And at 79 years young, he learned he made DoDEA history as one of the agency’s first African American students.

Treated like all of the rest

Malvin Gilmer recalls experiences as one of DoDEA’s first African American students.

After seeing combat in both WWII and Korea, Mr. Gilmer’s father, Melvin Gilmer, Sr., retired as a Major from the U.S. Army. He returned to his home state of Michigan, where Detroit Public Schools recruited him to oversee its cross-district busing program — a perfect fit, given his military experience as company commander for a motor pool. He died in 1993 and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Mr. Gilmer was one of two African American students to attend Okinawa University School in 1949, making him the second black DoDEA student in the Department of Defense schools, ever. He recalls he lived in Okinawa to this day with his mother and father — not on any official military base, but all on their own, navigating all of the American Exceptionalism territory.

“I thought there was a lot of benefits of being an officer’s kid,” Gilmer said. “I had a lot of freedom and things away from the base I could do… I could drive, but I not much of a driver.”

As a rule, military families were more successful than their non-military counterparts, and few African Americans were able to “tread” in that territory, history shows. It was such a long time ago. “I’m not even sure my father was allowed in the officer’s club,” he said. “It was such a long time ago. All the things were so [different].”

“We used to have ‘calm time,’ where we would all take naps on a mat in the middle of the day,” he remembers. “We would have 30 minutes and we would all take our naps.”

He remembers Okinawa as a scenic place, with beautiful ocean views sharply contrasted by large holes in the terrain left behind from the battle that had taken place on the island only a few years before. “There’s a lot of ghosts on the island,” Gilmer adds. “I remember seeing a lot of things there that would make you feel nervous. You were the only one in the world there… You were the only one of the rest of the students.”

Mr. Gilmer says he had no problems dealing with the “racism” of Okinawa. “I remember every time we would go on our little trips, we would always get the best seats. They’d let us eat with the officers, and we were treated like all of the rest.”

There weren’t very many African American officers on the island at that time.”

“I’ve shared it already with some of my family, and they just think it is awesome.”

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