Robert Harris Adams

The Fallen Cougars Project

Tiny Pomeroy, Washington site in Garfield County. To this day it remains the only incorporated city in Garfield County, perhaps they should change the name to Pomeroy County like they did with Asotin under similar circumstances. Regardless, the town was initially home to part of the Nez Perce Trail. When the Americans went out west, the future site of Pomeroy was in the path of the Lewis and Clark expedition. By the 1830s the town of Pomeroy battled with neighboring towns Asotin and Pataha for the position as County Seat. Instead, they split the baby, dividing it into two counties and Pomeroy became the county seat in Garfield County. Not much has changed since, a few fires worth noting, but not much else. The population remains consistently around 1,200 people, mostly farmers and their families. An idyllic and rugged little place. This is the town that Robert Harris Adams grew up in. It is where he went to school and where he became the kind of man that would defend his home, his community, and his nation when they were in danger.

Harry Adams was born in 1881 in Texas, but moved to Pomeroy, Washington with his family in 1887. His father opened the local grocery store in town and raised his family there. He attended Washington State College and returned home to Pomeroy to in 1914 when married Minta "Avis" Adams. Harry took over the family grocery store in town after his father passed away in 1917, and using his business acumen and university education, the business soon became the Burch-Adams company.[1] Avis took care of the family home and soon enough,

[1] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) February 2, 1951. Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/568626715/?article=ba3dfa5a-cae5-416a-b009-8e11355bc23d&focus=0.27502903,0.6481689,0.38646564,0.8128647&xid=3355&_gl=1*9l52ry*_gcl_au*MTc5MjY1Mjk2MC4xNzIwMTk3NzYy*_ga*ODY4Mzc2OTEzLjE2NDMxODU1MTM.*_ga_4QT8FMEX30*OThkMjQyMmItZmRhYy00NzI3LTg3YmEtNzU2MWFhNmE3ZmJiLjE1NC4xLjE3MjQxMzkzNTkuNjAuMC4w*_ga_LMK6K2LSJH*OThkMjQyMmItZmRhYy00NzI3LTg3YmEtNzU2MWFhNmE3ZmJiLjM3LjEuMTcyNDEzOTM1OS4wLjAuMA.

children. By 1920 the couple already had daughter Virginia, but on April 16, 1920, the couple welcomed their only son, Robert Harris Adams, to the family. In 1923 they brought home the final addition to the family in their youngest daughter Patricia.[2] Given events later in his life, one can safely assume that Robert was particularly close with his little sister. Robert was baptized at the Episcopal Church of Spokane on October 21, 1923.[3] The Adams children attended local Pomeroy schools and graduated. Rober then followed in his father's footsteps and went down the road to Pullman, Washington where he enrolled at Washington State College as a Pre-Dental major.[4]

From Pullman to the Sky – Short Time in School and Military Service

There is not a lot of information available on his time at Washington State College. *The Chinook* yearbook seems to list him as a pledge for the Sigma Nu Fraternity in 1940, as well as a member of the Intercollegiate Knights (alongside another Fallen Cougar in Rene Dupraz) but there is not much else.[5] It seems Robert instead dreamed of flying. As the clouds of war continued to grow darker overseas, perhaps he knew it was more important that he learn to fight than to fix teeth, at least for the time being. His instincts were not wrong.

By 1941 relations between the United States of America and the Empire of Japan had soured. Japan had been at war with China since 1937. The Japanese home islands were not rich in natural

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[2] Robert Harris Adams in United States of America, Bureau of the Census. Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930. Washington. Located: https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/111658863:6224?tid=&pid=&queryId=239ba858-472a-4636-8957-6ea4f4c38139&_phsrc=kmf13&_phstart=successSource

[3] Robert Harris Adams in the Episcopal Church of Spokane, Baptismal Records, 1923. Located: https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/12132:61608?tid=&pid=&queryId=503bf25c-9796-44a6-8f17-10ecd9926c17&_phsrc=kmf5&_phstart=successSource

[4] C. James Quann, *WSU Military Veterans: Heroes and Legends* (Pullman, Washington State University Publishers), 173.

[5] Robert Harris Adams in *The Chinook*, Washington State College Yearbook, 1940. 257 & 291 Located: https://content.libraries.wsu.edu/digital/collection/chinook/id/27291/rec/41

resources and the material needs of conducting a war with a nation the size of China were immense. Japan had only been able to conduct the war successfully because the empire received a large amount of its oil from the United States. Without American oil imports Japan could not hope to win its war in China. When the United States cut off oil shipments to Japan in 1940, a response the Japanese invasion of French Indo-China, the Imperial high command came up with a plan to take the resources by force. Their strategy was to take the resource-rich islands in the Pacific, fortify them against counter-attack, and continue their war in China in the West while extracting the natural resources and fending off the United States, Great Britain, and their allis in the East.

The surprise attack on the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, is well known. However, the impact of the attack on Pearl Harbor distracts from the broader campaign throughout the Pacific that, when viewed in its entirety, constitutes the largest military campaign in history. Between December 7th and December 10th, 1941, the Japanese empire attacked or invaded British colonies of Malaya, Singapore, and Hong Kong as well as the United States naval bases on Wake Island, Guam, the Philippines, and more. They opened a battlefront that was 6,000 miles wide north-to-south. The United States desperately needed men of intelligence, training, and rarified skills to fill the ranks of their armor if they had any hope of victory against such an organized and motivated enemy, they needed men like Robert Harris Adams. Luckily for the United States, he had come to the conclusion that a life of service was his calling before they even asked.

After finishing his second year at Washington State College, he voluntarily enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps. He was listed as 5’10 inches tall, weighing 158 pounds with blue

eyes, red hair, and a light complexion.[6] Staying local for his initial bouts of training, he finished his primary and secondary flight schools at Lewiston State Normal School and Clarkston Airport before he was sent South where he finished his training and earned his wings at Luke Field in Arizona on August 22, 1942. He left the United States in November of 1942 prepared for war.[7]

Robert achieved the rank of First Lieutenant when he was sent to the Pacific to fly combat missions against the Japanese Empire. He was assigned to the 80th Pursuit Squadron, (later the 80th fighter squadron) 8th Pursuit Fighter Group. The 80th was thrown into combat quickly in the South Pacific, scoring its first Aeriel victories in August of 1942. Over the course of the war they would account for more than 200 aerial combat victories, several of which were the handiwork of one Robert Adams from Pomeroy.[8] Robert began fighting on December 3, 1942. In June of 1943 he was cited as a hero of engagements between American and Japanese combat pilots somewhere in New Guinea. During one escorting mission, Robert engaged enemy fighters with his comrades in the skies over New Guinea when all of a sudden his guns jammed. Seemingly undeterred he "he lingered in the skies during the battle as a decoy, luring the enemy planes to fire upon him until they become a target for other American pilots." On June 22 he was engaged in another intense mission where his squadron alone faced 36 Japanese "Zero" fighters in the air. Adams and his squadron, "The Head Hunters" (named for the famed headhunting tribes in New Guinea that they now defended) scored 14 kills and 9 probable kills without losing a single man themselves. In his time as a combat pilot, dating from December 3, 1942 to January

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[6] Robert Harris Adams World War II Draft Registration Card, Located: https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/36810454:2238?tid=&pid=&queryId=6058edf9-457e-4e6d-92c9-8efe273af098&_phsrc=kmf1&_phstart=successSource

[7] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) September 26, 1943, "Pomeroy's Ace Pilot Missing." Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/567867532/?match=1

[8] Kunsan Air Base Database, 80th Fighter Squadron History. Located: https://www.kunsan.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/412725/80th-fighter-squadron/

13, 1943 Robert participated in 25 operational flight missions against enemy fighters and bombers in the South Pacific.[9]

While he was engaged in seemingly non-stop action against the enemy, he still found time to write home routinely. *The Spokesman-Review* newspaper in Spokane, Washington eagerly covered the exploits of the local boy turned war hero, referring to him as "Pomeroy's Ace Pilot" on numerous occasions. They covered some of the letters he sent home and tracked his missions as best they could. In one letter Lieutenant Adams sent home to his parents he informed them that he was waiting at his airfield for the arrival of his new P-38 fighter plane to arrive. He had already come up with a touching name for his new digs, he named her the "Princess Pat" after his little sister Patricia. The good news continued to roll in when, on September 22, 1943, another article announced, "Pomeroy Flyer Gets Medal."[10] Another article in the *Spokesman-Review* noted that he was to have the oak cluster added to his Air Medal for "Meritorious achievement while participating in an aerial flight near Salamaua, New Guinea, in May 1943. Lieutenant Adams was acting as an escort on a mission to Wau, New Guinea, when his formation was ordered to intercept a greatly superior number of Jap planes . . . Lieutenant Adams shot one enemy plane down in flames. . . the courage, skill and devotion to duty displayed by Lieutenant Adams on this occasions are worthy of commendation."[11] But not all was well in his letters, he also sent news that was less uplifting and rather foreboding. He

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[9] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) September 26, 1943, "Pomeroy's Ace Pilot Missing." Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/567867532/?match=1

[10] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) October 3, 1943. "Missing Pilot Cited Again." Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/567697714/?match=1&terms=Robert%20H.%20Adams

[11] Article catalogued in Robert Harris Adams Find-A-Grave database. Located: https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56780813/robert_harris-adams#view-photo=220816536

reported to his parents that he had been "flying constantly with an oxygen mask and that he was physically tired and was hoping for a rest leave."[12]

Tragically, on September 2 of 1943 he was officially reported as missing in action by the adjutant general, the article noting that he was a "Washington State College Man."[13] Sadly, though the family likely maintained hope, Robert Adam's body was never recovered from the theatre where he waged war against tyrannical regimes. On October 22, 1943 the *Spokeman-Review* again ran a rather touching article detailing the official ceremony to award Robert his medal. Instead of receiving it himself, the article has a large photo showing it being pinned to his baby sister, the inspiration for his P-38, Patricia Adams. The article notes that she was escorted to the ceremony by their father, as well.[14]

Newspapers back home were choked with articles lamenting the loss of the local hero. Without a body to lay to rest, he was instead memorialized several times. First his name was inscribed on the Manila American Cemetery Memorial, Walls of the Missing, in the Philippines. But if you want to see a memorial for this brave man who went from a kid in a one-horse-town to master of the skies, you do not need to travel near as far. Instead you can head up to Pullman, Washington and visit his Alma Mater. There you will find the World War II Memorial dedicated to all Cougars who gave their lives to preserve a free world. On the memorial below Bryan Hall's watchful tower you will see his name emblazoned in golden letters alongside all the Fallen Cougars who perished in defense of their home and their way of life.

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[12] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) September 26, 1943, "Pomeroy's Ace Pilot Missing." Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/567867532/?match=1

[13] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) October 3, 1943. "Missing Pilot Cited Again." Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/567697714/?match=1&terms=Robert%20H.%20Adams

[14] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) October 22, 1943 "Given Medal for Missing Brother". Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/567711011/?match=1