whereby there are many who are not apart of an organized religion or some who do not believe in a divine being, I cannot force my personal views on anyone, but religion is a significant part of my life. From my view, philosophically, what I try to explain to people is that there are two components to life: the personal and the professional. And the trick is to mesh those two components whereby excellence predominates. What trips up some people is they achieve the professional excellence, but they lack the personal excellence in their lives, which, in my view, is a prescription for trouble. This then can lead to problems within their family life and/or relationships, for examples.

Dawson: Vice admiral, you graduated from Indiana University Medical School in 1976. Was there a person or event that you recall now that made a positive difference for you as a student there?

Robinson: Yes. There was someone who did make a positive difference in my medical school experience. It was my microbiology teacher, Professor Eugene Weinberg. I really bonded with him while in medical school. He helped me tremendously as a confidante and friend. To this very day, I am still friends with him and his wonderful wife and their family.

Dawson: How did you become involved with the military establishment, and when?

Robinson: Well, I became involved with the military establishment while in medical school. I was chosen to be in the first class as Armed Forces Health Professional Scholars Program. In this program, we were obligated to pay back one to one. That is, we would draw a stipend or salary and have our tuition costs paid by the U.S. military if we gave back one year of service in return. When you consider the tremendously high costs it takes to obtain a medical degree in today's economic terms, it is an excellent program. In fact, it was my plan to do my four years in the Navy and return to the private sector, but the opportunities afforded to me were too great to ignore. In areas of professional satisfaction, the extensive travel, the many medical experiences, and—well, here I am some 25 years later as the new U.S. Navy surgeon general—all gave me the personal and professional satisfaction to know that a military career was my in future.

There are so many opportunities for this nation's young people in joining the military services. If young Americans, especially Africans Americans in this instance, want to pursue a graduate degree from most institutions of learning in the world, the military funding offers scholarships and other programs for students to obtain the desired post-graduate degrees. When one examines the role of the military in providing leadership in our community, for the most part, the military has served as a vital resource. Our young people need to understand that they have to take advantage of the many opportunities available to them. This would include opportunities offered by the military because if they do not take advantage of the programs out there, there are plenty of people ready to take their place at the table.

Dawson: Vice admiral, why did you choose surgery as your professional area of expertise?

Robinson: In this instance, my father, Dr. Adam Robinson Sr., was crucial. He trained in Baltimore, MD, at Provident Hospital as a surgical intern from 1946–1949. Unfortunately, he did not sit for his boards, which he greatly regretted. He eventually practiced in Louisville as a general practitioner. This served as a significant motivation for me. Also, my training stint at the National Naval Hospital Center directed my focus to colorectal surgery. While there, I was fortunate enough to work under Navy Captain and Colorectal Surgeon Dr. Lee Smith. I also basically ran the proctology clinic for the four years I was there at the National Naval Medical Center.

In 1982, when I finished my general surgery obligations, I then went to The University of Illinois-affiliated Carle Clinic Foundation in Champagne–Urbana, IL, to complete my training in colorectal surgery. I completed this program in 1984.

Dawson: So you completed your surgical training programs in the mid 1980s and took your boards. How would describe your board examination experience?

Robinson: In general surgery, we take both written and oral boards. I studied very hard for the written exam segment because I did not score well on the in-service exams during my training and that scared me enough so that I really hunkered down in my books and reviews—so that by the time I took the exam I had prepared so well that I was very comfortable with the material and passed. The oral board was a bit more challenging, but, again, I passed.

My experience during my colorectal boards was somewhat taxing for me emotionally, but, again, I was able to muster enough strength and pass. I recall one question the examiner asked me involved the inguinal ring. That is, he wanted me to describe the layers of tissue there from the inside out. I was so nervous I answered the question instead beginning from the outside in.

Dawson: Vice admiral, do you hold any academic appointments?

Robinson: I am currently a member of the Society of Black Academic Surgeons. I am also an associate professor of surgery at the National Health Sciences School of Medicine. In the past, I served as program director of general surgery and its training program at the Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, VA.

[By the way, Robinson earned an MBA degree from The University of South Florida in the 1990s.]

Dawson: Vice admiral, it seems you have been a trail-blazer to date in your career. What were your and/or your family experiences during the Civil Rights Movement?

Robinson: Although we did not protest directly in marches as such, we did, as I recall, play a crucial role in the movement in Louisville.

At the insistence of our mother, our family were the first African Americans to be involved with the local symphony orchestra. My brother, mother and a sister played the violin, and I played the French horn. We were members of the Woodrow Johnson Youth Orchestra for more than 15 years and, considering the raucous time period, they were not nice times for us as the only black orchestra members. It was painful to go to orchestra practice sessions, where the students and their parents were not too nice, to put it mildly. This episode taught us that regardless of what people say about you, one needs to do what it takes to survive and prosper from the negative experience.

Another episode during my youth also now sticks out in my mind that had “movement” written all over it. The public school superintendent at the time was a man named Omar Carmichael. In 1955/1956, Carmichael integrated Louisville public schools. As one can imagine, he caught pure hell for that. My mother, as a result, felt that my sisters and brother and I should attend the “best” schools. She then enrolled my sisters in a school that was on the east side of Louisville—which was very white, very rich—which had a precollege curriculum. Well, the rest is history, as reflected in my family’s narrative of success since.

Dawson: Vice admiral, what are some of your goals as the new Navy surgeon general?

Robinson: Well I have many goals but to list a few:

1. To ensure that the message gets out that we are a vibrant organization that is committed to all of the healthcare aspects for force protection and medical advancement.
2. To ensure that our organization is committed to care for our warriors, wherever they are located in the world, and our families and retirees.
3. To make sure that our citizens understand that the cost of freedom is not free. In my humble opinion, I feel that every man or woman, personally, should be committed to serve this great nation, especially in times of need. Serving is the only way we can ensure that we remain a strong nation.

4. To attempt to ensure that our forces reflect the demographics of the nation. Our nation is made up of a multitude of ethnicities and religions, therefore, all of us need to be involved in the security of our country and the fabric of life of the nation.

I am not asking people to commit to 30 years like I did, but rather to commit to a three- or four-year commitment and get a head-start in life. The military can serve as a launch pad for a career in many competitive areas in civilian life.

Dawson: Dr. Robinson, any advice for younger physicians or those considering the military?

Robinson: There are a lot of people out there, particularly African Americans, who do not have opportunities or do not know how they are going to accomplish their goals once they get an opportunity. I would suggest that in addition to professional development, a person needs spiritual development. If you do not have a personal life that is well grounded via a spiritual life, what good is all that you have accomplished? In my opinion, your accomplishments do not mean anything unless they connect to family, basic values and the concept that I need to do something to help someone else. That is, that I am only going to come this way once; therefore, I need to help someone along the way.

Dawson: Vice admiral, if you had the opportunity to relive any aspect of your medical career to date, would you change anything, if anything?

Robinson: Excellent question in which I will answer this way: Would I change anything? No! Would I have joined the U.S. Navy in the first place? Yes! If I had to, would I leave the Navy early? No! Has my time in the U.S. Navy so far been satisfying or fulfilling? Yes! Could there have been other paths taken? Yes, Always!

Here I’m reminded of Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Less Taken.” That is, for me, there is always another path, but the path we take, we are committed to it. We are committed to it in the sense that the path we took, we have to make the most out of our lives. Then, hopefully, we have a done good job so that at the end we can say, “Congratulations, job well done!”

Dawson: Vice admiral, thank you for your time and effort. Also, I would like to thank Commander Chito Pepler of the U.S. Navy’s Office of Public Affairs.

Robinson: Thank you.

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