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Wilson praises Army's diversity

Retired general says much work remains ahead

BY MICK WALSH
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Quoting educator Mary McLeod Bethune, Apostles Luke and Paul and even the president of Romania, retired Gen. Johnnie E. Wilson kept an overflow audience entertained Wednesday during Fort Benning's annual Black History Month luncheon. He also made references to the King family, Buffalo Soldiers and Tuskegee Airmen.

"The Army has long led the way in diversity as no other institution has," said Wilson, one of four black men ever to achieve the rank of four-star general in the Army.

And he should know.

He teased his audience that he enlisted in 1961 in order to get money to attend college -- "money I'm still waiting for," he said.

But that short hitch turned into a 38-year career, one that ended with his retirement in 1999. He rose from a 17-year-old private out of Lorain, Ohio, to attend Officer Candidate School and later achieve a rank only one man before him had ever reached.

His father, Thomas Wilson Jr., had moved his family to Ohio from Louisiana, where Wilson was born in Baton Rouge in 1944. They were part of the massive urban migration north by blacks after World War II. Wilson was the second oldest of 12 children, growing up in a cramped, three-bedroom house in the federal public housing projects on Lorain's south side near Lake Erie.

Though the military had been integrated since the Truman presidency, Wilson's early days in the Army were spent during some of the most turbulent times in the history of American race relations.

"We should be pleased with the progress the Department of Defense has made over the years in race relations," he said, "but there is still much work to do. We must always be on guard against complacency."

Wilson, now the president and chief operating officer of Dimensions International Inc., a company run by Russell Wright -- son of Wilson's hosts, Dr. Bob Wright and his wife, June -- praised the troops in his audience.

"America is proud of all Fort Benning soldiers," he said, scanning the room at the Officers Club, "for your dedication to duty, your selfless service and your commitment to freedom."

Peppered through his speech were references to education. "I don't know what the future holds," he said, noting that students from Faith Middle School and Spencer High School had taken part in the 90-minute program. "But I do know that you hold the future. Keep learning; and a few of you will become heroes."

With the 2003 retirement of Gen. Larry R. Ellis as commanding general of the U.S. Forces Command in Atlanta, the last of the four black four-stars has left active service. The others: Colin Powell, the late Roscoe Robinson and Wilson.

But that doesn't preclude a future minority general from climbing the ladder to the top. When Ellis retired, there were 34 blacks, nine Hispanics, five Asian Pacific Islanders and one American Indian holding the rank of brigadier general or higher.

Wilson closed his speech, quoting from a Bethune poem: "I leave you love. I leave you hope. I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. I leave you respect for the use of power. I leave you faith. I leave you racial dignity."