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Interview no. 290.1

Lucien Adams

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Lucien Adams (1922-)
INTERVIEWER: Sarah E. John
PROJECT: Bicentennial
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 13, 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 290A
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 290A
TRANSCRIBER: Cristina Aguiar
DATE TRANSCRIBED: September 1, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in Port Arthur, Texas in 1922; veteran of World War II; employed by the Veterans Administration since 1946.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; discrimination; experiences in the Army; events that led to his receiving the Medal of Honor; his work with the Veterans Administration; his views on the Bicentennial Celebration in which Mexican American Medal of Honor Winners were honored in El Paso, Texas; views on the Chicano Movement; personal comments.

20 minutes; 9 pages

[This is an Oral History Interview with Mr. Lucien Adams of San Antonio, Texas, June 13, 1976. Interviewing is Sarah John for the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso.]

J: Mr. Adams, could you tell us please when and where you were born?

A: I was born in Port Arthur, Texas, October 26, 1922.

J: Can you tell me who your parents were and what they did for a living?

A: My father worked on the railroad tracks; my mother was a housewife.

J: What are their names?

A: My father's name the same as mine: Lucien Adams, Sr. My mother's name was Rosa Ramírez.

J: Were they originally from Port Arthur, also?

A: No, [but] they're from Texas.

J: What influence did your parents have on you as you were growing up?

A: The influence my parents had on me was generally to take advice, respect the elder, look up to the older people with respect. I have followed that theory all the way through my life.

J: Could you tell me please about your elementary schooling?

A: I went to school in Port Arthur, first to Webster Elementary School and Franklin Elementary School; Thomas Jefferson Junior High School. I interrupted my education to help support my brothers and sisters. When war broke out, I went to work with the Consolidated Iron Works. They made the warships and infantry landing crafts. I worked there about 18 months and then I went into the Army in 1943.

J: Did you ever experience any racial or ethnic discrimination while you were in grade school, junior high school, or high school?

A: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact it began when I started first grade.

J: I guess schools were still segregated at that point, if I'm right.

A: Back in my home town, there were not that many minorities or Mexican Americans, that we had separate schools. We had just one school.

We attended with all, so we didn't have the [segregation]. But still there was a lot of discrimination back in those days.

J: What types of things happened?

A: As far as I recall, when I first started school in the first grade, the little Anglo students didn't want us to get on the school grounds. I didn't know what "playing hookie" was until I found out a little later on in years that I had played hookie, and it was simply because the little Anglo kids didn't want us to go to the class with them. So, I did miss school, oh, I'd say a month or two in first grade. So I expect that [I've seen discrimination] ever since I was six years old.

J: You said that you joined the military in 1943, is that correct?

A: 1943; February '43.

J: What was the reaction of your family and friends when you went in?

A: When I went into the service we went to the Greyhound Bus Station: myself, my uncle (who was the same age as I was), and then a lot of the neighbors who were called to service. We went to Houston, Texas to get sworn in. Then we came into Fort Sam Houston where we were inducted. But the parents of my parents(my grandparents) and the parents of the other neighbors that went in the service were there to see us off at the bus station.

J: Can you tell me about your experiences at Boot Camp?

A: I went to Camp Butner, North Carolina and took my basic training there. The training was good. It came in very handy in later months. In fact, I went to Camp Butner, North Carolina in February, and by November of '43 (which was about nine months later) I was on my way to Europe.

J: Were there any other Mexican Americans in your unit at that time?

A: Yes, there were several Mexican Americans during basic training and also overseas. I was a replacement in an organization that was a regular Army organization, which was the 3rd Infantry Division. When I joined them, the organization was not entirely of the original members, because they landed in South Africa; and when I joined them on the Anzio Beach in January of '44, that organization had been replaced time and time again--way before I got there.

J: Did you ever experience any discrimination in the military or were you ever a witness to any discrimination toward other people in the military?

A: No, not in the service, especially during the war. During the war it may exist in the rare echelons on stateside; but in combat and overseas during a wartime period, there is no time to observe discrimination.

J: Would you like to comment on the events that led to your winning the Congressional Medal of Honor?

A: Yes. The event that led to me receiving the Medal of Honor was, the organization, which is the 30th Regiment, 3rd Battalion, was spearheading a move through the mountains there in France. Two companies of the battalion were cut off for about 10 hours; and finding out that we could not make contact with the cut off companies, the battalion commander made a request that we make contact with the cut off companies. I led a patrol to see what was the obstacle, what was the strength that was cutting off the two companies that were cut off. So I made my patrol, and I noticed them on a road block, which was a path. The enemy had established a road block in which they captured one of our half tracks and were mending it and they set up three machine gun

emplacements on the road block, seeing that our other two remaining companies could not contact the two cut off companies. So I made my report back to the company commander, and he said, "Since you were the one that made the patrols and made the report, you know what's up in the front, what's ahead of us. You take your squad, [I was a squad leader] and you're going to lead the company on this break-through to make contact with the two companies that were cut off." So I took my squad and the company got in position to make the move, to try to make contact with the two cut off companies. So, my squad was the attacking squad, trying to re-open the road block. Immediately upon our line of departure we came under intense enemy fire, which was from these three machine gun emplacements and also this half track. We had not advanced five yards into our company when the fireworks began and immediately my buddies began hollering for medics, so we knew we were in for a battle. So I made my advance to a point where the enemy machine gun emplacement must have been about 15 yards in front of me directly, and I could see the fire coming from the machine gun. I immediately returned fire from my automatic weapon to the first machine gun emplacement and noticed that the fire from that machine gun had slowed up. To make sure that it was out of commission, I threw a hand grenade into the emplacement. Then I advanced from that position (from the first machine gun emplacement that I knocked out) and noticed automatic fire coming from another machine gun, and it must have been about five yards to the right of the first emplacement; so I returned the fire in the direction where the fire was coming from. That time I used as much fire as I could return with my automatic weapon and also with

the use of hand grenades; I knocked out the second. Then right behind that one was the third machine gun emplacement. I advanced to it within a very short distance and used hand grenades and also machine gun fire and knocked it out. I was credited with nine enemy killed, two enemy captured and opening the road block that was the obstacle that was holding us back from making contact with our batallion. That was the action for which I was recommended the Medal of Honor and was awarded the Medal of Honor. Previous to that event on a breakthrough from Anzio going to Rome, before D-Day came about (June the 6th of 1944), I had been recommended for the Medal of Honor once before; but for some reason or another it did not go through. As a result of the first action I was awarded the Bronze Star with the cluster. So that's about it.

J: Well deserved. In proportion to any other group in the United States, more Mexican Americans have won this medal. Do you have any comment on why, as a group (proportionately), they have won more of these medals?

A: I don't know why it appears to be that the Latin Americans or Chicanos or ethnic group persons seem to have been awarded the highest medal that the government of the United States award their people that are entitled to receive such recognition. But I think first of all it is that we think about bringing up our sincerity and Americanism, patriotism. When we enlist in the service, when we're drafted in the service, when we take the job assignment, [we take] the responsibilities of such a job very seriously. I don't think that percentage wise [we're] objectors, draft dodgers or complainers. I think that we, as

Americans first, second as Mexican Americans, take our obligation very seriously, and we do our best at what may fall in life or otherwise.

J: What was your rank when you retired from the service?

A: I didn't retire from the service. I was in the service from February '43 to September the 7th, 1945. I didn't stay in the service because I was offered an opportunity to work with the Veterans Administration. President Truman put out an executive order. Any recipient of the Medal of Honor that wished to accept employment with the Veterans Administration had a job, regardless of his qualifications. You wanted a job which started with \$2,999 a year (which was a GS7 at that time) and that was money in 1946, 1945. So I figured that this was my chance to have a permanent job, a decent job; a job that I thought that I would receive a lot of satisfaction from, which consists of serving those who had served (whether they were veterans, widows, orphans, dependant parents, parents who lost their son in service) and to see that they got what Congress approved for them, for the service that their loved ones rendered to their government. I have been with the Veterans Administration since January the 4th of '46 to the present time, and I have enjoyed my work immensely. There's no job on the outside that I would consider more satisfying, because you see what you accomplish, you see that the individuals, the persons that have any benefits coming to them, receive them. With your assistance and experience, it makes things a little bit easier for them to get what's coming to them. In the same line, for those veterans that returned and have not applied for many, many of their benefits

that they are entitled to, it's no one's fault that they have not received them. If they would only take a few minutes of their time to call the nearest V. A. office, the nearest County Service officer's representative to seek information, it would surprise them to know that if they applied, had inquired, they would be receiving what they were entitled to. So my job has been a very gratifying, a very satisfying job. I have accomplished a million dollars worth of satisfaction and more, working in my job, in my position.

J: What are your feelings and thoughts about this particular occasion in which you are taking part this week?

A: I think that the LULACs Chapter and the citizens of El Paso should be commended, should be praised by its citizens for such efforts of this group and other groups (Veterans of Foreign Wars, G.I. Forum, and first the LULACs) who have taken it upon themselves to plan this occasion, to gather the recipients of the Medal of Honor of Spanish-Mexican extraction, to unite, bring us together, to celebrate this Bicentennial celebration. It is patriotism, second it is Americanism. It's a recognition that all citizens should be aware of. Now we're two hundred years old--we will be July the 4th--and it is the efforts of little organizations that keep reminding us what this country stands for. So I have nothing but praise for the organizations that are responsible for having us together in this event.

J: Mr. Adams, what is your view toward the Chicano Movement?

A: My views toward the Chicano Movement? This is something that should have been done many, many years ago. It is really not a move, it is only an effort. If we would have been taught, I think, when we were

younger, that if we had educated ourselves, educated our children, we would have been better prepared-- not to fight for what is right, for a certain group; it is not that. But if we had educated ourselves, if we had had the opportunity to get the education, we would have accomplished a lot more. You see now in the Yellow Pages in the telephone directory many, many doctors, attorneys, professional people [who are Spanish surnamed]. Years ago you wouldn't see too many Garcias, Rodriguezes--common names or any Latin American names; not too many. But now with education, communication, organization, unity, I think that the aims and purposes for the Latin Americans will be accomplished.

J: So, you do see it as a positive movement?

A: Oh, yes.

J: What do you think of the word "Chicano" itself?

A: I dislike it very much.

J: Can you tell us why?

A: Very simply, it's very discriminating. You don't call any Anglo group by nationality because of his nationality. You don't call the Italians, "Wop-Americans"; you don't call a Jew a "Kike." I think it's very degrading. You are an American, period. I don't see it; but if that's the way they look at it, to try to get identified, to be identified because you're a Mexican American and you want to be classified as such, I think it's little bit backwards. It's very distasteful to me.

J: Do you remember when you first heard the term?

A: I think I heard it in the 60's; I heard it in the 60's. I don't think

it's proper, but if that's the way certain groups want to be recognized, it's perfectly all right with me; but I think it's degrading.

J: Do you have anything you'd like to add, anything you'd like to tell the young people or the general public?

A: It's not advice; it's only a comment for the youth of America, for the citizens of tomorrow, the leaders of tomorrow: Be patriotic, respect your flag, respect your elders.

J: It has been a great honor to have this interview with you. I thank you very, very much.

A: It has been a pleasure talking to you.

J: Thank you.

A: You're welcome.

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INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

No. 2904

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Biography; Military
Career; events leading
to his receiving
to medal of Honor;
feelings + thoughts
on the occasion
(of their being honored
in El Paso); the
Chicano Movement;
his views on the
word Chicano; comment.

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