

Retired General Back in South Hill, Practicing Law and Sharing What He Has Learned

by Dawn Chase

Day Work to Duty

by Bruce E. Robinson

www.bruceerobinson.com, \$8.50

Bruce E. Robinson's *Day Work to Duty* is an autobiography with stories you wish you'd heard from an admired relative when you were growing up — an account of “what my life brought to me and what I did with it.” It's a retroactive blueprint, matter-of-fact, with no conceit in its pages.

Not that pride wouldn't be justified. On August 1, 2007, Robinson retired as a major general in the U.S. Army Reserve, after commanding the 98th Division (Institutional Training) — the Iroquois Warriors, with headquarters in Rochester, New York. The 98th was charged not only with preparing weekend warriors for a long-term mission with Operation Iraqi Freedom, but also with preparing American soldiers to train an Iraqi security force.

Robinson, 60, now is a busy South Hill lawyer — a bankruptcy trustee, a substitute judge, a special justice who presides over adult mental competency hearings, and a twenty-plus-year member of the Virginia Legal Aid Society's board of directors.

But that's deep into the story.

Day Work to Duty traces the development of a man who was born into the projects of Philadelphia. He didn't have a drive toward any particular career or life dream — he just wanted to help others and make a decent living along the way.

What he had was the ability and willingness to work hard. Those traits caught the eyes of mentors throughout his life — another gift. And, from his teens on, he could recognize an opportunity and grasp it.

This is what Robinson says of “day work”:

I am of the stock of hardy people initially tied to the soil of the

American South. One distinguishing feature they shared is their willingness to do a day's work. “Day work” was the common vocational vernacular for women of color who did domestic work. It was a form of entrepreneurship by which one could work in multiple venues during the week and not be controlled by one master.

It was through day work that Robinson's family was able to purchase a home and move out of the projects. Robinson himself did odd jobs throughout his childhood, and added part of his earnings to the family's budget.

When school ended, Robinson piled into the car with his siblings to ride to South Side Virginia, where they spent summers helping extended family with their tobacco crop. They had to prearrange their Virginia rest stops so they would not encounter facilities that did not welcome African Americans.

Robinson received an appointment to West Point, which taught him to study and tested his endurance in many ways. In his third year, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and riots broke out across the nation. Robinson and other cadets gazed at newspaper photos of soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division guarding the U.S. Capitol. “Why are your people doing this?” other cadets asked Robinson.

After completing his five-year Regular Army obligation, Robinson left active-duty service but entered the Army Reserve. Thus began the thread of his civilian life, braided with reserve duty and training that prepared him for his future role in Iraq.

He tells of one year's employment at Philip Morris, manufacturing cigarettes; law school at the University of Richmond; and his first law practice on Hull Street in South Richmond, where he was mentored by, among others,



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Circuit Judge Frank A.S. Wright, and where he invested in real estate with the help of Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court Judge Arlin F. Ruby.

Robinson writes of his court-appointed criminal defense work and of prosecuting as a commonwealth's attorney, and the philosophy of justice he developed from those roles.

On the military side, he describes the commitment a military spouse must make and ends his salutes to each of his two former wives with: “We ... are friends.” The challenges of his mission interweave with funerals of 98th Division soldiers, with Robinson presiding as the head of the “Iroquois Warriors family.”

His final sketches include musing on the advantages of living alone, his run in the thirty-first Richmond Marathon, and the unfolding of his beliefs about the role of God in his life. All were contemplative experiences that helped him integrate the ribbons of his life — the duty to country, family, profession, and community.

In our cynical society, we're sometimes primed to roll our eyes when a writer enters this territory. But Robinson's perspective is so even, so grounded, and so dedicated to finding the ground, that we can accept his conclusions as the gift he recognizes them to be.