

Race in the Crucible of War: African American Soldiers and Race Relations in the
“Nam”

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This dissertation titled
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Abstract

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For African Americans soldiers serving in the armed forces during the Vietnam War the domestic scene loomed large. African Americans perceived racial issues—race relations, prejudice, and discrimination—in Vietnam through a lens heavily influenced by their earlier experiences in the United States. Issues related to race and race relations helped to define the African American experience in the United States, and these same issues defined the experiences of black soldiers in Vietnam.

Race relations in combat were typified by cooperation, shared sacrifice, and a sense of brotherhood. These positive relations were largely a reflection of the fact that black and white soldiers in combat were heavily dependent on one another. Despite these positive interactions with whites, African Americans did not view the armed forces as an institution free of racial prejudice. Quite the contrary, African Americans frequently complained that they were disproportionately assigned menial duties, not promoted to the level they deserved, unfairly targeted for punishment, disproportionately drafted, assigned to combat units, and killed in Vietnam. Relations outside of combat were typified by racial tension and violence. Between 1969 and 1971 hundreds, if not thousands, of incidents of racial violence occurred in and around American military bases

in Vietnam. In many respects, the armed forces' failure to address adequately black complaints of racial discrimination contributed to these outbreaks of violence.

During their time in Vietnam, many African American soldiers developed strong opinions and perceptions about the Vietnamese. Knowing very little about the Vietnamese or Vietnam in general, African American soldiers interpreted what they observed in Vietnam from a perspective shaped almost entirely by their own experiences back home. They empathized with Vietnamese civilians as persons of color and as victims of poverty and white mistreatment. Many also believed that the Vietnamese were similarly empathetic towards the African Americans struggle against racial prejudice and discrimination in the United States. This perception of empathy extended towards PAVN and NLF forces. Vietnamese communists actually promoted this idea through the use of leaflets and radio broadcasts, both of which gave the impression that they meant no harm to black soldiers and distinguished them from whites.

Dedication

“Only you saw what took many time to see, I dedicate this to you for believing me”

Mom, Dad, and Maria

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Introduction

On March 8, 1965 two American marine battalions waded ashore at Red Beach Two in Da Nang, South Vietnam. These marines were the first United States combat troops to land in Vietnam, and their arrival signified a dramatic shift in the American military commitment to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). The United States had earlier provided the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) with thousands of military advisors, some of whom participated in combat operations. American officials hoped that the ARVN would be able to hold off the People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) without the use of American combat soldiers. However, the government of Ngo Dinh Diem and subsequent governments were unable to attain this objective. Fearing the collapse of the RVN, Lyndon B. Johnson's administration committed the United States to a more extensive combat role.¹ A short time after the marines landed at Da Nang President Johnson would secretly authorize these battalions to engage PAVN and NLF units.²

Raymond Leon Horn was one of these marines. Horn, a black corporal from Chicago, had been drafted into the marines a year earlier and was stationed in Quan Nam province in the central region of the RVN. Unfortunately, his time in Vietnam was short as he was killed by an explosive device on May 1, 1965. Horn was the first African American serviceman to die in Vietnam.³ As the American military commitment increased, many African Americans followed him. The African American contribution to

¹ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 2002), 155-156.

² Ibid., 156-157.

³ "The Vietnam Veterans War Memorial: The Wall-USA," *Veterans of the 4th Battalion 9th Infantry Regiment*, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://thewall-usa.com/info.asp?recid=24137>

the war was considerable. Of the roughly 2.5 million Americans who served in Vietnam 300,000 were African American.⁴ African Americans represented 12.6 percent of the 58,022 Americans who died during the Vietnam War, a percentage slightly higher than their percentage of the civilian population⁵

The experiences of African American soldiers in Vietnam merit scholarly study not only because of their important contribution to the American war effort but also because of the historical context in which their service took place. For the first time, American military forces were fully integrated and included men from a variety of ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds. While the armed forces were officially desegregated with Executive Order 9981 in 1948, many units remained segregated until the end of 1954.⁶ The Vietnam War was the first war in which African Americans served in non-segregated units for its duration.

Escalation of the American military effort in Vietnam occurred just as the civil rights movement achieved such successes as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That the dominant foreign policy issue of the 1960's, the Vietnam War, occurred contemporaneously with the most important domestic issue of the era, civil rights, had a significant effect on African American soldiers. Issues related to race and race relations helped to define the African American experience in the United States, and these same issues defined the experiences of black soldiers in Vietnam.

Understandably, many African Americans perceived racial issues—race relations,

⁴James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), xix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶Sherie Merson and Steven Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces* (Washington, D.C: The Johns Hopkins University, 1998).

prejudice, and discrimination—in Vietnam through a lens heavily influenced by their earlier experiences in the United States. Sometimes the racial experiences they had in the United States were challenged by what they experienced in Vietnam, while at other times their circumstances seemed to coincide with their experiences back home. Either way, the domestic sphere weighed heavily on their experiences as soldiers fighting in a foreign war. Race and domestic racial relations were the crucible that followed African Americans to Vietnam.

In much the same way that the domestic sphere loomed large over the experiences of African American soldiers, the Vietnam War became a significant point of contention among participants in the civil rights movement. Civil rights leaders Bob Moses and Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) spoke out against the Vietnam War from the beginning, but most feared alienating Lyndon Johnson's administration and as a result took a position best articulated by Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who explained, "We think we have enough Vietnam in Alabama to occupy our attention. We will leave foreign policy to the United States."⁷

However, within a few years other black leaders began to move away from Wilkins's positions. They argued that blacks should not support the war because African Americans continued to face discrimination in the United States. In April 1967 Muhammad Ali famously refused induction into the armed forces reasoning, "Why should they ask me and other so-called Negroes to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles

⁷Lawrence Allen Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War: Civil Rights and Vietnam in the African American Press* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 79.

from home and drop bombs on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?”⁸

Not surprisingly, Martin Luther King Jr. would move to the forefront of black opposition to the war. He had expressed reservations about American intervention in Vietnam as early as 1965, but like Roy Wilkins, he feared alienating the Johnson administration and lessening its support for civil rights initiatives. As a result he always stopped short of a full denunciation of the war.⁹ However, over time he became more and more convinced of the destructive nature of the war, but equally importantly its negative impact on the civil rights movement. On April 4, 1967 King announced his opposition to the Vietnam War in a sermon at the Riverside Church in New York City, alleging that the war was both distracting attention from and damaging the civil rights movement. His position was controversial, and Wilkins, prominent journalist Carl Rowan, and Whitney Young, executive director of the Urban League, were among those who criticized his antiwar stance.¹⁰ These prominent civil rights leaders may have assessed American intervention in Vietnam differently, but their positions were influenced by domestic concerns specifically the civil rights movement.

The domestic situation heavily influenced the experience and perspective of black soldiers serving in Vietnam as well, but historians have paid little attention to this influence. The limited historiography on the experiences of African American soldiers during the Vietnam War includes two books by historian John Westheider: *Fighting On*

⁸ Herman Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 73.

⁹ Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*, 79-80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100-105.

Two Fronts: African-Americans and the Vietnam War (1997) and *The African-American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (2007). Herman Graham's *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power; Manhood, and the Military Experience* (2003) is a useful source which focuses on African American soldiers in Vietnam.¹¹ While these books expand our understanding of the African American experience in Vietnam, they are also fairly limited in their scope. Westheider focuses on how the Vietnam War and the experiences of black soldiers changed African Americans' image of military service as a means of advancement. Graham's book is a gendered analysis of how the armed services used images of masculinity to attract African Americans to military service. However, these books provide only limited discussion of race relations in Vietnam. Black-white relations are not at the forefront of either Westheider or Graham's analysis. While both acknowledge that racial tension and violence occurred during the Vietnam War, they understate how prevalent they were. Westheider and Graham provide no significant discussion of African Americans' perceptions of and interactions with Vietnamese civilians and combatants.

A number of other works also touch upon the black experience in Vietnam. Lawrence Allen Eldridge's *Chronicles of a Two-Front War* is first and foremost an examination of ways in which the black press covered the Vietnam War. Eldridge discusses the ways in which domestic events in the form of the civil rights movement influenced the reporting of the Vietnam War. He also makes an effort to discuss, if only

¹¹ Westheider, *The African-American Experience in Vietnam*, James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), Graham, *The Brothers' Vietnam War*.

briefly, the different ways in which the press depicted the black experience in Vietnam and especially how this changed over time.¹²

Kyle Longley's *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* is one of the few works to focus on the experiences of American soldiers during the Vietnam War. Longley provides a limited discussion of black-white relations and black complaints of discrimination, but his analysis does not go much below the surface and is not particularly revealing.¹³ Christian Appy's *Working Class War* is primarily a class analysis of the soldiers who made up the American fighting forces in Vietnam, but Appy also provides a limited discussion of the black experience in Vietnam and racial issues more generally.¹⁴ Richard Moser's *The New Winter Soldiers* and David Cortright's *Soldiers In Revolt* each provide a similar focus on those veterans and soldiers who protested American involvement in the Vietnam War.¹⁵ Moser and Cortright discuss the experiences of African Americans who opposed the war and point out social unrest in Vietnam as well as complaints of racial discrimination.

Peter S. Kindsvatter's *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, & Vietnam* provides a fairly thorough discussion of American soldiers in

¹² Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*.

¹³ Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008).

¹⁴ Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Richard Moser, *The New Winter Soldier: GI And Veteran Dissent During The Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005).

Vietnam. Kindsvatter examines both the experiences of African Americans more generally as well as black-white relations in combat.¹⁶

Isaac Hampton II's *The Black Officer Corps* examines the experiences of black officers in Vietnam and provides some explanation for the scarcity of black officers.¹⁷ George Lepre's *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam* is another useful source which discusses incidents in which soldiers tried to kill their commanding officers. Lepre discusses incidents which appeared to have racial overtones.¹⁸ Gary D. Solis's *Marines and Military Law in Vietnam* and William Thomas Allison's *Military Justice in Vietnam* both provide limited discussion of incidents of racial violence during the Vietnam War.¹⁹

Since the Vietnam War was the first conflict in which blacks and whites served together in desegregated units for the duration of the war, relations with whites were a significant factor influencing the experiences of African Americans. However, because this was the first war in which black and white soldiers served side by side, it was difficult to predict how amicable relations would be. Would black and white soldiers treat one another as equals or would racial tensions occur? For much of U.S. history black and white soldiers had served in segregated units and as a result the armed forces had limited experiences dealing with race relations.

¹⁶ Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea & Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

¹⁷ Isaac Hampton, *The Black Officer Corps: A History of Black Military Advancement From Integration Through Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁸ George Lepre, *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Gary D. Solis, *Marines and Military Law in Vietnam: Trial By Fire* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, 1989), William Thomas Allison, *Military Justice in Vietnam: The Rule of Law in an American War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

African Americans arrived in Vietnam with a certain perspective on race relations. Many black soldiers had limited experiences with whites and for the most part their interactions were negative, especially for African Americans from the South. Some black soldiers undoubtedly entered the military with the expectation that they would be escaping at least some of the racial prejudice and discrimination common in civilian life. However, they did not have any clear expectations as to what their relations with white soldiers would be in Vietnam.

To a large degree they were surprised by what they found. While racial segregation, tension, and even violence often characterized black-white relations in the United States, racial antagonism between blacks and whites was almost non-existent in the front lines of Vietnam. For soldiers serving in combat, race relations were typified by cooperation, shared sacrifice, and a sense of brotherhood. Even more significantly, the testimonies of African Americans reveal that socially constructed and enforced ideas of race and notions of proper behavior between blacks and whites began to break down. Many African Americans came to view the front lines of Vietnam as a de-racialized space.

These positive relations were largely a reflection of the fact that black and white soldiers in combat were heavily dependent on one another. Many African Americans likely would have agreed with Charles Strong, who served with the Twenty-Third Infantry Division in 1969-70, when he stated, "Because your life is at stake it doesn't make any difference that the man to the left or the right of you is black, yellow, red,

orange. It makes no difference.”²⁰ The friendships blacks and whites formed with one another were also a reflection of the fact that service in Vietnam removed them at least physically from the toxic racial situation in the United States. In many respects these experiences taught African Americans that race relations in the United States were not pre-determined or destined to remain the same. As Strong noted, the friendships he formed with whites in Vietnam taught him that racism “was just a tradition that was just passed down to us... to be prejudiced, to look upon people differently.”²¹

My dissertation’s discussion of the positive relations enjoyed by black and white soldiers in combat is significant. This topic has been largely ignored by historians of the Vietnam War. Many African Americans viewed the friendships they formed with white soldiers as one of the few positive legacies of the Vietnam War. Thus, my dissertation brings greater attention to these legacies.

The positive relations many African Americans enjoyed with whites on the front lines, however, did not lead them to assess the armed forces as an institution free of racial prejudice and discrimination. To the contrary many complained that they experienced the same type of discriminatory treatment in the military that African Americans routinely experienced back home. Black complaints included allegations that they were disproportionately assigned menial duties, not promoted to the degree they deserved, and unfairly targeted for punishment. Additionally, African Americans complained that they were disproportionately drafted, assigned to combat units, and killed in Vietnam. Black soldiers charged that they were unable to escape the prejudice and discrimination they

²⁰ “The Bloods of ‘Nam,”” *Frontline*, produced, directed and photographed by Wayne Ewing (Alexandria, VA: PBS, 1986), Videocassette (VHS).

²¹ Ibid.

had experienced in civilian life. Their experience suggested that military service, which had been viewed historically as an avenue of escape from racial prejudice and discrimination, no longer provided African Americans with such an opportunity.

Another important conclusion of this dissertation is that while racial tensions were virtually nonexistent in combat, relations were far tenser on American military bases, especially in the aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in April 1968. These tensions were aggravated in great part by the armed forces' failure to address adequately black complaints of discrimination. In failing to recognize these concerns, the armed forces not only alienated many African American soldiers but also contributed to the worsening of black-white relations. Between 1969 and 1971 hundreds, if not thousands, of incidents of racial violence occurred in and around American military bases in Vietnam. Racial violence was also a problem on military bases in Europe, Asia, and the United States. The armed forces had little experience dealing with such outbreaks of violence. As would be expected, military leaders were deeply concerned about the negative effect of these incidents on morale and unity. However, they reacted by focusing almost all of their attention on the role African Americans played in these incidents. In doing so, they ignored not only the actions of white soldiers but also further alienated African American soldiers whose earlier complaints of discrimination had not been addressed.

Previous historians have noted some of the more highly publicized incidents of racial violence like the Long Binh and Kitty Hawk riots, but they have failed to recognize that these were just two of the thousands of incidents of racial violence which occurred

during the war. An important conclusion of this dissertation is that incidents of racial violence were common and widespread between 1969 and 1971. My dissertation provides without question the most thorough analysis of racial violence during the Vietnam War, as well as the armed forces' reactions to these incidents.

White soldiers were not the only group that black soldiers interacted with in Vietnam. Before they arrived in Vietnam, the majority of African Americans had not traveled outside of the United States. Other than their interactions with whites, most black soldiers had only limited experiences with other racial groups. During their time in Vietnam, many African American soldiers developed strong opinions and perceptions about the Vietnamese. Knowing very little about the Vietnamese or Vietnam in general, African American soldiers interpreted what they observed in Vietnam from a perspective shaped almost entirely by their own experiences back home. Many saw a parallel between the poverty that most blacks experienced in the United States and the poverty experienced by the average Vietnamese in South Vietnam. Additionally, many African Americans viewed South Vietnamese civilians as victims of white racial discrimination, a condition they viewed as similar to what they experienced back home. Malik Edwards, who served with the Ninth Regiment of the Marine Corps in 1965-66, exemplified this perception when he stated, "I think being black you felt more affinity with people who had problems who were in trouble. You felt more affinity with them because you had had trouble and you had had problems."²²

Interestingly, many African American soldiers believed that the Vietnamese reciprocated. They empathized with African Americans as persons of color and as

²² Ibid.

victims of white mistreatment. African Americans' perceptions of the views of Vietnamese civilians were shaped almost entirely by their own experiences in the United States. African American soldiers believed that non-white skin color and shared or similar experiences had a unifying effect. The reality was different. The RVN was not free of prejudice as evidenced by the mistreatment of racial minorities such as Montagnards, a collective term used for the dozens of indigenous groups who resided in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Some African Americans recognized that racist Vietnamese discriminated against them. However, when African Americans did encounter racist treatment from the Vietnamese, they often interpreted it as being inspired or heavily influenced by white soldiers. Some whites had brought their racist beliefs to Vietnam and taught them to the local population.

Many African Americans also developed strong opinions about the ARVN as well as the PAVN and the NLF. Black impressions of the communist enemy were particularly strong. No matter their race, American soldiers often had a grudging respect for the fighting prowess of the PAVN and the NLF. Many African Americans also believed that the enemy forces empathized with them. These feelings were best reflected in the rumors which circulated among black troops that communist forces would not shoot or harm African Americans unless forced to do so. PAVN and NLF forces supposedly empathized with the black struggle against racial prejudice and discrimination. Vietnamese communists actually promoted this idea through the use of leaflets and radio broadcasts, both of which gave the impression that they meant no harm

to black soldiers and distinguished them from whites. These enemy appeals expressed sympathy for blacks because they were denied political and civil rights at home.

Historians have devoted little attention toward American GI's views of and interactions with Vietnamese civilians and combatants. In most cases when these issues have been discussed, historians have focused on incidents such as the My Lai massacre in which American soldiers killed or otherwise mistreated Vietnamese civilians.

Unfortunately, there has been almost no discussion of how black soldiers viewed the Vietnamese. My discussion of African Americans' perceptions of and interactions with Vietnamese civilians and combatants is the first of its kind.

One must be careful about making generalizations about the black experience in the Vietnam War given the large number of African Americans who served and the diversity of experiences they could have had. The use of only a few sources could result in a biased or inaccurate account. To minimize the possibility of bias or inaccuracy, I have used a wide variety of sources. There is a limited but useful historiography about the experiences of African Americans in Vietnam.²³ Numerous African American veterans have published memoirs regarding their service in Vietnam.²⁴

²³ Westheider, *The African-American Experience in Vietnam*; James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Herman Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Lawrence Allen Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War: Civil Rights and Vietnam in the African American Press* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

²⁴ Norman A. McDaniel, *Yet Another Voice* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1975); Samuel Vance, *The Courageous and Proud* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1979); Stanley Goff and Robert Sanders with Clark Smith, *Brothers Black Soldiers in the Nam* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1982); David Parks, *GI Diary* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1984); Albert French, *Patches of Fire: A Story of War and Redemption* (New York: Doubleday, 1997); Richard Guidry, *The War in I Corps*. (Raleigh, NC: Ivy Books, 1997); Terry Whitmore, *Memphis, Nam, Sweden: The Story of a Black Deserter* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997); Ed Emanuel, *Soul Patrol* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2003); George E. Brummell, *Shades of Darkness: A Black Soldier's Journey through Vietnam*,

There are also a number of published collections of oral history which include African American accounts. The most highly regarded is African American journalist Wallace Terry's *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (1984). As a journalist for *Time* magazine, Terry spent years interviewing black and white soldiers in Vietnam, and *Bloods* is a collection of twenty interviews with black Vietnam veterans about their wartime experiences.²⁵ Eddie Wright, a black Vietnam veteran, produced *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on My Personal Experiences, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans*. Including interviews with six African American Vietnam veterans, as well as the author's own remembrances, it is another useful source.²⁶

I have also used less traditional sources such as documentaries and poetry. *Same Mud, Same Blood* (1967), *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger* (1968), and *Bloods of Nam* (1986) are all documentaries which provide useful information concerning the experiences of black soldiers in Vietnam.²⁷ I have also used poems written by Vietnam

Blindness, and Back (Silver Spring, MD: Pie Publishing, 2006); Brian H. Settles, *No Reason for Dying: A Reluctant Combat Pilot's Confession of Hypocrisy, Infidelity and War* (Charleston, S.C: Booksurge, 2009); James T. Gillam, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands: An American Sergeant in the Vietnam War 1968-1970* (Denton, TX, University of North Texas Press, 2010).

²⁵ Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984). *Bloods* includes interviews with veterans who served during different periods of the conflict, in different areas of Vietnam, and in different branches of the armed forces. It includes testimonies from draftees, enlistees, and members of the officer corps.

²⁶ Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986). Testimonials from African American Vietnam veterans are also found in James R. Wilson, *Landing Zones: Combat Vets From America's Proud, Fighting South Remember Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides* (New York: Penguin Group, 2000); Benjamin Fleury-Steiner, *Disposable Heroes: The Betrayal of African American Veterans* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

²⁷ *Same Mud, Same Blood*, December 1, 1967. *Same Mud, Same Blood* Video, accessed September 20, 2012, <http://archives.museum.tv/archives>; *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger*, 1968. *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger* Video, accessed December 16, 2012,

veterans including Lamont Steptoe; *Mad Minute* (1993), *Dusty Road* (1995), and *Uncle's South China Sea Blue Nightmare* (1995) and Horace Coleman, *In the Grass* (1995).²⁸

I have also made significant use of articles found in contemporary newspapers and magazines including the *Baltimore Sun*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Daily Defender*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Cleveland Call and Post*, *Globe and Mail*, *Hartford Courant*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *New York Times*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Washington Post*, *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Newsday*. These articles, which number in the hundreds, provide significant information about a host of issues relevant to the black experience. Many of these articles directly quote African American soldiers in Vietnam which provide a vivid and immediate expression of how individual soldiers felt about numerous issues of importance. Articles written by such African American journalists as Wallace Terry of *Time*, Ethel Payne of the *Chicago Daily Defender*, Thomas A. Johnson of the *New York Times*, and Donald Mosby of the *Chicago Daily Defender* are especially valuable as these journalists spent considerable time in Vietnam interviewing African American soldiers about their experiences.

In addition to information found in memoirs, films, and contemporary newspapers, I have conducted extensive archival research. I have used materials found at the U.S Army Heritage Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and particularly the Deputy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVVh1JEe7Bw>; "The Bloods of 'Nam'" *Frontline*, produced, directed and photographed by Wayne Ewing (Alexandria, VA: PBS, 1986), Videocassette (VHS).

²⁸ Lamont Steptoe, *Mad Minute* (Camden, New Jersey: Whirlwind Press, 1993); Lamont Steptoe, *Dusty Road: A Vietnam Suite* (Camden, New Jersey: Whirlwind Press, 1995); Lamont Steptoe, *Uncle's South China Sea Blue Nightmare* (Philadelphia: Plan B Press, 1995); Horace Coleman, *In the Grass* (Woodbridge, Connecticut: Vietnam Generation and Burning Cities Press, 1995).

Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) Policy Files on Discrimination in the Army collection.²⁹ This collection contains substantial material about race relations during the Vietnam period. Included are official military reports of racial tension and violence on American military bases in the United States, Europe, Asia, and of course Vietnam. Of particular interest are hundreds of military criminal incident reports, which contain information on racially motivated crimes including assault and murder. I am the first historian to examine these materials.

I have also relied heavily on research conducted at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland (NACP). The U.S. Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1975 collection includes hundreds of reports about incidents of racial violence. These reports, the majority of which concern incidents occurring during 1969-71, depict racial friction and even violence as fairly commonplace both in the cities of Vietnam and on American military bases.³⁰ I am the first historian to examine these reports.

To augment the information garnered from memoirs, newspapers, archives, and other sources, I have also conducted more than thirty interviews with African American Vietnam veterans. These interviews have not only provided me with the opportunity to compare and even verify information found in other sources but also to ask African American veterans more detailed questions about issues addressed and in some cases not addressed in other sources. To understand their attitudes and perceptions I have attempted to interview as wide a cross-section as possible of African Americans who served in

²⁹ DCSPER Policy Files on Discrimination in the Army, U.S. Army Heritage Collection, Carlisle, Pennsylvania

³⁰ U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP), College Park, Maryland.

Vietnam. Oral interviews obviously present certain problems. Memories of events occurring nearly 50 years ago can be faulty or tainted. Many veterans have died, and others are unwilling to speak about their experiences. Aware of these limitations, I have also done my best to ensure that any conclusions based on these interviews are corroborated by such contemporary sources as newspaper articles, other testimonies, and archival evidence.

The majority of African Americans who served in Vietnam were in units in the army and the marines. Therefore my oral interviews have focused on the experiences of those who served in these two branches. I have interviewed veterans who served in a variety of army and marine divisions as well as some who served in in the Air Force and U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). I have interviewed African Americans who served with the First Infantry, Fourth Infantry, Fifth Infantry, Ninth Infantry, and Twenty-Fifth Infantry Divisions of the Army. I have also interviewed former members of the First Cavalry Division and Fourth Cavalry Regiment, the Eighty-Second Airborne, 101st Airborne, and 173rd Airborne Divisions, the 525th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, the U.S. Army Security Agency, and the Thirty-Fifth Combat Brigade and 589th Combat Battalion of the Army Corps of Engineers. I have also interviewed marine veterans who served with the First and Third Marine Divisions. Collectively these military units represent the majority of units that served in Vietnam.³¹

³¹ This is not to say that I interviewed the same number of veterans from each division. I interviewed a greater number of veterans who served with the First and Twenty-Fifth Infantry Divisions than others largely because I had greater success locating former members of these divisions. Members of the First Division were stationed in Vietnam from 1965-70, while the Twenty-Fifth Division was stationed there from 1965-71. Both divisions were present in Vietnam for the majority of the conflict, and they were involved in significant fighting.

The majority of African Americans who served in Vietnam were either draftees or draft- influenced volunteers, and most of the veterans I have interviewed were members of these groups. However, I have also interviewed African American enlistees and members of the officer corps including those who reached the rank of captain and major while in Vietnam. This selection of interviews has allowed me to include not only the perspective of draftees but also of black officers—2 percent of commissioned officers during the war were black.³²

The nature of the Vietnam War changed over time, and these changes could have influenced the experiences of African Americans and indeed all soldiers. That is, someone who served in Vietnam in 1965 would have had a different experience from someone who served in 1971. I have tried to keep this in mind when describing and evaluating black experiences. However, I have also considered commonalities in experiences over time. Some of the veterans I interviewed served several tours in Vietnam which helped to clarify which perspectives and experiences changed over time and which did not.

In much the same way that soldiers who served during different stages of the war may have had different experiences, those who served in different areas of Vietnam may have also had different experiences. For example, soldiers serving in one part of the country may have had greater opportunities to interact with the Vietnamese civilian population than those located in other parts of the country. Many of the veterans I interviewed served in different units, and they also served in different parts of Vietnam.

³² Appy, *Working Class War*, 22.

When relevant, I have noted differences in experiences among those serving in different regions.

In addition to interviews with black veterans, I also interviewed sixteen white veterans. In some cases these interviews provided me with a different perspective on race relations, but often they corroborated information gained from African American veterans. These interviews have been especially helpful in describing and analyzing the positive relations that most black and white veterans claimed to have experienced while serving in combat.

Collectively, these sources have provided me with the diverse and extensive evidence needed to describe and analyze the experiences of black soldiers during the Vietnam War. Whenever possible I have tried to corroborate information gained from one source with other sources. Relying only on accounts from a limited number of black soldiers could have led to a biased or unrepresentative account of the overall black experience in Vietnam, but the variety of sources I have used gives me confidence that my conclusions are valid.

Hundreds of thousands of African Americans served in the Vietnam War, but when they left the United States, they did not leave their earlier experiences with race behind. Past and contemporary racial issues continued to influence their experiences in Vietnam just as they influenced the domestic black experience. Participation in a war in a faraway country did not remove them from the racial environment they had grown up in and which was showing signs of change in the 1960's and 1970's. These experiences continued to influence blacks in Vietnam.

My dissertation provides historians with a greater understanding of how issues relating to race defined the experiences of African American soldiers during the Vietnam War. Previous black-white relations were an important factor influencing the black experience in Vietnam. Also, in Vietnam African Americans confronted a third “race,” the Vietnamese, and my dissertation describes and analyzes the triangular interaction among blacks, whites, and the Vietnamese, civilians and combatants. This was an important part of the black experience, which has been all but ignored by historians. My dissertation also describes the ways in which the African American experience in war both paralleled and deviated from the black domestic experience in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Black and white soldiers were engaged in combat in a faraway country, but they were not immune to or unaffected by events back home.

Chapter 1: “We was just us”: De-racialization on the Front Lines of the Vietnam War

In 1967 NBC journalist Frank McGee traveled to the Republic of Vietnam where he spent nearly a month living with members of the 101st Airborne as they fought Viet Cong forces for control of the region west of Phu Lai. McGee’s experiences with the 101st were later revealed in a fifty minute documentary titled *Same Mud, Same Blood* which appeared on NBC that same year.³³

Neither McGee’s decision to travel to Vietnam nor his focus on U.S. forces was unique. Hundreds of journalists were in Vietnam at the time, and he was hardly the first to try to cover the conflict from the vantage point of ordinary American soldiers. However, McGee’s approach was distinct because he was not particularly interested in portraying combat, war strategy, or really the war effort at all. In fact, *Same Mud, Same Blood* shows very little actual fighting. Instead, McGee concentrated on the experiences of African American soldiers in Vietnam and particularly on the ways in which black and white soldiers interacted with one another while engaging the enemy. He noted, “Our history books have taken little notice of the Negro soldier. How do the troops of this war, black and white, want its history written?” To answer this question, he focused on Platoon Sergeant Lewis B. Larry, an African American from Mississippi, and the men, black and white, under his command.³⁴

McGee’s interest in the African American experience in Vietnam and his focus on race relations reflected a number of changes in both military and civilian life. For one

³³ *Same Mud, Same Blood*, December 1, 1967. *Same Mud, Same Blood* Video <http://archives.museum.tv/archives>, accessed September 20, 2012.

³⁴ Ibid.

thing, the Vietnam War was the first conflict in which American armed forces were fully integrated. While Executive Order 9981 officially desegregated the armed forces in 1948, many units remained segregated until the end of 1954.³⁵ In Vietnam, particularly once the American military effort escalated in the mid 1960's, soldiers of both races literally fought side by side in large numbers.

This development occurred contemporaneously with such noteworthy successes for the civil rights movement as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These laws and others contributed to a growing political and social equality for African Americans, but both full equality and significant racial integration remained elusive on the home front as whites, particularly in the South, continued to resist efforts to achieve these goals. Thus, paradoxically, considerable achievements in the efforts to achieve political and educational equality existed contemporaneously with racial segregation, increased tension, and even violence. McGee was well aware of this contrast, noting numerous times that race relations were worsening in the United States, as evidenced by "race riots."³⁶

However, in the jungles of Vietnam McGee found a much different story. He saw no evidence of racial tension among the men of the 101st Airborne. Instead, he observed black and white soldiers sharing food and drink, telling stories and jokes, and empathizing with each other without any attention to racial background. When asked about race relations in Vietnam, Sergeant Larry stated firmly, "There's no racial barrier of any sort here." A black lieutenant named Wilkenson agreed, arguing that blacks and

³⁵Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces* (Washington, D.C.: The Johns Hopkins University, 1998).

³⁶ *Same Mud, Same Blood.*

whites were viewed as human beings and not as people of different races. Speaking about the significance of racial difference, a white soldier named Anthony Mavroudis replied, “That feeling doesn’t exist in the Army, we’re all soldiers. And the only color we know is the khaki and the green. The color of the mud and the color of the blood is all the same.”³⁷

That their platoon sergeant was black seemed unimportant to the men who served under Larry. McGee noted that “for this report the fact that Larry is a Negro is of paramount importance, to the officers and men he serves with it’s a matter of total irrelevance.” Racial relations were so good in fact that McGee concluded, “Nowhere in America have I seen Negroes and whites as free, open, and uninhibited with their associations. I saw no eyes clouded with resentment.” According to McGee, race was simply not a matter of great significance or importance for the men serving in the 101st Airborne. In fact, as he spent more time with them, McGee noticed that he began looking at individual soldiers without noticing their color.³⁸

While *Same Mud, Same Blood* does not reveal the full story of the African American experience in Vietnam or of race relations during the war it depicts very accurately the nature and the level of cooperation and friendship shared by black and white soldiers in combat. As McGee’s documentary argues, in combat many soldiers, black and white, experienced a level of racial harmony all but unknown in other sectors of American life.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

A thorough examination of contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, memoirs, and oral interviews confirms that many African American soldiers agreed with McGee's assessment of racial relations in the front lines. Speaking of his service in Vietnam, Robert Sanders concluded that "the only thing that was good about Vietnam" was the "unity and harmony" witnessed and experienced by black and white soldiers serving in combat units.³⁹ While racial segregation, tension, and even violence often characterized contemporary black-white relations in the United States, racial antagonism between blacks and whites was almost non-existent in the front lines. This lack of antagonism was more than simple toleration; rather, prejudices broke down and strong bonds of camaraderie were formed between black and white soldiers.⁴⁰ For many African Americans these positive experiences with whites contrasted sharply with their experiences in the United States where despite gains in achieving civil rights, segregation, racial animus, and discrimination were commonplace. An anonymous black soldier accurately described the shared black-white experience, "When you're in combat, you're equal in everything. You live together. You sleep together. You eat the same things. You fight the same way. You stink the same way.... racial segregation is for the birds."⁴¹

Even more significantly, the testimonies of African Americans reveal that socially constructed and enforced ideas of race and notions of proper behaviors between blacks

³⁹ Stanley Goff and Robert Sanders with Clark Smith, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1982), 147-148.

⁴⁰ Vietnam was not the first conflict in which black and white soldiers interacted in these ways, but the fact the Vietnam War was the first conflict in which the United States military was desegregated for the duration of the conflict supports the conclusion that these relationships were much more common during Vietnam than in previous conflicts.

⁴¹ Ethel L. Payne, "GIs Tell How they Stand on the Viet War," *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 11, 1967, 2.

and whites had begun to break down. Many came to view the front lines as a de-racialized space. In the words of an unnamed African American soldier stationed in Vietnam, “The question of race is always there for the Negro. He would either be blind or insane if it were not. But Vietnam is a buffer or isolation ward to the whole question of race as we know it.”⁴² As this soldier suggests, existing conceptions of “race” were not nearly as controlling on the front lines of the Vietnam War as they were in the United States. McGee reached a similar conclusion, finding in Vietnam an absence of “race as a factor in human existence...to such an extent that the men I was with, had difficulty reorganizing their thoughts to match mine and answer questions on a subject [race] they’ve stopped thinking of.”⁴³

“The first white friend I had, I had in Vietnam”

Of course African Americans soldiers had varied experiences with whites before entering the military. Growing up in Providence, Rhode Island, Wayne Smith experienced discrimination, but he also had a number of white friends.⁴⁴ Horace Coleman grew up in an integrated neighborhood and attended integrated schools in Dayton, Ohio. Raised in this environment he didn’t have a negative view of whites before entering the military.⁴⁵ Similarly, Ron Bradley had fairly positive interactions with whites in his neighborhood in the Bronx New York. As a young man, he delivered newspapers for a

⁴² Thomas A. Johnson, “The U.S. Negro in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1968, 17.

⁴³ *Same Mud, Same Blood*.

⁴⁴ Wayne Smith, interview by author, October 25, 2011.

⁴⁵ Horace Coleman, interview by author, June 12, 2012.

white grocer to mostly white customers and he never had any trouble. He even had a white girlfriend when he began high school.⁴⁶

In the many areas of the country blacks and whites had limited interactions with one another. Anthony Martin grew up in Chicago where neighborhoods were heavily segregated and race relations were tense. Fighting between black and white youths was fairly common and as a result it was dangerous to travel outside of one's own neighborhood alone.⁴⁷ Raised in an all-black neighborhood in Muncie, Indiana, Brian Settles had few opportunities to interact with whites. He remembered, "race relations were not good in Muncie...I played basketball outside of the colored YMCA, we couldn't even use the white YMCA downtown."⁴⁸

Growing up in Washington D.C., Stephen A. Howard had very limited interactions with whites. He recalled that "the first white friend I had, I had in Vietnam."⁴⁹ Raised in Baltimore, Sinclair Swan had few meaningful interactions with whites in part because he attended segregated schools.⁵⁰ Growing up in New Orleans, Nate Mondy was raised exclusively around African Americans and had few interactions with whites before joining the military. Clyde Jackson grew up in Richmond, Virginia, where as a result of legally sanctioned segregation he had few interactions with whites.⁵¹ Many blacks who grew up in the segregated south likely would have agreed with Reginald Edwards of Phoenix, Louisiana, who recalled, "In them days we never hang

⁴⁶ Ron Bradley, interview by author, October 23, 2011.

⁴⁷ Anthony Martin, interview by author, September 12, 2011.

⁴⁸ Brian Settles, interview by author, October 1, 2012.

⁴⁹ Stephen A. Howard's account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 119.

⁵⁰ Sinclair Swan, interview by author, August 11, 2011.

⁵¹ Clyde Jackson, interview by author, January 8, 2012.

with white people. You didn't have white friends. White people was [sic] the aliens to me. This is '63...You expected them to treat you bad."⁵²

Others recalled having varied interactions, some positive and some negative, with whites growing up. Raised in Summit County, Ohio, James Gillam and his brother were the only African Americans at their school. Through playing football he made some white friends, but there was always an undercurrent of racism in town. He recalled, "I never got to swim at the local swimming pool."⁵³ For Lamont Steptoe race relations were similarly complex in his hometown of Pittsburgh. While he attended integrated schools where relations between blacks and whites were fairly good, blacks were also barred from some swimming pools. He also experienced occasional incidents of racial harassment.⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, blacks who lived in the South had particularly poor experiences with whites. George Brummell grew up in Federalsburg, Maryland, and he had very few interactions with whites outside of his job of picking cucumbers. Brummell was bused to an all-black school sixteen miles out of town and blacks were not allowed in local stores or restaurants.⁵⁵

In Roosevelt Gore's hometown of Mullins, South Carolina, racial segregation prevailed and whites routinely mistreated blacks. Gore's father worked as a sharecropper for a tenant farmer who cheated him and the other black workers. Gore remembered, "The white man could get away with cheating because he wouldn't let my father or any

⁵² Reginald Edwards account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 4-5.

⁵³ James T. Gillam, interview by author, Lubbock, Texas, March 14, 2008.

⁵⁴ Lamont Steptoe, interview by author, June 25, 2012.

⁵⁵ George Brummell, interview by author, October 21, 2011.

of his other tenant farmers keep records.” Not surprisingly, Gore grew up feeling “like an outcast...I was actually glad to get drafted in 1966. I wanted to get away from the environment I was living in.”⁵⁶

Robert Louis Jr. was raised in rural Louisiana where nearly all African Americans worked as sharecroppers in servitude to whites. While Louis described this work environment “as close to slavery as possible” there was some variation in the way whites treated blacks. According to Louis, whites who had money tended to be racist and abusive towards blacks, while some poorer whites were respectful.⁵⁷

James Lewis’s interactions with whites growing up in Lake Charles, Louisiana, were limited and always involved blacks working in subordinate positions to whites. He recalled that his father, who worked at a lumber company, always called the 11 year old son of his boss “Mr.” Discrimination was so severe in Lake Charles that Lewis joined the military largely because he realized that his only other option was to “stand on the corner and eventually be arrested for something I did not do,” a circumstance which young blacks in his hometown routinely faced.⁵⁸

Eddie Green grew up outside of Marion, Alabama, where segregation was total and oppressive. The threat of violence was also very real, and in 1956 Green’s father was murdered by a group of whites. Green also attended school with the sister of Jimmie Lee

⁵⁶ Roosevelt Gore’s account as found in James R. Wilson, *Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 101.

⁵⁷ Robert Louis Jr., interview by author, November 30, 2011.

⁵⁸ James Lewis, interview by author, March 20, 2012.

Jackson, an unarmed protestor who was shot and killed by an Alabama state trooper in 1965 and whose death inspired the Selma to Montgomery march.⁵⁹

Growing up in Pampa, Texas, Wes Geary was also well aware of the dangers inherent in being black in the south. He recalled, “They had lynched a black kid one time and burned down the court house in town...That whole region, almost every town had been the scene of a lynching, at least one lynching. And so black people knew their place... you didn’t even think about crossing that line.”⁶⁰

African Americans who traveled to the South were often exposed to racism and prejudice as well. While waiting in Army fatigues at a bus terminal in Columbus, Georgia in 1959, Sinclair Swan was accosted by a white man who instructed him to stay in the colored area of the terminal.⁶¹ Horace Coleman’s grandfather was lynched in Mississippi but it wasn’t until he arrived in Panama, Florida for basic training in 1966, that he experienced southern racism firsthand. After entering a restaurant, he was told by one of the workers, who happened to be a Scottish immigrant, “I am sorry I can’t serve you.” Coleman recalled, “This woman isn’t even a citizen and she’s telling me I can’t eat here...This is the South alright.”⁶² In 1967 Arthur Barham attended Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. He recalled that the Ku Klux Klan routinely assaulted black soldiers who wandered off-base and as a result black soldiers were forced to travel in groups.⁶³

⁵⁹ Eddie Greene, interview by author, March 12, 2012.

⁶⁰ Wes Geary, interview by author, Dearborn, Michigan, August 7, 2009.

⁶¹ Swan, interview by author.

⁶² Coleman, interview by author.

⁶³ Arthur Barham, interview by author, February 19, 2013.

“No such thing as black, white, or brown”

Many African Americans experienced markedly different relations with whites in Vietnam. A number of contemporary newspaper and magazine articles noted the absence of racial friction in combat units, especially in comparison to the United States. In June 1966, *Jet* magazine reported that black and white soldiers in Vietnam shared the same tents, socialized, and worked together free of racial animus or incident. The article concluded that among combat troops in Vietnam “an American is an American and no one stops to judge color.”⁶⁴

In April 1967 United Press International journalist Leon Daniel, who had long covered the American civil rights movement, provided a similar account of race relations in Vietnam. Daniel found little evidence of racial tension or violence in Vietnam, noting that the hostility that sometimes typified race relations in the United States was all but absent in Vietnam. In his estimation, black and white soldiers were dependent on one another, sharing the same “risks as well as their canteens.” He concluded, “Deep in the jungles, where bullets are color blind and living seems more important than pigmentation, racial tensions ease.”⁶⁵

A May 26, 1967 *Time* article, “Armed Forces: Democracy in the Foxhole,” focused on the behavior of members of the 173rd Airborne Division. *Time* journalists found no evidence of racial prejudice or tension among black and white soldiers. Additionally, the article compared race relations in Vietnam to race relations in the United States, proclaiming that “black-white relations in a slit trench or a combat-bound

⁶⁴ Simeon Booker, “An American is an American,” *Jet*, June 30, 1966, 22.

⁶⁵ Leon Daniel, “Negro Finding Home in Armed Forces,” *The Boston Globe*, April 9, 1967, 16.

Huey are years ahead of Denver and Darien, decades ahead of Birmingham and Biloxi.”⁶⁶ A few months later the *Christian Science Monitor* declared, “To a marked extent, race is forgotten on the battlefield.”⁶⁷

In the spring of 1968 *Chicago Daily Defender* journalist Donald Mosby traveled to Vietnam to explore the experiences of African American soldiers serving there. He found that there was absolutely no evidence of prejudice or racial tension among combat troops. Furthermore, he claimed that “the men in the line companies who are fighting and dying in the war have pushed through the barriers of race and ethnic prejudice.”⁶⁸ According to Mosby, race had become a non-issue for black and white soldiers in Vietnam.

Similarly, *New York Times* journalist Thomas A. Johnson traveled to Vietnam in the spring of 1968, where he spent fourteen weeks interviewing black and white soldiers about race relations in that country. From these interviews he concluded that “Vietnam is like a speed-up film of recent racial progress at home.” Analyzing the black perspective, Johnson concluded, “Negroes in Vietnam say that the closest to real integration that America has produced exists here.”⁶⁹ He also made a point of mentioning that race relations in Vietnam were all the more impressive when contrasted with race relations back in the United States. In May 1968 an article in *The New Pittsburgh Courier* similarly contrasted the racial situation in Vietnam with that in the United States

⁶⁶ “Armed Forces: Democracy in the Foxhole,” *Time*, May 26, 1967.

⁶⁷ George W. Ashworth, “GI Integration meets battle test: Race held Unimportant,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 23, 1967, 1.

⁶⁸ Donald Mosby, “Our Man Mosby Finds No Prejudice in Viet Conflict,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 23, 1968, 2.

⁶⁹ Johnson, “The U.S. Negro in Vietnam,” 16.

proclaiming, “The Negro in Vietnam has achieved the most genuine integration and fullest participation in policies that America has yet granted.”⁷⁰

In August 1968 *Ebony* magazine dedicated an entire issue to discussing the experiences of African American soldiers in Vietnam. In an article titled “Negroes in ‘The Nam,’” Thomas A. Johnson maintained that “racial differences between blacks and whites have disappeared on the fighting fronts.” Furthermore, Johnson found that black and white friendships were fairly common among soldiers in combat.⁷¹ He also reported that black soldiers much preferred the racial situation in Vietnam to that of the United States. A black officer reported to Johnson that “the brother does all right here... you see it’s just about the first time in his life that he finds he can really compete with whites on an equal--or very close to equal basis.” This officer also claimed that many black soldiers enjoyed their equal status in Vietnam to such an extent that they chose to extend their tours.⁷²

Many African Americans, either in memoirs or in oral interviews, recall similar conclusions about race relations in Vietnam. Jim Houston of Cleveland served with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division in 1966 and he described black white relations in Vietnam as “a brotherhood thing for us...we was like brothers, you know like your real brother, like you might love your real brother. You know you love your family, that’s the way we were.”⁷³

⁷⁰ “Black GI Wants New Answers,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 18, 1968, 6.

⁷¹ Thomas A. Johnson, “Negroes in ‘The Nam,’” *Ebony*, August 1968, 37-38.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Jim Houston, interview by author, December 1, 2011.

Houston was not the only soldier to claim that the men he served with deserved to be in the same category as family. Robert Sanders of San Francisco served with the 173rd Airborne in 1968-69 and he recalled feeling closer to the men in his unit “than I do my own blood sisters and brothers.” Furthermore, Sanders asserted that “we was so close it was unreal. That was the first time in my life I saw that type of unity, and I haven’t seen it since. And that was ten years ago. It was beautiful. It sort of chills you, brings goose bumps just to see it, just to feel it.”⁷⁴

Don Jernigan, who served with the 198th Infantry Brigade in 1967-68, recalled, “The brothers were just family. And the white guys that were crew were family.”⁷⁵ Wayne Smith of Providence, Rhode Island, spoke of the black and white men he served with in the Ninth Infantry Division in 1968-69 in familial terms stating, “We truly were brothers and in some cases far closer to each other than anyone before or since in our lives.”⁷⁶

A number of soldiers initially reported feelings of prejudice when they arrived in Vietnam but noted that these feelings quickly dissipated. Robert Watters of Louisville, Kentucky discussed in great detail the nature of the changes that occurred once soldiers reached Vietnam. Watters, who served in 1965, concluded that at “the beginning of the Nam there was racism, there was racism going over on the plane, okay, there was racism

⁷⁴ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam*, 67.

⁷⁵ Don Jernigan account as found in Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986), 93. Eddie Wright was a black sergeant in Vietnam and *Thoughts* includes his own opinions on the war as well as the men he interviewed.

⁷⁶ Smith, interview by author.

in the field, but there, it wasn't all of a sudden.”⁷⁷ Watters further stated that “while I went to the Nam with some real bigots, and some real racists, okay. I saw a whole new change.”⁷⁸

David Parks of New York City reported that the whites he met in basic training “don't let you forget you're colored and that they're white for one minute.”⁷⁹ Parks, who served in 1966-67, believed that many white soldiers arrived in Vietnam feeling that socially accepted definitions of “black” and “white” were desirable and permanent. Reflecting later on his experiences in combat Parks remembered that “[t]he most positive thing that came out of the war was the comradeship that developed between black and white combat soldiers.”⁸⁰

Anthony Martin of Chicago served in 1966-67 with the Third Marine division and he reported a similar transformation. During his training at the Marine Corps Tracked Vehicle School in Twentynine Palms, California, Martin found himself the victim of harassment from other trainees and a target for undue criticism from his superiors. As the only African American in his graduating class, Martin was convinced that the poor treatment he received was racially motivated. However, in Vietnam things were much different. Martin theorized that “people began to realize you needed each other to get through this...and they know that the guy to the left and the right of him, regardless of

⁷⁷ Robert M. Watters, interview by George C. Herring and Terry L. Birdwhistell, May 16, 1985, University of Kentucky Libraries Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project, King Library, Lexington, Kentucky, 25.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ David Parks, *GI Diary* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1984), 24.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 137.

what color he is, that person's going to help you be able to put that next mark on your countdown calendar.”⁸¹

Robert Sanders experienced a certain level of prejudice when he first arrived in Vietnam, but these prejudices were replaced by “total unity and total harmony. It was really great, man. It was beautiful. That was the only thing that really turned me on in Vietnam. That was the only thing in Vietnam that had any meaning.”⁸²

Keith Freeman discussed an incident with a white soldier from Colorado who confessed to his previous prejudices and asked for forgiveness. Acknowledging that his parents taught him to be prejudiced against blacks, the man apologized, stating, “I’m sorry I ever learned like that because now I’m here and we’re out here fighting together watching guard for each other, when you’re asleep I’m on guard, when I’m asleep you’re on guard and my life is in your hands.”⁸³

These accounts reveal the perception of black soldiers that many white soldiers initially did not regard them as equal. African Americans recognized that they were serving alongside many whites who had been taught that all black Americans were inherently inferior with the corollary that they should be treated with disrespect and discrimination. However, these black witnesses concluded that over time prejudices receded, and blacks and whites came to accept one another as equals. Their time together in combat enabled whites and blacks to move beyond their previous social conditioning and form positive relationships. George Brummell, a black soldier from Federalsburg, Maryland who served with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry in 1966, spoke for many black

⁸¹ Martin, interview by author.

⁸² Goff and Sanders, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam*, 67.

⁸³ Keith Freeman account as found in Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War*, 107.

soldiers when he stated that Vietnam taught him “that we can get along together regardless of race.”⁸⁴

Numerous black soldiers described friendships with whites that developed as prejudices receded. Daniel Burress, a black marine from Chicago who served in 1965-66, developed a close friendship with a white corporal named Clark. On Burress’s last day in the front lines he was awarded the position of lance corporal and invited to the Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) tent, which was considered a major privilege. However, instead of going to the NCO tent he spent the night celebrating with Clark, who had bought an expensive bottle of wine to celebrate his promotion. Burress felt very conflicted over having to leave his friend, stating, “I was upset because I knew I was leaving the next day and I knew he would be there....we cried that night. We cried for different reasons. We cried for numerous reasons.”⁸⁵ Burress’s promotion and removal from the front lines were not enough to lessen his concern for Clark, who would remain.

Soldiers from a variety of different regions in the U.S. recalled experiencing similar types of friendships. Dave Dubose of New Haven, Connecticut, became close friends with a white soldier named Condon while serving with the 199th Infantry Brigade in 1966-67. Dubose remembered that he and Condon were as close as brothers and that their friendship revealed to him that the “barrier of color is false.”⁸⁶ Lee Ewing of Jeffersonville, Indiana served in 1967-68 with the Third Bridge Company of the First Marine Division and he became close friends with a white soldier from Connecticut

⁸⁴ Brummell, interview by author.

⁸⁵ Daniel Burress, interview by Ashley McKinney, April 18, 2002. Veterans History Project, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. 8-9.

⁸⁶ Dave Dubose, “Combat Knows No Color,” *Vietnam*, 1990, 25.

named Charles Sheehan. According to Ewing they shared a number of “firsts” together including trying drugs and alcohol for the first time. Speaking of their friendship, Ewing recalled, “He’s really significant in my mind...We was together all through those firsts, and he kind of looked up to me as the big brother.”⁸⁷

Stan Goff of Tyler, Texas, served in 1968-69 with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade where he became a close friend of two white soldiers named Doc and Emory. When Goff’s unit became embroiled in a fire-fight with People’s Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) troops, Goff and Emory, working together, managed to prevent the PAVN from firing on soldiers who were exposed. As a result of this incident Doc recommended Goff for the Distinguished Service Cross (DCS). Although Doc was his friend, Goff still had trouble believing that a white man would recommend a black soldier for such a distinguished award. ⁸⁸Doc’s support for Goff did not end there. When Doc heard that the brigade needed a bugler, he recommended Goff, who was a bugler in his high school band. As a result, Goff’s tour of duty in the front lines ended, and he became a bugler in the rear lines. Doc also instructed Goff not to tell anyone else about the recommendation. While Goff tried to follow his instructions, he found himself unable to do so. The first soldier he told was Emory, a white friend. In Goff’s words, “I wasn’t thinking white or black; I had to tell the men that allied themselves with me, like Emory.”⁸⁹ While Goff would eventually tell his black friends as well, the fact that he told his white friend first is

⁸⁷ Lee Sleemons Ewing, interview by Pat McClain. Veterans History Project, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 11.

⁸⁸ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers Black Soldiers in the Nam*, 136-137.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

significant because it provides further evidence that the existing boundaries shaping black-white relationships were being blurred, if not erased.

“He was a southerner that I thought I was not going to like”

African Americans sometimes found friendship in Vietnam in unexpected places. While serving with the First Cavalry regiment in 1966-67, Thomas Brannon of Sewickley, Pennsylvania, learned that his company commander was a southerner from Frankfort, Kentucky. His initial reaction was, “Oh God, stereotypical southern guy, I am going to catch hell now.”⁹⁰ However, Brannon’s initial skepticism of Harold Wilkins, which was based primarily on his father and grandfather’s reports of experiences with white southerners, proved incorrect. Wilkins ended up promoting Brannon to executive officer, and the two developed a close bond. Thinking back, Brannon concluded, “Harold Wilkins, who I thought was probably going to be the most racist son of a bitch I ever knew just based on my own prejudice and stereotypical way of looking at things, turned out to be first a great soldier and a great and good person... He was a southerner that I thought I was not going to like, but he was a southerner that I revered.”⁹¹

Black soldiers were aware that these “new” relationships formed in a “new” environment contrasted with prevailing racial mores back home. Ron Bradley of the Bronx, New York, remembered that “a lot of reality got served from soldiers from the South and North when we got together. Because normally, obviously, before you went in the service, you weren’t around [each other]. You were only around people pretty much

⁹⁰ Thomas Brannon, interview by author, December 6, 2011.

⁹¹ Ibid.

like yourself.”⁹² As a squad leader who served in an aviation company with the Ninth Infantry division in 1967-68, Bradley had the unlucky responsibility of leading a squad of mostly white southerners, one of whom claimed to be the son of a Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these men were initially resentful about having to follow Bradley’s orders, but over time these resentments subsided. In Bradley’s estimation everyone started to realize that they were more alike than dissimilar. He recalled, “Especially with the guy whose father was a Grand Dragon, he came around and started denouncing his father and what his father stood for...he said ‘I didn’t realize that blacks were like this...he lied to me.’”⁹³ Ed Emanuel, of Los Angeles, served as a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrolman (LRRP) with the Fifty-First Infantry in 1968-69 and he became close friends with a white soldier named Barney whom he described as a “brother straight from the hills of Kentucky. I knew in my heart that this buck sergeant was totally blind to color.”⁹⁴

While serving with the Americal Division in 1969-70, Charles Strong of Pompano Beach, Florida, befriended a white soldier from Georgia named Joe. While Strong acknowledged that the initial impression many blacks formed of Joe was that he was a “redneck, ridge running cracker,” in reality he was “the nicest guy in the world.”⁹⁵ The two men spent their leisure time listening to music and talking about their family and friends. They became so close that they pitched their tents together and Strong “would give him food and he would share his water. And food and water was more valuable than

⁹² Bradley, interview by author.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ed Emanuel, *Soul Patrol* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2003), 128.

⁹⁵ Charles Strong’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 57.

paper money.”⁹⁶ The fact that Strong shared his water, food, and sleeping accommodations in Vietnam with a white southerner is significant given that back in the United States white southerners were resisting the integration of lunch counters, the end of segregated drinking fountains, and above all residential and school desegregation.

Stephen A. Howard of Washington, D.C., served in 1968-69 with the 145th Aviation Company where he developed a particularly strong bond with a white soldier from Georgia named Rosey. Howard described Rosey as a “redneck,” but after only a short time they “ended up in each other’s room every night” exchanging information on their lives back in the United States and their dreams for the future. Howard and Rosey discussed “a lot about our personal lives. Having a girlfriend that you really were serious about marrying. Wanting to have a son one day. What our families was [sic] all about.” They also spent time discussing their different cultures. Howard recalled, “It was like I will show you what rednecks are like, then I’ll show you what niggers are about.”⁹⁷

Their close relationship spread to others in their unit, both black and white.

Howard stated that

when the rednecks got together and started to stomp and holler, you either had to go over there and pour beer on the floor and do your little jumpin’ up and down, or you stay out of it. That was their thing, and we had our thing. It was good to do it together, ‘cause we were all in the war together.⁹⁸

This account is revealing in a number of respects. Howard was in Vietnam during January 1968-August 1969, a period of time in which race relations in the United States

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷ Stephen A. Howard’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 119.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

were particularly tense.⁹⁹ He arrived in Vietnam having had little significant interactions with whites, yet quickly developed a close friendship with a white southerner. That Rosey actually showed an interest in an African American's culture revealed a level of respect rarely seen in the United States, especially in the South. When one considers the prevalence of social segregation in the South during this period, it is, in fact, unlikely that as civilians Howard and Rosey would have even had the opportunity or inclination to discuss their dreams, families, and cultures with a person of another race.

Howard's discussions with Rosey also opened his eyes to aspects of white culture. He learned that Rosey was the son of a poor sharecropper. In fact, Rosey's family was much poorer than Howard's. For what was likely the first time in his life, Howard met a white person who was poorer than he was. Howard even felt guilty when Rosey discussed going without food and "not having some of the basic things I knew deep down inside I had."¹⁰⁰

While the black and white soldiers who served with Howard and Rosey accepted their friendship, this was not always the case, especially outside of combat. Lamont Steptoe, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, befriended a white southerner from Alabama while serving with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry in 1969-70. This soldier was not only a close friend of Steptoe but of other black soldiers. As a Scout Dog Handler, Steptoe was only allowed to be in the field for a maximum of seven days at a time, with the rest of the time spent on base. He believed that race relations were fine in the field and black-white friendships were accepted, but this was not necessarily the case once soldiers were

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

outside of combat. Sensing these frictions, he informed his friend, “You know some of your fellow compatriots from down south are going to call you aside one day and ask you why you’re a nigger lover.”¹⁰¹ Unmoved, the man informed Steptoe that he would beat up anyone who questioned their friendship. When Steptoe went on R&R a few months later, he returned to find that “those soldiers in our unit from the South had in fact done exactly what I said they were going to do and he did exactly what he said he was going to do, he beat the shit out of them.”¹⁰² His actions are all the more remarkable when contrasted with the reaction of most Alabama whites to the civil rights movement and subsequent civil rights legislation.

Archie Biggers was a marine officer from Colorado City, Texas, who served with the Ninth Regiment in 1968-69. One of the few black officers in Vietnam, Biggers had the unique task of commanding white troops, many of them from the South. While some of the white soldiers in the unit were initially reluctant to take orders from a black officer, Biggers eventually developed a close relationship with them; in fact he became a confidant. They trusted him and felt comfortable coming to him with any professional or personal problems. One white soldier became so close to Biggers that he gave him a picture of his sister and said “she’s white, but you’d still like her. Look her up when you get back to the States.”¹⁰³

This statement is noteworthy for a number of reasons. That a white infantryman would actually encourage his black superior officer to date his sister speaks volumes about the lessening of racial prejudice in this individual. In *Race and Mixed Race*,

¹⁰¹ Steptoe, interview by author.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Archie Biggers’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 111-113.

Naomi Zack argues that the belief that black men lusted after white women “was the ultimate justification for the disenfranchisement of southern blacks, for segregation, and for the lynching of blacks.”¹⁰⁴ The idea of black-white sexual relations was viewed as so offensive and contrary to nature that it was described by a separate word: miscegenation. This repulsion led to the passage of anti-miscegenation laws in thirty-eight states which made it illegal for blacks and whites to have sexual relations, marry, or have children with one another. Until the 1967 U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Loving v. Virginia* thirteen states still had anti-miscegenation laws, including Biggers’s home state of Texas.¹⁰⁵ Biggers had arrived in Vietnam only a year after anti-miscegenation laws had been overturned in Texas, which makes the white soldier’s comments remarkable and demonstrates how socially constructed racial views and relationships were breaking down.

Equally significant are the words the white soldier chose to use. By stating “she’s white, but you’d still like her” the soldier made it clear that he held no biases against blacks, nor did he imply that dating a white woman was some sort of privilege which he was conferring on Biggers. He also recognized that Biggers might not be interested in dating a white woman. The white soldier’s offer represented a true breaking down of socially constructed boundaries.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 118.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 77. It is important to recognize that these laws were never meant to criminalize relations between white men and black women; rather, they were meant to prevent sexual relations between black men and white women.

¹⁰⁶ Archie Biggers’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 113.

“It hurt me bad when they got Joe”

The willingness of black and white soldiers to protect one another and the grief African Americans felt about the deaths of white soldiers also demonstrated the close bonds that black and white soldiers had formed. Wayne Smith, remembered “I met some white people that I am very glad to call my brother... some of the best people(black and white) I ever met, were those men, who were in combat, who were willing to risk their lives for me, and I them.”¹⁰⁷

Many black and white soldiers risked and sometimes sacrificed their lives for one another without any concern for race. Harold Bryant of East St. Louis, Illinois, served with the First Cavalry Division around An Khe in 1966-67, and he related an incident in which a black soldier saved the life of a white soldier whom he nicknamed “Mr. Ku Klux Klan” because of his membership in the Klan. Bryant made it clear that the members of his unit were close and there were never any racial incidents. Yet “Mr. Ku Klux Klan” fueled quite a bit of anger among the black soldiers. He managed to get cornered in a fire-fight with NLF forces. When the other soldiers tried to lay down cover fire and enable “Mr. Ku Klux Klan” to escape, he was too scared to move. This situation led a black soldier to drag him back to the unit. This incident “changed his [Mr. Ku Klux Klan] perception of what black people were about.”¹⁰⁸ Back in the United States an African American would not be willing to risk his own life to save a member of the KKK. Nor would a member of the KKK be likely to radically transform his racial views.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, interview by author.

¹⁰⁸ Harold Bryant’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 23.

Memphis native Terry Whitmore, who served with the First Marine Division in 1967-68, described an incident when he was wounded in a fire-fight, and a badly injured white marine stayed by his side rather than seek safety. Whitmore explained, “He was wounded. He couldn’t stand or even kneel...He just dragged me through the dirt, back about five or six yards.”¹⁰⁹ After dragging Whitmore out of the hole, the man shielded him with his body as American planes dropped napalm overhead. At the same time the white marine encouraged Whitmore to hold on, telling him “Hold on babe. You gonna be all right.” Whitmore strongly believed that he would not have survived had it not been for the protection and encouragement given by the white marine.¹¹⁰ The willingness of a white marine to risk his life for a black soldier he did not even know further illustrates the lessening of racial consciousness on the battlefield.

Bob “Pee Wee” Jefferson, a Sergeant and squad leader from Chicago, served in Vietnam in 1968. After Jefferson’s battalion was ambushed by PAVN forces he came upon a badly injured white soldier. Despite having been shot twice in the leg, Jefferson hoisted the soldier over his shoulder and carried him back to safety. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* years later noted that Jefferson saved the young soldier even “though he never knew the white kid’s name. He had never seen him before and would never see him again.” Speaking of the incident, which earned him a Bronze Star Medal for bravery, Jefferson recalled, “Over there we did that for each other. We all did. Didn’t matter

¹⁰⁹ Terry Whitmore, *Memphis, Nam, Sweden: The Story of a Black Deserter* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), 79.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

where you came from or who you were, rich or poor. You did for a man what you hoped they'd do for you.”¹¹¹

Edgar A. Huff of Gadsen, Alabama, served in 1967-68 and again in 1970-71, and he recalled an incident in which he risked his own life to save a white soldier. Huff was the first black sergeant major in the Marine Corps and one of the highest ranking non-commissioned black officers. He was also the superior to nearly all enlisted men, black or white, he encountered. During a fire-fight on River Road outside of Da Nang, NLF soldiers pinned down a young radio operator. Despite the objections of his colonel, Huff volunteered to save the young marine. He reasoned, “I knew I might get killed saving a white boy. But he was my man. That’s all that mattered.”¹¹² Huff was willing to risk his own life to save him, regardless of race because he was “his man.”

Similarly, some African American soldiers found that their white fellow soldiers could be more reliable in battle than their black counterparts. Cleveland native Jim Gillam served with the Fourth Infantry division from late 1968 until early 1970, and he remembered that “the ironic thing about this race thing is on one of the worst days of the worst week I spent in Vietnam I got in a fire-fight and all the black men I was with ran away and left me and the only two guys that stayed with me were two white guys.”¹¹³ While understandably angry at the soldiers who abandoned him, this predicament demonstrated to Gillam that “race” was not a determinant of reliability.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Anne Keegan, “Vietnam hero gets lost in a city jungle,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 12, 1988, 1.

¹¹² Edgar A. Huff’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 151-152.

¹¹³ Gillam, interview by author.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Others made the ultimate sacrifice. During an intense fire-fight in October 1965, Milton Lee Olive, an African American soldier from Chicago, noticed a grenade bouncing towards him and the other men in his unit. Olive jumped on the grenade saving the lives of four soldiers, black and white, who were nearby. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported that “Race was obviously no factor in the mind of the young Chicagoan when he saw the grenade coming over the thicket...Olive without hesitation grasped the grenade in his hand and flung his body atop it” sacrificing his own life in an effort to save his fellow soldiers. Olive was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.¹¹⁵

Jet reported a 1966 battle involving the 101st Airborne in which a white sergeant named Harry Goodman was shot and badly wounded by an enemy machine gun. With little regard for his own life, an African American soldier named Harry Garnett crawled out to save him. Unfortunately, Garnett was killed in the process.¹¹⁶

Black soldiers reacted to the death of a fellow soldier, whether black or white, with both grief and anger. In *Same Mud, Same Blood*, a black soldier named Wilkenson discussed a recent battle in which his unit took a number of casualties. He recalled, “We had so many casualties and nobody said we had one colored and five whites. I mean they were all casualties.”¹¹⁷

Hosea Dyson, a marine from Chicago, recalled an incident in which his squad was ambushed while patrolling along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Afterwards, Dyson and his fellow marines crawled through the jungle to retrieve the bodies of their deceased

¹¹⁵ James Goodrich, “Nation Honors Negro GI Who Gave Life For Mates,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 28, 1966, A1.

¹¹⁶ Booker, “An American is an American,” 20.

¹¹⁷ *Same Mud, Same Blood*.

squad members. Dyson recalled, “We didn’t care whether they were black or white...We just wanted to get them back so they could have a decent burial...I know one thing. I’ve got friends here, black and white, who would find my body and bring it back.”¹¹⁸

Wilkenson and Dyson were not alone in viewing the deaths of black and white soldiers as equally significant. Many African American soldiers likely would have agreed with Don Jernigan’s sentiments, “I remember most profoundly some of the white guys too, my grief, believe it or not is for as many of them as it is for my black brothers.”¹¹⁹

Jernigan’s ability to grieve equally for white and African American soldiers was not atypical. While serving with the 101st Airborne in 1966-67, Moses Best of Fayetteville, North Carolina, initially avoided making friends because he did not want to develop a relationship with anyone at a high risk of being killed. However, he eventually became quite close to a white soldier named Chitwood. Against Best’s advice, Chitwood volunteered for a particularly dangerous position and was killed. Best described Chitwood “as a real nice guy, Chitwood. I often think about him. He was probably the closest friend I ever had over there.”¹²⁰

Charles Strong’s white friend Joe was killed when he stepped on a booby trap. Strong was only a short distance away from Joe when the trap exploded, and he was forced to watch his friend suffer and eventually die. Strong explained that “it hurt me real bad when they got Joe.” While guarding the Medevac that came to pick up Joe, Strong,

¹¹⁸ Paul Hathaway, “Negro in Viet: Not That Far From the Ghetto,” *Newsday*, May 15, 1968, 37.

¹¹⁹ Jernigan as found in Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War*, 93.

¹²⁰ Moses Best’s account as found in Wilson, *Landing Zones*, 82.

looking for revenge, prayed “to the Lord to let me see some VC, anybody jump out on the trail.”¹²¹

On January 27, 1983, the *Chicago Tribune* published letters written in 1967-68 by Freddie King, a white soldier from Hammond, Indiana, to his family. These letters demonstrate both the close bond that many black and white soldiers formed with one another in Vietnam and the grief they felt when one of their “brothers” was killed. In one of the letters to his family, Freddie mentions having a close friend named Willie Ellison, an African American from Texas. Freddie even sent a few pictures of them together to his parents and siblings. Unfortunately, on November 25, 1968, both Freddie and Willie were killed when the vehicle they were in ran over a mine.¹²²

The *Tribune* article also included a number of letters that Freddie’s family received after his death. One of these letters was from Clarice Ellison, Willie’s mother. Clarice was obviously well aware of her son’s close friendship with Freddie, and her comments reveal a number of details concerning their relationship. She stated, “Your son was a dear friend of my son because your son wanted to come home with him. What I love about your son. My son couldn’t write, your son taught him how to write letters to me.” She, like Freddie’s family, was also sent a number of pictures of Willie and Freddie together in Vietnam.¹²³

Another letter was written to Freddie’s parents after his death by Jim Jones, an African American soldier who served with both men. Jones explained that he was a

¹²¹ Strong’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 57.

¹²² Anne Keegan, “Letters from the front: One American Family’s private history of Vietnam,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 27, 1983, D3.

¹²³ Ibid.

“Negro, but I just wanted to let you’ll [sic] know that we aren’t like animals and not care what happens to each other [over here] like most people think we do in the states.” In fact, Jones cared deeply about Freddie. He stated, “I knew your son, Freddie, and me and him were real good friends...we got to be close friends and it really hurt me when he met his death.” Freddie’s death so affected Jones that he “offered to bring his body home but they wouldn’t let me so I thought I would write you’ll a letter and try to express my sorrow.”¹²⁴

“No room for rednecks”

African American soldiers were not the only ones to experience the breaking down of barriers in Vietnam. In *Same Mud, Same Blood* a number of white soldiers provided a similarly positive view of race relations in Vietnam. Asked about his interactions with black soldiers, a soldier named “Arkansas” replied, “You look at them and they’re just another guy out there. A guy that you can bum a cigarette off of if you’re out. Or get a drink of water off if you’re out or a can of food. Everything is share and share alike.”¹²⁵ Quite significantly, Arkansas grew up in a state where blacks and whites were forced to drink from separate water fountains, but his service in Vietnam had revealed to him the unfairness of the attitudes and customs he had been taught as a boy. He recognized that many whites in Arkansas would not approve of his fraternization with black troops, but dismissed any criticism noting, “If they came over here and spent a couple months they’d learn it too, the hard way.” When pressed whether this new commitment would remain when he returned home, Arkansas replied, “After I’ve gone

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ *Same Mud, Same Blood*.

through what I have over here, if a white man tried to get me riled up against the negro, maybe go through a riot demonstration or something, I think I'd just get mad enough to shoot him period and be done with it."¹²⁶

A white soldier from Chicago named Hawkins came to a similar conclusion. He maintained that in Vietnam "you're not looking at a man's color," but rather his character and his ability to get the job done properly. Speaking of the soldiers in his platoon, Captain Anthony Mavroudis believed that "you can't divide them as a group, it's the man it's not the color and as far as I am concerned, the credit for anything that happens in this war, no matter what the outcome is, belongs to both, the white, and negro."¹²⁷

Oral testimonies from white Vietnam veterans provide similar examples of black and white friendship. Many whites also recalled having few interactions with African Americans before joining the military. Lewis Downey had limited relations with blacks while growing up in New Mexico and Mississippi, but this changed in Vietnam. Downey arrived in Long Binh believing that he would be working at a shortwave radio station, but when his orders were lost he feared being sent to an artillery unit. He sought out the help of an African American sergeant who allowed him to use a telephone to straighten the matter out. Downey recalled, "I have good feelings about black people...he helped me and that simple twist of fate meant the difference between doing something for people instead of dropping high explosives on people." One of the people Downey was able to help was a black cook named Pie. After Downey managed to connect a phone call for Pie to his mother "he came out of the phone booth with the biggest grin on his face...[he said]

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

‘I just talked to my mother.’ This moment continued to have great significance for Downey more than thirty-five years after his service in Vietnam ended.¹²⁸

Growing up in Boone County, West Virginia, Theodore Belcher had very few meaningful interactions with African Americans. However, when he joined the military, he found himself befriending a number of black soldiers, including George Brummell, who became a close friend. According to Belcher, when he served with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry in 1966-67 black-white friendship in Vietnam was not unusual. He remembered, “I know for a fact that every one of them met blacks, the blacks and the whites, met someone of the opposite race that they were tight with, they were close to.”¹²⁹

According to Belcher there was “no room for rednecks” in Vietnam and any man displaying prejudice was quickly isolated from the rest of the men. Belcher remembered an incident in which a white soldier from Arkansas named Manning called a black soldier, who had just been added to the squad a “nigger” and suggested that if they were back in Arkansas he would hurt him. Belcher angrily confronted the offending soldier in front of the rest of the squad, screaming, “Manning you’re not fucking in Arkansas alright and you will not refer to this man as a nigger and you will not come up with your little bullshit... I said cut yourself on the frigging arm, this man cuts himself on the arm, you’ll see red blood coming out of your fucking veins. Alright, so just consider yourself, we’re all in it together.”¹³⁰ After Belcher confronted him, Manning’s perspective on African Americans and race relations seemed to change and he became friends with a few African American soldiers in his unit. Although Manning was later killed in combat,

¹²⁸ Lewis Downey, interview by author, June 11, 2012.

¹²⁹ Ted Belcher, interview by author, December 6, 2011.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Belcher took some solace knowing Manning had at least been “integrated” before being killed.¹³¹

Tom Rogan of Springfield, Massachusetts, became close friends with Tom Brannon, an African American, in Vietnam. While both men were platoon leaders in the Fourth Cavalry Regiment of the First Division in 1966-67, Rogan believed that their friendship developed more out of shared interests than their similar rank. Rogan remembered that the other platoon leader in the squad was a Mormon and their forward observer was a Christian Scientist, which meant that they both abstained from drinking alcohol. As a result, he found himself relating better to Brannon, who like him, enjoyed drinking beer. Their already strong friendship was cemented when Rogan saved Brannon’s life after he was ambushed.¹³²

In 1966-67 Jack Whitted of Wheatley, Arkansas, commanded the First Battalion of Twenty-Eight Infantry Regiment of the First Division which placed him in charge of between 800-1000 troops. He reported a complete absence of racial tension among his men. Furthermore, many soldiers developed friendships with no regard to skin color. This was true of Whitted as well. After a white chaplain was dismissed for incompetence, Whitted was sent a replacement chaplain named Wes Geary, at the time the only black chaplain in the division. The two became close friends, even traveling together to Thailand on Rest & Relaxation(R&R). Whitted also became a close friend of Sinclair Swan of Medford, Massachusetts, who was a black company commander in the First

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Tom Rogan, interview by author, December 14, 2012.

Infantry. Late at night, when everyone else was asleep, Whitted and Swan would sing “My Darling Clementine” and other songs to each other over the radio.¹³³

The friendships that Whitted developed with Geary and Swan are particularly noteworthy when one considers that Whitted was born in the 1920’s in rural Arkansas. Describing his upbringing in pre-World War II Arkansas, Whitted stated, “My father was probably the most anti-black fellow that ever lived.” According to Whitted, his father lived his beliefs. In 1919, he was an active participant in putting down the “Elaine Race Riot,” which resulted from an attempt by black sharecroppers to unionize. In the aftermath, a white mob, which included Whitted’s father, killed more than a hundred African Americans.¹³⁴ Despite his upbringing and ancestry, Whitted was able to develop close friendships with blacks in Vietnam.

Thomas Titus, a white LRRP member, became close friends with an African American named Willie in Vietnam. Reflecting on his friendship with Willie, Titus stated, “I found my other family in Vietnam. My friend Willie was just like another brother to me. No matter whether I had skin practically snow white and he had skin practically black as night.”¹³⁵ During an enemy ambush, Willie tripped over a detonator wire which caused an explosion. While Titus tried to save Willie’s life, his injuries proved to be fatal. The death of his best friend in Vietnam had a haunting effect on Titus.

¹³³ Jack Whitted, interview by author, July 11, 2012.

¹³⁴ Robert Whitaker, *On The Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation* (New York: Broadway Books, 2009).

¹³⁵ *My Vietnam, Your Iraq*, Directed by Ron Osgood (2010; PBS, 2011), DVD.

He recalled, “31 years later I am still carrying around a hell of a lot of guilt” for Willie’s death.¹³⁶

In December 1965 Milton Sands, a white soldier from Doylestown, Pennsylvania, wrote a letter from Vietnam to the *Philadelphia Tribune* in which he praised the contributions and sacrifices of African American soldiers serving in Vietnam. After witnessing the death of a young black soldier, Sands “felt the need to tell someone of his death in the hope that the value of his sacrifice, of a life just barely lived, will not be lost...This colored boy died for America.” In highlighting this individual black soldier’s death, Sands also made a larger point about the continued mistreatment of African Americans in the United States. He reminded those “who might have denied him the right to food, lodging or a job” that this black soldier and many like him did not shirk their duties in Vietnam. Sands concluded, “May God grant all Americans the vision...to become more “democratic” Americans whether at work, at the lunch counter, or on the battlefield.”¹³⁷

Hosea Dyson remembered a white marine who upon leaving their squad told Dyson that “he’d been proud to be in the same foxhole with me...It made me feel good, so good. I would have felt good if a Negro had said it, but it struck me that someone white should do it.” When asked whether the war had changed white soldier’s perceptions of African Americans, Dyson replied, “I think the war changes men...It will

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Jim Magee, “Death of Negro GI in Vietnam Triggers Letter: Dying Negro Soldier,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 25, 1965, 5.

make a difference when we get back. Out here, they see us as people. Before, you were just a shadow or something. Now they know.”¹³⁸

Dyson’s experiences raise an interesting question as to the permanency of the friendships black and whites developed with each other. Did these friendships continue once soldiers returned to the United States? Herman Graham III’s *The Brothers’ Vietnam War* acknowledges that friendships between black and white soldiers did develop, but he argues that these relationships were situational. Once soldiers were removed from the threat of immediate death on the front lines, old racial prejudices resurfaced.¹³⁹ To some extent it is true that these relationships were temporary. Once their wartime service ended many Vietnam veterans lost contact with one another as had been the case in previous wars. There is no evidence that veterans of the Vietnam War lost contact with one another any more than veterans of previous wars, or that race had anything to do with it.

However, a number of interracial friendships continued long after military service ended. Ed Emanuel maintained that “Vietnam exposed a biracial brotherhood that proved to be the beginning of lasting friendship.”¹⁴⁰ Roosevelt Gore, who served with the First Infantry Division in 1967-68, agreed with Emanuel, noting that he remained close friends with two white soldiers, David Simpson and Ted Burton, fellow South Carolinians, nearly twenty-five years after they served together.¹⁴¹ Thomas Brannon remained friends with Harold Wilkins for more than forty years after they served together. He also remained best friends with Tom Rogan for the same period. Additionally, Brannon, Tom

¹³⁸ Hathaway, “Negro in Viet,” 37.

¹³⁹ Herman Graham III, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 47.

¹⁴⁰ Emanuel, *Soul Patrol*, 128.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Roosevelt Gore as found in Wilson, *Landing Zones*, 79.

Rogan, and Ron Copes travel to Washington, D.C. for Veterans Day every year.¹⁴² Ted Belcher also remained close friends with George Brummell for more than forty-five years after they served together.¹⁴³ Wes Geary remained close friends with Jack Whitted for a similar period of time.¹⁴⁴ Speaking of his long friendship with Wes Geary, Whitted commented, “My daughter has his address and phone number and I have told her that I want Wes to preach at my funeral when I die and that will probably raise a lot of hackles in May County to have a black chaplain come in here and preach a funeral.”¹⁴⁵

Even for those African American and white soldiers who permanently parted company after leaving Vietnam, these friendships remained an important part of their memories of the war. While serving in Vietnam, Dave Dubose was a close friend of a white soldier named Condon. While they did not remain in close contact after Condon was shot and evacuated from Vietnam, their friendship left an indelible imprint on Dubose’s memories of the war. By chance, years after their service in Vietnam had ended, Dubose happened to meet a member of Condon’s family. He recalled, “I got excited and told this family member how Condon and I loved each other. It must’ve appeared funny to this person for a black man to tell a white man that he loved him. I knew him in a different time then they did. Condon and I were very close.”¹⁴⁶

Additionally, the bi-racial friendships that black and white soldiers experienced with one another in Vietnam often had an impact on their post-Vietnam lives. Reflecting on his experiences as an air traffic and intercept controller with the Air Force in 1967-68,

¹⁴² Rogan, interview by author.

¹⁴³ Brummell, interview by author.

¹⁴⁴ Whitted, interview by author.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Dubose, “Combat Knows No Color,” 25.

Horace Coleman of Dayton, Ohio, remembered that “one of the things that the war did in a positive sense was it forced blacks and whites in Vietnam to work together.”¹⁴⁷ In Coleman’s estimation, Vietnam provided an opportunity for black and white soldiers, many of whom had grown up in segregated environments in the United States, not only to develop friendships but also to learn about people with whom they had little previous interaction.¹⁴⁸

Eighteen years after Tom Brannon’s service in Vietnam ended, he received a phone call from Bobby Metter, a white soldier with whom he had served. Brannon was understandably surprised to hear from Metter after such a long period of time, but his sense of shock was only heightened when he learned that Metter was calling to thank him for educating him about racial equality. Metter’s experiences in Vietnam serving with Brannon had convinced him that African Americans and whites were equal and deserved equal treatment. While this view was not shared by most whites in his hometown of Salem, Virginia, Metter continued to express support for racial equality in his community. Additionally, he passed these values on to his children. Reminiscing on his service in Vietnam and his conversation with Metter, Brannon affirmed, “Maybe I made an impact on Bobby Metter’s life that will affect whites in his community that look at people like me and can accept me as an American even though I’m darker than them.”¹⁴⁹

As prejudices broke down and friendships developed, the rigidity and importance of racial categorizations also weakened to the extent that many African Americans believed that their race and skin color were no longer definitive. The positive race

¹⁴⁷ Coleman, interview by author.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Brannon, interview by author.

relations Sanders experienced in Vietnam led him to conclude, “For the first time in my life, I saw people as people. We was [sic] just us, you know man, it was US.”¹⁵⁰ In Sanders’s estimation, combat service provided him with the opportunity to see his fellow soldiers, not as black or white, but just as people.

Sanders was not the only black soldier to express this new perspective. Sinclair Swan recalled, “When we were beating the bush it didn’t matter what color you were and like the old song says ‘everybody’s green.”¹⁵¹ Ed Emanuel believed that “there was no such thing as black, white, or brown Lurp [LRRP] in the jungles of Vietnam. We were all camouflage green. Somehow, that way of thinking seemed to weave its way into the fabric of our every day.”¹⁵² David Parks agreed, maintaining that “olive green was the only color that mattered.”¹⁵³

Cephus “Dusty” Rhodes of Apalachicola, Florida, served with the First Infantry division in 1966-67 and he believed that there was no recognition of color among the men in his unit in Vietnam. He remembered, “If the guy next to you is good you don’t know what color he is. If he’s not good you don’t know what color he is... He could be purple if he was doing the job. He could look like your mother if he’s not doing the job.”¹⁵⁴ As far as Rhodes was concerned, reliability was much more important than the color of an individual soldier’s skin.

When Stan Goff left the front lines of Vietnam, his friends, black and white, saw him off. Seeing the unity in his company, he reasoned that maybe this “could mean that

¹⁵⁰ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam*, 148.

¹⁵¹ Swan, interview by author.

¹⁵² Emanuel, *Soul Patrol*, 124.

¹⁵³ Parks, *GI Diary*, 137.

¹⁵⁴ Cephus “Dusty” Rhodes, interview by author, January 19, 2012.

black didn't matter." Instead of seeing him as a black man leaving the war, the men simply saw "just a man that was going out of the war."¹⁵⁵ Goff, like a number of other African Americans, perceived the front lines as a de-racialized space in which blacks and whites could enjoy real friendship "free" from socially constructed racism.¹⁵⁶

Death and Dependence

Several factors explain why race relations were more positive among soldiers in combat. For one thing the American military encouraged unity and discipline among its troops, especially those engaged directly in combat. This was, of course, nothing new. Samuel Stouffer's extensive two-volume study, *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*, shows that the military in World War II taught soldiers to sacrifice their own interests in deference to the interests of the Army. Stauffer argues that "the soldier was not an individual atom in the tide of warfare; he was an integral part of a vast system of discipline and coordination....who was simultaneously guided, supported, and coerced by a framework of organization."¹⁵⁷ This framework encouraged loyalty to the army, the unit, and one's fellow soldiers.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, Anthony Kellet argues in "The Soldier in Battle: Motivational and Behavioral Aspects of the Combat Experience" that "armies have long sought to promote loyalty to an entity larger than the soldier's immediate

¹⁵⁵ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam*, 139.

¹⁵⁶ Similar depictions of black-white friendships can be found in Bill C. Bryels's account in Robert E. Vadas, *Cultures in Conflict: The Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002); Roosevelt Gore's account as found in Wilson; Robert M. Watters, interview by George C. Herring and Terry L. Birdwhistell, May 16, 1985, University of Kentucky Libraries Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project, King Library, Lexington, KY; Samuel Vance, *The Courageous and Proud* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1979); Daniel Burrell, interview by Ashley McKinney, April 18, 2002. Veterans History Project, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵⁷ Samuel Stauffer, *The American Soldier: Combat and its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 97.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

group.”¹⁵⁹ In Vietnam this meant encouraging soldiers of both races to be loyal to their unit and defend its members against the enemy. Robert Sanders stated that the captain in his unit instilled in the men “that there wasn’t no [sic] black and white in Nam.”¹⁶⁰

While we might question the strength of this indoctrination or whether it was much more than rhetorical, many soldiers reiterated the idea that Army or Marine green was the only color of importance. While the military encouraged unity, this was more a reflection of sound military strategy than any deep commitment to remaking relations between black and white soldiers.

The very real possibility of being killed explains in great part why there was so little racial tension in combat and why so many black and white soldiers formed such close ties with one another. The American strategy of search and destroy and the fact that the National Liberation Front (NLF) and PAVN initiated the majority of engagements meant that each soldier’s life was continually under threat in the field.¹⁶¹ This reality bonded black and white soldiers to one another.

As was the case in past conflicts, combat tended to have a unifying effect on soldiers from different backgrounds. It is perhaps a given that few soldiers in Vietnam would have had the inclination or willingness to live by their learned racial prejudices with bullets flying past their heads. It made sense to try to work together, especially as working together increased one’s chance of survival. A 1975 *Journal of Social Issues*

¹⁵⁹ Anthony Kellett, “The Soldier in Battle: Motivational and Behavioral Aspects of the Combat Experience” as found in Betty Glad, ed. *Psychological Dimensions of War* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1990), 219.

¹⁶⁰ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam*, 67.

¹⁶¹ Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 163. Appy cites a number of studies which claim that Viet Cong and PAVN forces initiated anywhere from 75-88 percent of all combat incidents.

article titled “Black-White and American-Vietnamese Relations Among Soldiers in Vietnam” closely addresses the topic of race relations in Vietnam and includes the impressions of a number of doctors, psychologists, and researchers. Duncan Stanton, a psychologist from the University of Pennsylvania, argued that “race and racial differences seemed to lose their importance” among those serving in combat because black and white soldiers were heavily dependent on one another for survival and any type of prejudice was viewed as disruptive.¹⁶² Similarly, Jonathan Borus, a physician at Harvard University, concluded that because soldiers were continually confronted with the possibility of being killed they not only depended upon one another, but they rejected race as a factor of importance.¹⁶³

Many black soldiers agreed with this interpretation. Gerald Lynch, a black marine from Boston, participated in the Battle of Khe Sanh in 1968. He argued that in times of intense combat “everybody thinks along one common line and that is survival.”¹⁶⁴ James Lewis of Lake Charles, Louisiana, served with the 589 Engineer Battalion Combat in 1968-69 and he believed “there was no racism in the combat zone” because black and white soldiers “were all like rats pressed in a can and having to fight together to stay alive and so nobody gave race much thought.”¹⁶⁵ Eddie Greene believed that race was not an issue in Vietnam when he served there in 1970 because “it was a life or death situation and no one had time for any racism.”¹⁶⁶ St. Louis native Willie Thomas, who served with

¹⁶² Byron F. Fiman, Jonathan F. Borus, and M. Duncan Stanton, “Black-White and American-Vietnamese Relations among Soldiers in Vietnam,” *Journal of Social Issues*, Fall 1975, 41.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁶⁴ Bavarskis, “Vietnam Veteran Decides To Join The Black Struggle,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 26, 1973, 10.

¹⁶⁵ Lewis, interview by author.

¹⁶⁶ Greene, interview by author.

the First battalion of the 525th Intelligence in 1969-70, had a similar perception, stating that most believed, “I don’t have time to hate you. My life might depend on you in the next five minutes.”¹⁶⁷ Hosea Dyson maintained, “In war there isn’t any color line” because “you have to work together. You depend on each other to survive out there.”¹⁶⁸ Similarly, Freddie Edwards, who served with the First Marine Airwing in 1970-71, believed that the intimacy of combat provided a sort of protective shield from racial distinctions.¹⁶⁹

Other soldiers agreed that the shared experience of combat and the very real possibility of being killed contributed to the bonding of black and white soldiers. Anthony Martin made a clear distinction between the way black and white soldiers acted towards one another before their first fire-fight and how this changed in the aftermath. Initially, “the whites hung with whites and blacks hung with blacks” but after the unit’s first taste of combat “the bodies were brought back to the ships, there was silence, and a lot of the nonsense was kind of put aside.”¹⁷⁰ Wayne Smith noted that the immediacy of death and the possibility that “the last person you’re talking to on this earth could be fucking Vietnamese or could be no one” created a sense of brotherhood among the soldiers in his unit.¹⁷¹ Similarly, Clyde Jackson of Richmond, Virginia, who served in 1966-67 and again in 1971-72, believed that the existence of a common enemy explained why black and white soldiers got along so well with one another.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Willie Thomas, interview by author, September 3, 2011.

¹⁶⁸ Hathaway, “Negro in Viet,” 37.

¹⁶⁹ Freddie Edwards, interview by author, December 2, 2011.

¹⁷⁰ Martin, interview by author.

¹⁷¹ Smith, interview by author.

¹⁷² Jackson, interview by author.

Survival became the paramount goal in the mind of all soldiers, and this reality united black and white troops. At the same time, the fact that soldiers were reliant on one another for survival does not fully explain why many black and white soldiers formed such close bonds with one another. After all, soldiers in combat did not spend all of their time fighting and much of the bonding between black and white soldiers happened during downtime in the bush. Additionally, as was noted by Frank McGee in *Same Mud, Same Blood*, there was always the chance that “buried racial antagonisms might surface” after the shooting stopped if someone of a particular group was viewed as acting inappropriately, cowardly, or dangerously in combat.¹⁷³

That this rarely happened suggests that the de-racialized environment was more permanent than the aftermath of a single fire-fight. In many respects black and white soldiers were often just as dependent on one another when they weren’t facing enemy fire. Thus, bonds of friendship were formed out of an overall shared experience of sacrifice and hardship. Psychologist Jonathan Shay correctly notes that “extreme dependency on others is fundamental to modern combat,” but he also understands that dependency was not limited just to the periods where soldiers were actively engaging the enemy. Shay reminds us that combat soldiers in Vietnam often experienced “shortages of all sorts--food, water, ammunition, clothing, shelter from the elements, medical care” and even of effective and sensible leadership.¹⁷⁴ The fact that soldiers from different backgrounds faced these challenges together and that there was no easy way of avoiding them helped in the bonding process. A number of black soldiers mentioned this shared

¹⁷³ *Same Mud, Same Blood*.

¹⁷⁴ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 19.

dependency. George Hicks of Warfield, Virginia, who served with Army Security Agency in 1969-70, theorized that black and whites got along primarily because they “endured the same thing...you are over there suffering the same pain I am...I am eating the same c-rations you are eating.”¹⁷⁵ Thus, in Hicks estimation the fact that black and white soldiers suffered through the same experience helped them form a bond with one another.

A number of other soldiers reached similar conclusions. Speaking of the men in his unit, Cephus Rhodes remembered, “We share the same hardships, we share the same aspirations, get through tonight, win this battle, take this hill, cross this river, be here when the sun comes up in the morning and were together in that.”¹⁷⁶ Jim Houston believed that a “brotherhood” developed between black and white soldiers in his unit because “that’s the only way you’re going to make it back.” However, he also maintained that relationships formed “because you had to depend on each other. We ate out of the same dish, drink out of the same bottle.”¹⁷⁷

Similarly, Ron Bradley recalled, “Those who were racist were educated because we all realized we were dependent on each other to stay alive.” But he also recognized that dependence went further than just moments of actual battle stating, “You were spending all your time together 24-7 so obviously you would talk...You would be drinking beer or you know sitting there smoking cigarettes, or passing stories back and

¹⁷⁵ George Hicks, interview by author, April 28, 2012.

¹⁷⁶ Rhodes, interview by author.

¹⁷⁷ Houston, interview by author.

forth about you know where you lived and how you grew up. So a lot of ideals were altered by being together in such close proximity.”¹⁷⁸

Horace Coleman spoke of shared dependency, “Everybody there knew that you had to depend on other GIs. They were going to be cooking your food, transporting your food and drink to you, or your ammunition. You had to depend on the person next to you, in front of you, in back of you to do their job so you could do yours. To make a combined effort to stay alive.”¹⁷⁹ Similarly, Ron Copes of Hartford, Connecticut, believed that positive race relations in Vietnam were a reflection of this shared dependency. Speaking of his experiences serving with the First Infantry in 1966-67 and again with MACV in 1969-70, he recalled, “Everybody had a job to do, there was a need to depend upon the guy on your left and right. When you’re out there engaged you want to know that somebody’s gonna have your back or get you what you need.”¹⁸⁰

“Race was like, that’s bullshit that happens back in the world”

This shared dependency no doubt united black and white soldiers, but it was not the only reason that race relations in combat were so harmonious. Combat service placed African American soldiers’ lives at risk, but it also physically separated them from the racism and prejudice that often defined race relations in the United States. Many African Americans arrived in Vietnam having had only limited experiences with whites in civilian life. In many cases, the experiences with whites they did have were not positive, and almost all reported incidents in which they were victims of discrimination and

¹⁷⁸ Bradley, interview by author.

¹⁷⁹ Coleman, interview by author.

¹⁸⁰ Ron Copes, interview by author, November 17, 2011.

prejudice. Their previous experiences colored their perception of what combat service in Vietnam would be like.

It is also important to remember that while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 succeeded in providing greater political and social rights for African Americans, full equality and complete racial integration proved elusive. The passage of civil rights legislation should not be interpreted as evidence of universal or even majority support for black civil or voting rights. In May 1965 a major polling firm found that 42 percent of whites supported civil rights demonstrators, which was an all-time high for the period. By June 1967, support had dropped dramatically as 82 percent of whites reported having an unfavorable opinion of the civil rights movement.¹⁸¹ This growing negativity towards the civil rights movement was no doubt influenced by the rise in popularity of militant groups like the Black Panthers. Many whites incorrectly lumped in black militants with more traditional and moderate advocates of civil rights such as the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). Nonetheless, these statistics are still significant as they demonstrate that the civil rights movement never had majority white support and by 1967, incidentally before both the Newark and Detroit riots, a wide majority of white Americans were unsupportive if not outright hostile towards groups seeking legal and civil rights for blacks.

Additionally, a number of incidents took place in the United States during the Vietnam War era which confirmed just how fractured and divisive race relations had become on the home front. These events made it clear to black soldiers just how difficult

¹⁸¹ Clay Risen, *A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination* (Hoboken, New Jersey, 2009), 7.

it would have been for black and white soldiers to develop back home the relationships they formed with one another in Vietnam. On August 11, 1965 the arrest of a black motorist by white police officers in Los Angeles triggered six days of violence, known as the Watts riot, in which between 7,000-10,000 people rampaged through the area looting and burning buildings, attacking fire fighters, and confronting police. It took 10,000 National Guardsmen to end the rioting, but not before thirty-four people were dead, more than a thousand were injured, and four thousand arrests were made.¹⁸²

On July 12, 1967 in Newark, New Jersey, the arrest of a black taxi driver by white police sparked the Newark Riots. Over five days, twenty-six people were killed, 1100 were injured, 1400 were arrested, and there were more than 350 incidents of arson. While the prevailing image from the Newark Riots was that of a black sniper shooting at police, law enforcement fired 13,325 rounds of ammunition.¹⁸³

A few weeks later on July 23, 1967 police officers in Detroit raided an illegal, after hours bar in one of Detroit's largest black neighborhoods. Similar to events in Watts two years before and in Newark two-weeks earlier, the situation quickly escalated into violence. Over the next five days, forty-three people died—thirty of them killed by police officers, 7,231 people were arrested and 2,509 buildings were looted and burned.¹⁸⁴

Race relations continued to fracture during the next year. After Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968, riots broke out in a number of cities most

¹⁸² Errol Wayne Stevens, *Radical L.A.: From Coxey's Army to the Watts Riots, 1894-1965* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 306-307.

¹⁸³ Kevin Mumford, "Harvesting the Crisis: The Newark Uprising, the Kerner Commission, and Writings on Riots," as found in Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter, *African American Urban History Since World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 203.

¹⁸⁴ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 259.

notably, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Chicago, Kansas City, and Pittsburgh.¹⁸⁵ Given this racial climate it is difficult to believe that the relationships black and white soldiers formed in Vietnam could have occurred to any extent in the United States. *Same Mud, Same Blood* and accounts in *The New York Times*, *Time*, and the *New Pittsburgh Courier* contrasted the positive race relations they witnessed in Vietnam with the racial disorder and violence in the United States.¹⁸⁶ Service in Vietnam had removed soldiers, even if only temporarily, from the existing toxic racial environment. Far from the tension that often defined contemporary black-white relations, black and white soldiers were able to escape their social conditioning and form new relationships which contradicted existing racial norms.

To some extent antagonistic race relations in the United States explain why it was not easy for black and white soldiers to establish new relationships in Vietnam. When Stan Goff first arrived in Vietnam, black-white relations in his unit were tense. Goff believed that prejudice was particularly pronounced in many of the white southerners who served in his unit. He did not regard this behavior as surprising as they came from a culture which taught them that African Americans were inferior and only useful as servants. In Goff's words many white soldiers simply came from

different backgrounds. Their parents taught them that a nigger ain't shit, a nigger can't do shit. You can see it in their eyes. They look at you as though you're supposed to ask them, 'what can I do for you?' You know? It's as if they're saying, 'This is what I want you to do, boy.' You just see it in their eyes and their actions. They sit back and have an offhanded look

¹⁸⁵ Risen, *A Nation on Fire*, 232.

¹⁸⁶ *Same Mud, Same Blood*, "Armed Forces: Democracy in the Foxhole," Thomas A. Johnson "The U.S. Negro in Vietnam," "Black GI Wants New Answers."

at you: 'I'm smarter than you,' Being from the South, I'd seen that look all my life.¹⁸⁷

Despite these initial prejudices, blacks and whites came to understand each other better. Goff gave considerable credit to black soldiers who recognized that they were “stuck out here in the boonies, and the white guy from the South is stuck out here, and it's life and death, we'd better begin to erase all this coloration immediately.”¹⁸⁸ He concluded that after initially hesitating, both groups embraced each other and became friends. Goff's account is noteworthy in that he recognized that both blacks and whites had to look past their previous experiences with one another. As a black southerner, Goff had experienced mistreatment at the hands of whites, and he also needed to overcome the antipathy he felt for whites for some type of racial civility to develop. White southerners had to fight strongly against their own upbringing which had taught them that blacks were inferior and learn to respect their black fellow soldiers and treat them as human beings. In both cases, it is hard to believe that either group would have been able to overcome these prejudices had they been living in the highly racist environment which had formed and encouraged their growth in the first place.

It was understood that soldiers often arrived in Vietnam with racist views formed by their environment or culture. *In Same Mud, Same Blood* Mavroudis talked about white soldiers who arrived in Vietnam believing in the inferiority of African Americans. He stated that in combat situations white soldiers “really see that the Negro is not everything that their social group said they were and they'll know that they're not because they

¹⁸⁷ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam*, 26.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

fought alongside them...they'll be able to go back and tell them 'you can feed your lies and bias from now till doomsday, but I'll know better.'”¹⁸⁹

Some soldiers recognized the importance of place in defining racial attitudes and behavior. While James Lewis found that there was no racism in the combat zone, he also noticed that occasionally when white soldiers returned from R&R, their old racial views remerged and “if there was any racism shown it would be shown then.”¹⁹⁰ He believed that this change in behavior happened because “they were back in the world without the pressures that were necessitating them being cohesive and being as one. The band of brothers thing broke down the minute they would go out the door.” Interestingly, once they returned to the unit these men would be forced to re-adopt a non-prejudicial outlook.¹⁹¹

A number of African American soldiers noted the toxic racial environment in the United States and some even wondered if they were better off staying in Vietnam. In 1975 the *Journal of Social Issues* released a study on black-white relations in Vietnam which concluded that African American Vietnam veterans believed overwhelmingly that race relations had been better in Vietnam than in the United States.¹⁹²

In Same Mud, Same Blood Frank McGee asked a number of soldiers how they felt about the recent racial disturbances in the United States. Each was clearly perplexed by the racial situation back home especially as it contrasted sharply with his own experiences in Vietnam. Referring to the race riots, Larry stated that he was saddened and

¹⁸⁹ *Same Mud, Same Blood*.

¹⁹⁰ Lewis, interview by author.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Fiman, Borus, and Stanton, “Black-White and American-Vietnamese Relations,” 39.

confused “because I refuse to believe that people just can’t live together.” When asked about the possibility of black veterans participating as snipers in urban riots, Larry answered confidently, “If he was standing in that mob or firing at somebody and he had to face one of the people he faced while he was in the army, he’d probably throw his weapon down and run and hide his face.”¹⁹³ A white soldier named Hawkins became upset when McGee asked him to imagine a race riot in which he faced off against Larry. Hawkins answered, “I’d probably cry, I would expect him to draw back and hit me as hard as he could. I would get up and walk away. That’s how much I feel for the man, and I say man, not colored man. I would feel like a dog. I pray this never happens.”¹⁹⁴

In a letter to *Jet*, Robert L. Jackson, a black marine stationed in Vietnam, wrote in reference to recent riots in his hometown of Chicago, “It appears to me that racial injustice is about to take over the U.S; it’s spreading like malignant disease.” Racial problems in the U.S were enough to cause Jackson “to wonder if it is safer to stay here and fight, or return home and fight a never ending battle between the races.”¹⁹⁵

In December 1966 John Davidson, a black infantryman serving with the 173rd Airborne, wrote a letter to his mother explaining why he decided to extend his tour in Vietnam for an additional six months. Davidson explained that his options were staying in Vietnam or facing reassignment in Augusta, Georgia. He preferred “the crawling terrors of the Bien Hoa jungles” to the prejudice and discrimination he believed he would face in Georgia. He concluded “I’d like to come home if things were different...but in

¹⁹³ *Same Mud, Same Blood.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ “‘Safer In Vietnam or U.S.?’ Marine Wonders,” *Jet*, September 1, 1966, 23.

Vietnam, I get along with some of the white guys as well as I do with Negroes. This place means something special to me.”¹⁹⁶

Wayne Smith noted that most soldiers had an attitude of “race was like, that’s bullshit that happens back in the world.”¹⁹⁷ Additionally, Smith believed that the fact that African American and white soldiers were outside of the United States allowed these relationships to develop. He remarked, “You take people away from their kind of culture...and you no longer look at what are the differences between us, but rather you emphasize what we have in common and we’ve always had far more in common than different.”¹⁹⁸

African American poet and Vietnam veteran Lamont B. Steptoe discusses the distance black soldiers felt from America in his poem, “Uncle’s South Sea China Blue Nightmare.” Steptoe writes, “In country, America is forgotten even in the midst of its own war. Life is finally understood... In country, Afro-Irish-Italian-Jewish-Latino-Hispanic-Angelo-Saxon-Asian-Native American sing in one beer hall voice.”¹⁹⁹ Clearly, Steptoe believes that the space of Vietnam allowed the opportunity for comradeship to exist among various racial and ethnic groups.

Ron Bradley believed similarly that distance from the racial environment in the United States allowed black-white friendships to flourish. Speaking of the men with whom he served, he recalled “we became a cohesive group and the prejudices and the past ideologies were thrown out the window because most of them were proven to be

¹⁹⁶ “Rather Stay In Vietnam Than Return To Georgia,” *Jet*, December 8, 1966, 8.

¹⁹⁷ Smith, interview by author.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Lamont B. Steptoe, *Uncle’s South Sea China Blue Nightmare* (Alexandria, VA: Plan B Press, 2003), 40.

false and they had been perpetrated on a lot of people especially from the South.”²⁰⁰ He credited this shift in outlook to the fact that Vietnam was an environment far removed from the United States stating, “You know it’s like you learn the truth. You learn the reality. You learn that we’re all the same. You know that instead of being divided by environment or what state or by ideology.” As Bradley saw it, once black and white soldiers were removed from their previous environment their commitment to past indoctrinations dissolved and they began to realize that much of what they had been taught to believe about each other was false. He recalled, “For those in the South it was like ‘well yes we’ve been led to believe this about the North and we’ve been led to believe this about blacks and we’ve been led to believe that about whites.’ All that went to the wayside.”²⁰¹

Clyde Jackson believed that Vietnam provided blacks and whites with an opportunity to interact with one another that they otherwise wouldn’t have had in the United States. He remembered, “Whether black or white, I think it was a bridge for a whole lot of them, a bridge as far as communicating with each other and the closeness that they had...because there wasn’t a lot of communication between blacks and whites at the time.”²⁰²

Ed Emanuel argued that the “time and place allowed the bond between...fellow soldiers to transcend the not-so important barriers like “race”...place gave us a chance to see the true color; green.”²⁰³ Samuel Vance and a fellow black soldier named Gibbs

²⁰⁰ Bradley, interview by author.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Jackson, interview by author.

²⁰³ Emanuel, *Soul Patrol*, 128.

remembered that in Vietnam “the black man looks upon that white man as a man, as a friend, as a soldier, but most of all as an American...if only the people back home could feel that way about us, without looking at the color of our skin.”²⁰⁴ To Gibbs the racial situation in America was so bad that upon arriving in the United States he “wanted to get back to Vietnam”²⁰⁵ Similarly, when David Parks was flying home on the plane he wrote, “I’m a Negro and I’m back home where color makes a difference.”²⁰⁶ For these African American soldiers the fraternal bond they shared with their fellow white soldiers in the de-racialized space of Vietnam was not possible in the United States.

Conclusion

Most blacks had expected to experience racial discrimination in Vietnam, but to the surprise of many the front lines of Vietnam were a place of racial friendship and unity. Racial division and violence were replaced by fraternity and cooperation. African American and white soldiers ate together, slept in the same tents, risked their lives for one another, and grieved when a fellow soldier of either race was killed. The socially constructed categories of “black” and “white” and conceptions of “normal” relations between the two groups were blurred and changed. This change occurred both because African American and white soldiers were heavily dependent upon one another and because service in Vietnam separated them from the toxic racial environment of the United States.

That said, the friendships that African Americans experienced with white soldiers on the front lines should not be seen as evidence of any sort of general trust in white

²⁰⁴ Samuel Vance, *The Courageous and Proud* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1979), 44.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Parks, *GI Dairy*, 123.

society, the military hierarchy, or the American government. As we will see in the next chapter, African American GIs were often deeply suspicious of white officials, civilian or military, and their policies and objectives.

Additionally, relations between black and white soldiers were not always amicable. While a high level of fraternity existed between blacks and whites engaged in combat, these positive relations often did not extend to those serving in support units on the rear lines or on military bases in Europe, Asia, and the United States, where racial segregation, tension, and even violence were the norm.²⁰⁷ In fact, many of the same soldiers who claimed that race was simply not an issue in combat believed that it was a serious issue outside of the combat zone.

What is interesting is that neither the distrust of the white elites nor the deteriorating racial situation at home and on American military bases had a dramatic effect on relations between blacks and whites engaged in combat. Despite growing tension on military bases in the post-1968 era, relations between black and white soldiers serving on the front lines appear not to have been dramatically affected. Of the Vietnam veterans interviewed for this chapter many served part or all of their time in Vietnam after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.²⁰⁸ In late 1969, African American journalist Wallace Terry reported a significant rise in both black militancy and racial violence on military bases. However, he modified this assessment by stating that "the black soldier in

²⁰⁷ It is important to remember that the majority of soldiers who served in Vietnam were actually in support units and therefore in the rear lines. Appy, *Working Class War*, 167. Appy estimates the ratio of support/combat troops was between 5-1 and 10-1.

²⁰⁸ Freddie Edwards, George Hicks, James Gillam, Eddie Greene, Clyde Jackson, James Lewis, Louis Perkins, Wayne Smith, Lamont Steptoe, Sinclair Swan, and Willie Thomas.

the bush still helps his comrade and wants his help as well.”²⁰⁹ Terry mentioned an incident in which a black medic jumped on a grenade sacrificing himself to save a white marine. In another incident, twelve white soldiers held a wounded black lieutenant above their heads to protect him from napalm smoke until a rescue helicopter could arrive.²¹⁰

Years later, Terry elaborated even further on the level of racial camaraderie he witnessed in Vietnam. Terry readily acknowledged that race relations were often poor in the rear areas especially post-1968, but he also maintained that “part of Martin Luther King’s dream came true in Vietnam. In his famous 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial he said he had a dream that one day the sons of former slaves and the sons of slave owners would sit at the same table. That dream came true in only one place, the front lines of Vietnam.” In Terry’s estimation, thousands of black and white soldiers “found their common humanity on the front, where they shared the last drop of water, where they gave their lives for each other.”²¹¹

As well, when African Americans criticized the military, American society in general, or even whites for racist behavior, they usually made a distinction between these groups and the white friends they had made in Vietnam. Most were able to distinguish their white comrades from those who they believed were responsible for their mistreatment. When *New York Times* journalist Thomas A. Johnson was invited to a “soul session,” an event in which he was told African American soldiers would be criticizing whites, he was surprised to find a number of whites in attendance. When it was

²⁰⁹ Wallace Terry, “Racial Tensions in the Military: Black Power in Vietnam, September 1969,” *Time*, September 19, 1969.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Maria Wilhelm, “An Angry Vietnam War Correspondent Charges That Black Combat Soldiers Are Platoon’s M.I.A.’s,” *People*, April 20, 1987.

asked what these white soldiers were “doing attending a soul session,” it was explained that they were ‘honorary souls,’ and the criticisms of racist whites proceeded.²¹²

In many respects the front line experiences of black soldiers provided them with a new perspective on the strength and permanence of socially constructed categories of race. When racism was weakened by the particular conditions engendered by combat, not only was behavior modified but also the potency of racial classification. According to available accounts, whites learned to view blacks as worthy of real friendship and not as racial inferiors. As Richard Traegerman, a white soldier from Philadelphia saw it, service in Vietnam taught whites to view “Negroes as intelligent and brave as anybody else.”²¹³ Some African Americans learned from their front line experiences that “real” friendship with whites was possible. Their experiences taught them that white racial prejudice could be penetrated and that socially constructed categories of race were not impervious to change. As an anonymous black soldier in Vietnam sated, “The Negro sees the white boy—really sees him---for the first time...he’s just another dude.”²¹⁴ Thus, the front lines created new spaces in which both blacks and whites could think about race.

²¹² Johnson, “The Negro in Vietnam,” 16.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 2: “Brothers as many brothers as they can find”: Prejudice, Discrimination, and Death in Vietnam

In the 1986 *Frontline* documentary “The Bloods of Nam,” African American journalist Wallace Terry spoke about the significance of black-white friendships in Vietnam, noting that soldiers “became brothers against a common enemy. If Vietnam had any redeeming value it was this friendship.” At the same time Terry also claimed that Vietnam was “a place of discrimination” where black soldiers regularly dealt with racism and prejudice.²¹⁵

As Terry suggested, many African American soldiers experienced a degree of friendship and camaraderie with white soldiers in Vietnam, but these friendships did not lead them to view the armed forces as an organization free of racial prejudice or discrimination. Quite to the contrary many complained that they experienced discriminatory treatment during their military service. One frequently expressed complaint was that African Americans were disproportionately assigned menial duties. This accusation drew upon the historical experience of African Americans in the military when white officers viewed blacks as lacking the courage and skill to serve in combat and as a result assigned them solely to unskilled positions. Black soldiers also believed that they were not promoted to the levels that they deserved, a conclusion supported by the scarcity of black officers. Another widespread complaint was that African Americans were more likely to be punished for misbehavior than whites, especially through the use

²¹⁵ “The Bloods of ‘Nam’” *Frontline*, produced, directed and photographed by Wayne Ewing (Alexandria, VA: PBS, 1986), Videocassette (VHS).

of non-judicial punishments known as Article 15s and more serious punishments which might result from courts-martial.

Collectively, these complaints demonstrate that many blacks believed that officers, almost all of whom were white, had a negative image of blacks and their abilities. In this respect service in the armed forces in Vietnam paralleled their historical experience in civilian life—discrimination and inequality. Their experiences led many blacks to distrust the armed forces more generally as noted by an anonymous black soldier who stated, “The regular chain of command and the normal grievance system won’t work for the black man in the Army. We fear it and will never trust it.”²¹⁶

However, blacks simultaneously complained that the armed forces demanded that they perform the most demanding and dangerous duties. These conflicting complaints are exemplified in the experiences of James Daly, a black veteran from Harlem who appeared in the 1968 documentary, *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger*. Daly was initially trained to be an air traffic controller—a position which he hoped would translate to a civilian job once his tour in Vietnam was over. However, when he arrived in Vietnam, he was dismayed to find that despite his training he was given an assignment chauffeuring officers. When Daly complained, he was sent “to the jungles in Phuoc Binh with the First Infantry division Fifth artillery group.”²¹⁷ Daly’s experiences suggested that African Americans had only two options in the armed forces—menial work or combat duty.

²¹⁶ C.V. Glines, “Black VS White: Confrontation in the Ranks is Calling For Improved Human Relations---Or Else,” *Armed Forces Management*, June 1970, 21.

²¹⁷ *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger*, 1968. *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger* Video, accessed December 16, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVVh1JEe7Bw>

Throughout the war rumors were pervasive that African Americans were disproportionately assigned dangerous, front-line combat duties. There was some truth to this accusation. In the early years of the conflict, African Americans were disproportionately drafted and assigned to combat units. As a result a higher number of African Americans died. On March 5, 1967 *The Washington Post* cited a recent study by the National Advisory Commission on Selective Service which found that “under the current military service system, the qualified negro is more apt to be drafted, to be placed in a combat unit, and to meet death in Vietnam than the white man.” Furthermore, the commission found that African American participation in the draft was in “several ways inequitable.”²¹⁸ As we will see, this is only part of the story, as many African Americans, motivated in large part by economic factors, volunteered for elite units like airborne placing them in combat and increasing their chances of being killed.

As the Vietnam War continued, the percentages of African Americans who were drafted, served in combat units, and died decreased. However, the damage was done as rumors continued to circulate that the military was purposely sending large numbers of African Americans to their deaths in Vietnam. For many black soldiers the military effort in Vietnam had a domestic goal—the reduction and eventual extermination of African Americans from American society. While there is no evidence that the government or military had a secret plot to exterminate African Americans, these rumors, which continued for the entire war, demonstrate the level of distrust which many African Americans felt towards the armed forces.

²¹⁸ William Chapman, “Qualified Negro Is Found to Receive Inequitable Treatment Under Draft,” *Washington Post*, March 5, 1967, A1.

“The hardest, dirtiest, and most unpleasant chores”

From the American Revolutionary War until the Korean War, the experiences of African American soldiers followed a common pattern. They were excluded from combat by white officers who doubted that they would make competent soldiers or who feared that arming African Americans would have disastrous domestic repercussions. As a result, African Americans served primarily in menial positions in support of white troops. African Americans were eventually permitted to serve in combat but only in response to black protests.²¹⁹

By the time of the Vietnam War blacks were no longer prohibited from combat, but many African Americans believed that a number of whites continued to see blacks as suitable only for menial work. In the Vietnam era, company-level officers and non-commissioned officers had wide latitude in determining which soldiers were assigned such mundane tasks as digging ditches, filling sandbags, disposing of human waste, and low-level food preparation.²²⁰ According to many African American soldiers they were targeted for these duties and similar ones more frequently than their white counterparts.

In February 1966 the *Philadelphia Tribune* reported on the experiences of Georgie Woods, a popular black Philadelphia disc jockey, who spent two-weeks traveling through Vietnam entertaining troops. Woods remarked, “I talked to hundreds of Negroes in Vietnam and some of them bluntly told me they are constantly given the hardest,

²¹⁹Herman Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 1.

²²⁰ Thomas A. Johnson, “Blacks Don’t Feel They Get a Fair Shake,” *New York Times*, November 29, 1970, 193.

dirtiest, and most unpleasant chores.”²²¹ In December 1968 State Senator Charles Chew, a Democrat from Illinois, reported that he had received a number of letters “from our black fighting men who have made some terrible charges of racism in Vietnam.” One of the primary complaints voiced in these letters was “that menial tasks are assigned only to black soldiers.”²²²

Complaints of this sort continued for the duration of the conflict. In June 1970 Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Rights L. Howard Bennett noted that black soldiers often complained about “fairness in selection for duty detail.”²²³ In December 1971 *Jet* discussed the findings of Bennett’s successor Frank W. Render II who had previously traveled to Vietnam and investigated complaints of racial discrimination. Render found that one of the primary complaints voiced by black soldiers was that they were always “given the menial tasks.”²²⁴

Individual African American soldiers voiced similar complaints. David Parks, who served with the Ninth Infantry Division in 1967, consistently complained in his diary that blacks in his unit were unfairly targeted for menial work by a white sergeant named Paulson.²²⁵ On January 13, 1967 Parks wrote, “One Sergeant, Paulson was his name, had me put on the shit detail (latrine duty)... no FDCs [Fire Direction Control] are supposed

²²¹ Fred Bonaparte, “Bias Hurts GI’s Morale Says Georgie After Tour of Vietnam,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 19, 1966, 1.

²²² “Black Senator To Visit Vietnam To Probe Bias,” *Jet*, December 19, 1968, 4.

²²³ Glines, “Black VS White,” 27.

²²⁴ “Black GIs Caught In Vise,” *Jet*, December 2, 1971, 14-15.

²²⁵ Letter, Colonel Richard A. Edwards, Jr. to Brigadier General Edward Bautz, Jr., April 30, 1968, Folder 2: File on “Vietnam Diary” by David Parks, Box 16: Official Papers, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) Policy Files on Discrimination in the Army, The United States Army College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. While Parks does not say the division he served in according to the armed forces Parks served in Company B, Fifth Battalion, Sixtieth Infantry of the Ninth Infantry Division.

to pull that detail, but I got it nevertheless.”²²⁶ On February 2, 1967, Parks wrote, “Paulson is a real ass. He’s always telling me that Negroes are lazy and won’t help themselves...I tell him he’s full of shit and end up filling sandbags.”²²⁷ Parks was not the only African American targeted by Paulson. Speaking of two African American soldiers in his company, Parks lamented “Pratt and Gurney are pretty bright souls. But every time you see them they are pulling a shit detail while the white cats lie in their bunks enjoying life.”²²⁸

Parks was not the only African American to complain that he was ordered to complete menial tasks despite his superior rank. Ron Sawyer, of Mount Vernon, New York, served in Vietnam from January 1968 to February 1969 with the 380th Strategic Air Command. He recalled, “I was constantly ordered to do menial details even though there were men of lesser rate standing about.”²²⁹

In 1969-70 Vietnam experienced significant incidents of racial violence, a topic which will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Three. In an effort to determine the causes behind these violent incidents, the armed forces established the Human Relations Council in 1970. When members of the Human Relations Council visited Da Nang in September 1971 they frequently encountered black soldiers who complained “that they were being discriminated against when extra duty was assigned.” After investigating these allegations members of the council found that a company commander, when asked

²²⁶ David Parks, *GI Diary* (Washington, D.C: Howard University Press, 1984), 54.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108. A number of white soldiers confronted Paulson’s superior about the unfair delegation of menial duties and demanded that he make changes.

²²⁹ Willie L. Hamilton, “The Black Vietnam Veteran and His Problems: Fifth in a Series,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 20, 1971, 1.

to choose fourteen soldiers for additional duties, chose ten African Americans. While the Human Relations Council did not say whether they believed that the commander was prejudiced, they were quick to criticize his decision making, noting, “This was not a very good procedure and could lead to misunderstandings.” As a result they recommended that the company commander choose soldiers randomly from duty roster when determining assignments.²³⁰

As a member of a fleet marine force with the Third Marine Division in 1966-67, Anthony Martin believed that tasks were equally distributed between blacks and whites in combat, but he also spent considerable time on ships along the Cua Viet River where things were quite different. He recalled, “Aboard the ship, African Americans did more KP (Kitchen Patrol). I peeled more potatoes than any white boy on that ship. And you know my floors and, particularly on the USS Ogden they used to have me a cleaner on the ship...I learned how to iron clothes very well.”²³¹ Clyde Jackson, who served in Vietnam in 1966-67 and again in 1971-72 agreed with Martin’s assessment remembering, “As far as KP and stuff like that a lot of blacks had those jobs..... Most of the time blacks were doing KP.”²³²

James Gillam, who served in the Central Highlands in 1968-70, noted that whenever it was time to burn feces “they come to get the brothers because the brothers have no rank. They do a lot of the dirty jobs.”²³³ Gillam’s explanation was perceptive and

²³⁰ Report, Dennis M. Kowal to Chief, September 19, 1971, Staff Visits, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, Record Group 472, National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP), College Park, Maryland.

²³¹ Anthony Martin, interview by author, September 12, 2011.

²³² Clyde Jackson, interview by author, January 8, 2012.

²³³ James Gillam, interview by author, Lubbock, Texas, March 14, 2008.

accurate. The majority of African Americans who served in Vietnam were either draftees or volunteers of low rank. As a result they were liable to be ordered to engage in menial duties. At the same time, David Parks's experiences suggest that white officers sometimes targeted black soldiers for ditch digging and sandbag filling even when their rank was supposed to exempt them.

Responding to an increase in racial tension among members of the 197th Infantry Brigade at Fort Benning in Columbus in 1970, Infantry Commander Major General Orwin C. Talbott initiated the creation of a five man Race Relations Coordinating Group. The primary task of this group was to organize and monitor race relations seminars in which black and white soldiers were able to express their concerns. While these seminars occurred stateside, it is important to note that the Brigade was made up of 6,000 Vietnam veterans, 2,000 of whom were African American. Significantly, one of the most frequently voiced complaints from black soldiers was that "white NCOs always put black soldiers on the dirtiest details."²³⁴

Also in 1970, Major General Michael P. Ryan became concerned enough about racial tensions in the Second Marine Division, stationed at Camp Lejeune outside of Jacksonville, North Carolina, that he ordered his battalion commanders to hold "leadership discussions" in which black marines were encouraged to discuss any complaints or concerns they had involving racial matters. The division was composed primarily of soldiers with Vietnam service. The leadership sessions, which probably involved hundreds if not thousands of African American marines, found that "the black

²³⁴ Glines, "Black VS White," 24.

marine is especially sensitive to any indications that menial tasks are given mostly to him while most whites are spared the ‘dirty’ tasks.”²³⁵

In June 1970 *Armed Forces Management* concluded that there was a widespread perception among black soldiers that they were “singled out for hard labor details while whites get the ‘soft’ ones.”²³⁶ One anonymous black soldier was quoted as saying that “the best assignments go to whites because they control the personnel system.”²³⁷ While it is difficult to determine if African Americans were in fact disproportionately given menial or difficult tasks, *Armed Forces Management* noted that at least one marine general found an all-black detail working outside of his headquarters. To the anonymous general’s credit “the white NCO-in-charge was quickly informed that the appearance of discrimination is just as bad as evidence of it and some white were immediately exchanged for black to achieve a balanced scene.”²³⁸ While the general’s intervention demonstrates that some commanders were concerned about accusations of discrimination, it is worth remembering that the general was responding to someone else’s decision to assign only blacks to a work detail. At least in this case, someone had initially decided to assign a large group of black soldiers to menial duty. Other units may not have been led by generals with the same commitment towards fairness and equality.

“When promotions come along whites get promoted”

The perception that African Americans were disproportionately assigned menial duties resonated strongly with many black soldiers because it coincided with what had

²³⁵ Ibid., 22.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid., 21.

²³⁸ Ibid.

been their historical experience not only in the armed forces but back home. At the same time, as the anonymous soldier quoted in *Armed Forces Management* observed, African Americans were less likely to “control the personnel system” and as a result they had less influence over who received what assignments. Many blacks felt as though they were in an inferior position and were meant to stay there.

One reason for this view was that there were few black commissioned officers in Vietnam. African Americans represented only 2 percent of the officer corps during the war, and the low percentage of black officers was not lost on the media or soldiers themselves.²³⁹ During his 1966 trip to Vietnam Georgie Woods reporting seeing “less than five Negro officers all the time I was there...and most of them seemed to be highly specialized, either doctors or chaplains. I don’t recall meeting any Negro officers who actually were involved in setting policy or making assignments.”²⁴⁰

In May 1967 *Time* reported that of the 380 combat-battalion commands in Vietnam, only two were headed by black officers. In at least one case an African American colonel was promoted to a desk job that had not existed previously “simply to keep him from being assigned to a line command.”²⁴¹ It appears that the perception remained that African Americans were unsuited for leadership, particularly in combat.

An August 1968 *Ebony* article complained that of the “400,000 officers in the military, only 8,325 are Negro,” representing about 2 percent of all officers.²⁴² The

²³⁹Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 22.

²⁴⁰ Bonaparte, “Bias Hurts GI’s,” 4.

²⁴¹ “Armed Forces: Democracy in the Foxhole,” *Time*, May 26, 1967.

²⁴² Alex Poinsett, “The Negro Officer: Limited Numbers Spotlight Tokenism in the Military,” *Ebony*, August 1968, 137.

majority of these officers, 5,471, were in the Army, but even there they represented only 3.4 percent of the army's officer corps. In the Air Force there were 2,417 black officers out of total of 77,997, representing 3.1 percent of all officers. The percentage of black officers was even lower in the Marine Corps where there were only 167 black officers out of a total of 27,000, representing a mere 0.6 percent of all officers. In the Navy there were only 330 black officers out of total of 52,300, representing roughly 0.6 percent of all officers.²⁴³ Not much had changed by 1971, as *Jet* reported that blacks made up only 3.4 percent of officers in the army, 1.8 percent of officers in the Air Force, 0.7 percent of officers in the Marines, and 0.3 percent in the Navy.²⁴⁴

The scarcity of black officers in Vietnam provided substantial evidence that blacks were less likely to be promoted. Sinclair Swan, who served as a captain with the First Infantry Division in 1966-67 and again with the United States Army Republic of Vietnam (USARV) in 1968-69, believed that there was blatant prejudice in regards to the way promotions were awarded. He perceived that there no effort to encourage black officers or create equal opportunities for them. He believed that this lack of interest in blacks advancing in rank was the reason why he wasn't given a company command during his time with the 101st Airborne, a promotion which he thought he deserved.²⁴⁵

Louis Perkins, who served with the Fifth Infantry Division in 1966-67 and again as an advisor to Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in 1968-69, acknowledged that some blacks in his company received promotions, but he also knew that promotions

²⁴³ Ibid., 138-139.

²⁴⁴ "Black GIs Caught In Vise," 13.

²⁴⁵ Sinclair Swan, interview by author, August 11, 2011. Swan was originally slated to serve with the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam.

for black officers were few and far between. According to Perkins blacks “didn’t get the command spots” that they should have. Additionally, he believed that even when black officers were promoted, they were more likely to receive commands in service headquarters rather than positions that would allow them to lead men in combat.²⁴⁶

One of the reasons that so few African Americans were promoted was that they were far more likely to receive poor evaluations. A 1972 report presented to the Department of Defense revealed that between 1956 and 1972 African Americans were consistently rated ten points lower on their Officer Efficiency Reports (OER) than whites. Remarkably African Americans received on average the same OER ratings in the late 1950’s that they did in the early 1970’s. This report suggests that Swan’s and Perkins’s perceptions were correct.²⁴⁷

Ron Copes, who served with the First Infantry in 1966-67 and again with Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in 1969 -70, felt that “an African American had to do more than a white officer to get the same amount of credit.”²⁴⁸ Willie Thomas, who served in 1969-70 with the 525th Intelligence Unit, was also aware that there were few black commissioned officers. He saw the scarcity of black officers as the result of blacks not having full access to places like West Point. In his opinion, had they had such opportunities, more African Americans would have been officers.²⁴⁹ Thomas’s depiction of West Point was largely accurate. In 1968, there were only seventeen black cadets at West Point. Combined there were only ninety-eight African Americans at Annapolis

²⁴⁶ Louis Perkins, interview by author, December 17, 2011.

²⁴⁷ Isaac Hampton, *The Black Officer Corps: A History of Black Military Advancement From Integration Through Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

²⁴⁸ Ron Copes, interview by author, November 17, 2011.

²⁴⁹ Willie Thomas, interview by author, September 3, 2011.

Naval Academy, West Point, and the Air Force Academy. Between 1969 and 1972, only 105 blacks out of a total of 18,887 cadets graduated from these three institutions.²⁵⁰

If officers were unlikely to be promoted or given certain command positions, African American enlisted men had similar complaints. After his service in Vietnam was over, Anthony Martin learned that he was going to be transferred to the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station in Yorktown, Virginia, where he would receive a promotion to sergeant. However, when he arrived at Yorktown and inquired about his promotion, the captain of the base told him to his face that “the South was not ready to have niggers telling white men what to do.”²⁵¹ Although Martin was understandably outraged, the captain dismissed him from his office. Even more humiliating, Martin soon found himself taking orders from a white private first class in spite of the fact that he was a corporal. Speaking of these experiences, Martin recalled, “I myself was a victim of something that still burns in my soul today and I will never ever forgive the persons that did it.”²⁵²

Robert Louis Jr., who served in 1966-67 with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division, had a similar perception of the standard by which military officials judged African Americans. He believed that African Americans were always assessed with the expectation that they would not or could not succeed. As a result, there was little interest in promoting them.²⁵³

Roman Metcalf, who was serving with the Third Marine Division in Vietnam in March 1969, complained that African Americans were consistently passed over for

²⁵⁰ James E. Westheider, *Fighting On Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 123-124.

²⁵¹ Martin, interview by author.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Robert Louis Jr., interview by author, November 30, 2011.

promotions. He claimed that after only three months in Vietnam he was assigned to squad leader, but that marine officials failed to promote him to a higher position in spite of the fact that they continued to assign him “duties of a higher ranking officer.”²⁵⁴ Richard Devore, a black airman who was stationed at Bien Hoa Air Base in 1969, claimed that he knew some black non-commissioned officers who had been in the service for “14-16 years and have not been promoted from grade E5 to E6.”²⁵⁵

There is substantial evidence that the armed forces were well aware of these complaints. In October 1969 seminars organized at Fort Benning under the leadership of Major General Orwin C. Talbott revealed that African Americans frequently questioned, “When are whites going to give the blacks equality on the duty roster and in promotions?”²⁵⁶

During his trip to Vietnam in November 1969, L. Howard Bennett repeatedly encountered African Americans who were dissatisfied with the unavailability of promotions. During a visit with members of the 145th Aviation Battalion, he discovered that the “alleged difficulty in attaining lower enlisted-grade promotions by personnel” was an issue of considerable concern for black soldiers in the battalion.²⁵⁷

African American members of the III Marine Expeditionary Force stationed in Da Nang also complained that they were not being promoted to the ranks that they deserved. A report concerning the Twelfth Tactical Fighter Wing stationed at Cam Ranh Bay stated

²⁵⁴ Faith C. Christmas, “Mother of GI Seeks Vietnam Bias Probe,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 26, 1969, 3.

²⁵⁵ Hamilton, “The Black Vietnam Veteran: Fourth in a Series,” 32.

²⁵⁶ Glines, “Black VS White,” 26.

²⁵⁷ Briefing, Thomas Anderson to L. Howard Bennett, November 28, 1969, Visit of Mr. Howard Bennett, Equal Opportunity Reporting File-Survey: Box #1, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

that “promotional opportunities were believed to be slower for blacks” and that “black personnel train Caucasians on how to perform a job correctly; when promotions come along whites get promoted, but black trainers left back.”²⁵⁸ In one specific case a black E-4, likely a senior airman, was given tasks appropriate for an E-6, technical sergeant, but “was told when promotions come up that he is not eligible for promotion to E-5.” Blacks on the base also complained that they were “assigned the worst jobs (e.g., walking the flight line in sand and dust when jets are operating).” African Americans stationed with the USARV in Long Binh “perceived that Caucasians were moved up faster, and that black troops spent a longer than average time in grade.”²⁵⁹

This perception that African Americans were being discriminated against was shared by African Americans stationed with the MACV in Saigon also in December 1969. Bennett’s investigation found that “blacks are losing confidence in the system--- they believe complaint and grievance systems are brought with subtle and overt, real and imagined threats of retribution; promotions are slow, assignments are inferior.” African Americans serving with the Navy Support Activity in Saigon complained that there is “perceived to be an intangible core of prejudice in promotions and assignments.”²⁶⁰

On December 6, 1969 L. Howard Bennett wrote a letter to Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) Admiral John S. McCain which noted that many African Americans “complained that they are discriminated against in promotions...that they will stay in grade too long, that they will train and teach whites who come in and pretty soon

²⁵⁸ Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

their trainees pass them by and get the promotion.” Others complained that “they will work in grades higher than that which they occupy” and that even when they do an excellent job they remain at the lower grade working a job meant for someone with a higher rank. Unfortunately, there is no record of McCain’s response to Bennett’s letter.²⁶¹

For the remainder of the conflict the armed forces received complaints about the lack of promotions afforded to African Americans. In September 1970 Army surveillance revealed that African American soldiers at Camp McDermott in Nha Trang were concerned that “promotion opportunities” were limited for African Americans.²⁶² During a November 1970 Race Relations Conference held at Fort Monroe, Virginia attendees learned that African American soldiers overwhelmingly believed that “whites are promoted faster than Negroes.”²⁶³ A September 3, 1971 Human Relations report revealed that African Americans stationed at Camp Baxter in Long Binh “continue to believe that they are treated unfairly in matters of promotions.”²⁶⁴ During a November 1971 hearing organized by the Democratic Black Caucus, numerous witnesses testified that African Americans repeatedly failed to “win key command positions over less qualified whites.”²⁶⁵ After traveling to Vietnam in December 1971, Frank W. Render II stated that one of the most often heard complaints from black soldiers was that the “system of

²⁶¹ Briefing, L. Howard Bennett to John S. McCain, December 6, 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁶² Briefing, Macfarlane to Welborn G. Dolvin, September 1970, Equal Opportunity and Racial Unrest, Equal Opportunity Reporting File-Survey: Box #1, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP. Unfortunately, MacFarlane’s first name is illegible.

²⁶³ Report, James R. Anderson, December 29, 1970, Staff Visits, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁶⁴ Report, Benjamin E. Smith to Human Relations Branch, September 2, 1971, Staff Visits, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁶⁵ “Armed Forces: Black Powerlessness,” *Time*, November 29, 1971.

promotions is discriminatory.”²⁶⁶ A 1972 Human Relations study found that African Americans overwhelmingly believed that “whites are promoted faster than blacks.”²⁶⁷

The situation was no better outside of Vietnam. Bennett reported that African Americans serving with the Seventh and Thirteenth Air Force in Udorn Rtafe, Thailand “alleged that there were two promotion lists on base, one for blacks and one for whites” and those on the white list were always given preference.²⁶⁸

“A total lack of confidence in the system of military justice”

There was also a widely held belief among blacks that they were unfairly targeted for punishment and punished more severely for committing the same crimes as their white counterparts. Ron Copes believed that there were serious discrepancies in the way blacks were treated by the justice system in Vietnam compared to the way whites were treated. He recalled, “one of the things that I did see happen with African American soldiers when it came to discipline...they were prone to get the harshest punishment for the same thing whereas a white soldiers might get a more lenient punishment for the same crime...It wasn’t equal.”²⁶⁹ Similarly, Wayne Smith, who served with the Ninth Infantry Division in 1968-69, believed that African Americans were more likely to receive harsh punishments for violations than whites.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ “Black GIs Caught In Vise,” 15.

²⁶⁷ Report, 1972, Subordinate Unit Publications, Equal Opportunity Reporting Files-MACV Publications: Box #5, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁶⁸ Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁶⁹ Copes, interview by author.

²⁷⁰ Wayne Smith, interview by author, October 25, 2011.

Ron Sawyer felt that the “sentences meted out to blacks” were rarely deserved and that this type of discrimination was common in Vietnam.²⁷¹ Sawyer alleged that he was unfairly targeted for punishment by a white racist southerner who was out to get him. The man accused Sawyer of leaving his job ten minutes early, but when “three white airmen signed a statement which said that not only was Sawyer there but that on that particular night had worked overtime” he was released. While the support provided by Sawyer’s white friends speaks to the kind of racial camaraderie discussed in the previous chapter, Sawyer was well aware that the situation could have turned out differently. A conviction would have meant a reduction in rank from sergeant to airman basic, the lowest ranking, a fine of \$200, and a 30 day jail sentence.²⁷²

Following his visit to Vietnam, L. Howard Bennett reported that many African Americans displayed “a total lack of confidence in the system of military justice” viewing anyone connected with the system, including staff judge advocates, company commanders, and reviewing authorities, with suspicion and distrust. According to his report “sentences are viewed in comparison to what ‘whitey’ got for the same offense, and blacks perceive that they are getting more and harsher punishments.”²⁷³

Bennett’s report highlighted complaints made by black marines serving with the III Marine Expeditionary Force in Da Nang who claimed that when black and white marines with previously clean records were charged with the same offense, African

²⁷¹ Willie L. Hamilton, “The Black Vietnam Veteran and His Problems: Fifth in a Series,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 20, 1971, 42.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

Americans always received harsher punishments.²⁷⁴ The Judge Advocate General's Corps (JAG) warned that African Americans in the Twelfth Tactical Fighter Wing "believed there was a growing feeling among the young troops that the system of military justice is not equitable" and that this perception was damaging the armed forces authority and control. In Long Binh, black members of the USARV complained that they were "'busted' for offenses where whites were reprimanded," leading to the belief that "the minute you make rank the (white) Man is looking for a way to take it away."²⁷⁵

Bennett's investigation found that African Americans stationed with the MACV in Saigon "are losing confidence in the system---they believe complaint and grievance systems are brought with subtle and overt, real and imagined threats of retribution... military justice punishes blacks harder and more often than whites."²⁷⁶ A December 1970 report on race relations in the military revealed that black soldiers believed that they "are more likely to be charged or to receive stiffer punishment for similar offenses than whites."²⁷⁷ A September 1971 Human Relations report concerning a recent visit to Camp Baxter in Long Binh revealed that black soldiers felt that the military justice system was unfair and discriminatory towards African Americans.²⁷⁸ A 1972 Human Relations study found that African Americans perceived that they were far "more likely to be charged or to receive stiffer punishment for a similar offense than whites."²⁷⁹

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Report, James R. Anderson, December 29, 1970, Staff Visits, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁷⁸ Report, Benjamin E. Smith to Human Relations Branch, September 2, 1971, Staff Visits, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁷⁹ Report, 1972, Subordinate Unit Publications, Equal Opportunity Reporting Files-MACV Publications: Box #5, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

Not all punishments came as a result of some quasi-judicial inquiry. Article 15s were non-judicial punishments assigned by unit commanders at their discretion. African American soldiers were convinced that the white officer corps assigned them unfairly to blacks. During his 1969 trip to Vietnam Howard Bennett concluded, “Article 15...continues to be an object of constant complaint. Blacks characterize sentences as highly arbitrary and subjective, often bearing little discernible relationship to the offense committed or the sentences received by others for the same offenses.” Recipients of Article 15s were often given only a minute or two to explain themselves, and appeals were seen as a formality, not a legal challenge to be taken seriously. Bennett reported that some African Americans felt so alienated by the military justice system that they refused to fill out appeals or speak to Staff Judge Advocates (SJA) about their concerns, deeming these actions a waste of time. Bennett also observed that some barracks lawyers purposely misled black soldiers about their rights to file appeals.²⁸⁰

In September 1970 a group of between seventy-five to one hundred soldiers, most of whom were black, met to discuss allegations of discriminatory treatment at Camp McDermott in Nha Trang. Chief among their complaints was the belief that they were being discriminated against through the use of Article 15s.²⁸¹ A December 1970 report on race relations in the military concurred with this assessment, noting, “Military justice is a source of friction. Article 15 is greatest area of concern, especially when the commander

²⁸⁰ Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁸¹ Briefing, Macfarlane to Welborn G. Dolvin, September 1970, Equal Opportunity and Racial Unrest, Equal Opportunity Reporting File-Survey: Box #1, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

administers this punishment in writing and not orally.”²⁸² This report suggests that officers may have been dispensing punishments without discussing the facts with individual soldiers.

After visiting Vietnam in 1971, Frank W. Render II reported that “an overwhelming number of blacks were being processed through the system of military justice through the use of Article 15.”²⁸³ In April 1972 the Human Relations Branch received a complaint from Michael Hayes, a black soldier with the Fifty-Sixth Transportation Company in Long Thanh. Hayes alleged that his former commander Major Robert E. Short had discriminated against him on the basis of race. His accusations centered on Short’s use of Article 15s. According to Hayes, he received six Article 15 punishments in a three-week period at the end of his tour. He accused Short of trying to damage his military record just as his tour of duty ended.²⁸⁴ Black soldiers stationed outside of Vietnam also complained about unfair issuing of Article 15s to blacks.²⁸⁵

These complaints appear to have some validity. A November 1972 Defense Department study found that African Americans received 25.5 percent of non-judicial punishments, a percentage far higher than their percentage of the American military. Significantly, blacks were twice as likely as whites to be punished for such “confrontation or status-type offenses” as disrespect or inappropriate gestures.²⁸⁶

²⁸² Report, James R. Anderson, December 29, 1970, Staff Visits, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁸³ “Black GIs Caught In Vise,” 14.

²⁸⁴ Report, Herald F. Stout Jr. to Roland Day, April 18, 1972, Racial Incidents, Equal Opportunity Reporting Files- MACV Publications: Box #5, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁸⁵ “Area Army Camp Hit With Race Bias Charge” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, September 13, 1969, 4.

²⁸⁶ David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 207.

Many African Americans also believed that they were more likely to be punished as a result of courts-martial. In October 1969 a seminar on race relations conducted by Major General Orwin C. Talbott revealed that blacks frequently questioned “why more blacks than whites get court-martialed?”²⁸⁷ In September 1970 a group of between seventy-five and one hundred black soldiers protested the unfair use of courts-martial against African Americans.²⁸⁸ In December 1970 State Senator Charles Chew reported that he had received a number of letters from black soldiers who “have been court-martialed for fighting while white soldiers were freed.”²⁸⁹ The perception that African Americans were more likely to receive punishment as a result of courts-martial is backed up by available statistics. A 1972 study by the Defense Department found that of the 1,471 servicemen who received courts-martial, 34.3 percent were African American, a percentage far larger than their proportion in the armed forces.²⁹⁰

After his visit to Vietnam in 1970 Frank W. Render II noted that African Americans were targeted for “special and general courts-martial which, in many cases, lead to less than honorable discharges.”²⁹¹ Statistics support his observations. African Americans were far more likely than whites to receive undesirable, bad conduct, and dishonorable discharges than whites. Black soldiers who received these discharges often were disqualified from receiving veteran benefits, unemployment insurance, and welfare. In addition, receiving a negative discharge made it difficult for returning veterans to find

²⁸⁷ Glines, “Black VS White,” 26.

²⁸⁸ Briefing, Macfarlane to Welborn G. Dolvin, September 1970, Equal Opportunity and Racial Unrest, Equal Opportunity Reporting File-Survey: Box #1, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

²⁸⁹ “Black Senator To Visit Vietnam To Probe Bias.”

²⁹⁰ Cortright, *Soldiers In Revolt*, 207.

²⁹¹ “Black GIs Caught In Vise,” 14.

employment.²⁹² Thus, a negative discharge often pushed veterans towards the fringes of civilian society.

Undesirable discharges were used to remove drug addicts, homosexuals, radicals, militants and otherwise disruptive soldiers. Although soldiers typically had to request undesirable discharges Bennett's reports suggest that the armed forces were not adverse to pressuring soldiers into accepting punishments against their will. In 1970, African Americans represented 18.6 percent of undesirable discharges in both the Army and the Marines.²⁹³

Bad conduct discharges were reserved for those who had committed a number of minor infractions, a felony, or a serious breach of the military code of conduct. In 1970, African Americans received 15.5 percent of bad conduct discharges in the Army and 19.2 in the Marines.²⁹⁴ Dishonorable discharges were much rarer as they were reserved for soldiers who had committed serious crimes including murder. Like bad conduct discharges, dishonorable discharges could only be given after courts-martial. In 1970, African Americans received 24 percent of dishonorable discharges in the Army and 28.8 percent in the Marine Corps.²⁹⁵ While the percentage of African Americans who received undesirable and bad conduct discharges in the Navy was relatively low, they received 16.7 percent of dishonorable discharges, while they made up only 8.1 percent of all naval personnel.²⁹⁶ A 1970 investigation conducted by the Congressional Black Caucus

²⁹² James E. Westheider, *The African-American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 60-61.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

revealed that while African Americans made up only 11.7 percent of Air Force membership, they received 28.9 percent of less than honorable discharges.²⁹⁷

Accusations of discriminatory use of courts-martial were also made by black soldiers stationed outside of Vietnam. In September 1969 John Barnes, a black soldier stationed at Oakdale Army Camp outside of Pittsburgh, complained that authorities used “double standards” in the ways in which black and white soldiers were punished. He had recently been accused of missing work, and he was given the choice of either accepting a demotion or being court martialed. Barnes was adamant that he was on sick leave during the day in question and that the military was simply trying to get rid of him.²⁹⁸ Another black soldier and Vietnam veteran Robert Curry echoed Barnes complaints, “There was definitely a ‘double standard in existence at the camp as far as the black and white men were concerned.’”²⁹⁹

In November 1970 *New York Times* journalist Thomas A. Johnson reported that black soldiers in Germany frequently complained about “the dispensation of military justice.”³⁰⁰ According to Johnson a Pentagon investigation revealed that African Americans received 25 percent of battalion punishments. Equally troubling African Americans were far more likely to “receive special discharges allowing them to leave the service under other than honorable conditions and without normal veterans benefits.” In fact, Johnson interviewed a white company commander at Fulda who admitted that “he got rid of problem soldiers by convincing them to leave under provisions of the Army

²⁹⁷ Cortright, *Soldiers In Revolt*, 208.

²⁹⁸ “Area Army Camp Hit With Race Bias Charge,” 1.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰⁰ Thomas A. Johnson, “GI’s in Germany: Black is Bitter,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1970, 26.

regulation providing for such special discharges.” A white senior officer confirmed this practice stating, “you’re goddamn right they get them out! We’re running an Army, not a permissive society high school.”³⁰¹ Similarly, in 1971 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) found that African Americans stationed in Europe received 45 percent of less than honorable discharges.³⁰² When Thaddeus Garrett, legal assistant to New York Democratic Party Representative Shirley Chisolm, traveled to Greece and Turkey in December 1971, he found that “about 83 percent of courts-martial were slapped on blacks.”³⁰³

Prisons

Closely related to the perception that African Americans were more likely to be punished was the overrepresentation of blacks in military prisons. African Americans were far more likely to be held in pretrial confinement than whites. One study found that 40 percent of blacks accused of going Absent Without Leave (AWOL) were sent to the stockades to await trial, while only 15 percent of whites received the same punishment.³⁰⁴ A 1971 study conducted by the Congressional Black Caucus found that African Americans represented 50 percent of the airmen held in pretrial confinement for that year. Similarly, a Department of Defense task force found that black detainees were placed in pretrial confinement an average of five days longer than whites. Whites were also twice as likely to be released without any additional disciplinary action.³⁰⁵

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Cortright, *Soldiers In Revolt*, 208.

³⁰³ “Black GIs Caught In Vise,” 14.

³⁰⁴ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 57.

³⁰⁵ Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 207-208.

Military prisons housed far more blacks than their proportion of the entire armed forces. In December 1969 African Americans represented more than 42.4 percent of prisoners at the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) brig in Da Nang.³⁰⁶ In December 1969, 58 percent of prisoners in Long Binh Jail were African American.³⁰⁷ Greg Payton, a prisoner at Long Binh in 1968-69, described the prison as “ninety percent black, maybe more...Conditions were horrible...There were a lot of sadistic kinds of guards there.”³⁰⁸ While Payton may have exaggerated the percent of African Americans at Long Binh, blacks did represent a clear majority.

African Americans were also overrepresented in military prisons outside of Vietnam. In 1971 Thaddeus Garrett traveled to Germany, Greece and Turkey where he found that “blacks often make up as much as 65 percent of the total prison population.” At Manheim Stockade in Germany, 55 percent of prisoners were African American.³⁰⁹

“Brothers as many brothers as they can find”

Many blacks believed that military hierarchies viewed them as servants who were not meant to advance beyond menial servitude. Yet this perception conflicted with the disproportionate assignment of African Americans to combat divisions. Many black soldiers believed that they were disproportionately given dangerous field assignments. Black soldiers no longer had to fight for the right to engage in combat; now they feared that officers were purposely increasing their chances of injury or death. On March 26,

³⁰⁶ Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

³⁰⁷ Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

³⁰⁸ Richard Moser, *The New Winter Soldier: GI And Veteran Dissent During The Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 52.

³⁰⁹ “Black GIs Caught In Vise,” 14.

1966 the *Philadelphia Tribune* revealed that a number of unidentified congressmen had “filed inquiries for their constituents based on rumors that Negroes were being given a disproportionate share of dangerous assignments.”³¹⁰ On May 28, 1966 the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that a number of African Americans had complained to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that African Americans were being assigned “in disproportionate numbers to the most dangerous areas in Vietnam.”³¹¹

In May 1968 *Newsday* quoted a black marine named James Barnes who observed, “When you’re on patrol and moving into an area, it’s always the Negro who’s walking point. That means he’s the first to get it if a mine explodes...That’s the kind of assignment we get from the whites...Look at the guys who go out on sweeps, who protect hills. Brothers, as many brothers as they can find.”³¹² On November 1970 fifty to sixty black soldiers serving with the Twenty-Third Division organized a protest on the Chu Lai Base. Among their complaints was the allegation that “blacks with noncombat MOS’s [Military Operational Specialty] are put in the field where whites with combat MOS’s are placed in noncombat MOS’s.”³¹³

These complaints were brought to the attention of military leaders in November 1970 when the Department of the Army Race Relations Conference was held at the Headquarters Continental Army Command at Fort Monroe, Virginia. The conference included participants from all major Army commands as well as representatives from

³¹⁰ “High Vietnam Negro GI Death Rate Is Charged to ‘Valor,’” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 26, 1966, 6.

³¹¹ “Negro Deaths Exceed Whites’ In Viet Nam,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 28, 1966, 8B.

³¹² Paul Hathaway, “Negro in Viet: Not That Far From the Ghetto,” *Newsday*, May 15, 1968, 36.

³¹³ Report, November 18, 1970, Folder 37: Blue Bell Report Regarding Racial Incident at the Twenty-Third Infantry Division Headquarters, Chu Lai, Republic of Vietnam, Box 2: Official Papers-Blue Bells, DCSPER.

other services. During a presentation by Lieutenant Joseph Anderson, who had recently returned from a fact finding trip to Vietnam, conference attendees learned that one of the most frequently heard complaints from black soldiers in Vietnam was that they were “harassed, placed on details, and given undesirable guard posts more frequently than whites.”³¹⁴ In 1971 the Democratic Black Caucus conducted a hearing during which noted that black soldiers frequently complained that they “get the most dangerous combat jobs in Viet Nam if they show signs of black militancy.”³¹⁵

Some African Americans were very specific about the jobs they believed African Americans were more likely to be assigned. David Parks observed that black soldiers were always given the job of Forward Observer (FO), which was one of the most dangerous in his unit. An FO, which Parks claimed actually stood for “Fucked Over,” carried a visible phone with an antenna, making them an easy target for the enemy. With only three FOs to cover sixteen squads FO’s were constantly on duty, which increased the likelihood of casualties. Parks suspected that his selection as FO was no accident.³¹⁶ On January 31, 1967 his diary read, “Sgt. Paulson hand-picks the men for this job. So far he’s fingered only Negroes and Puerto Ricans. I think he’s trying to tell us something.”³¹⁷ Parks’s suspicions were more predictive than he might have imagined as on February 9, 1967 he wrote, “Just got kicked out of my beautiful...job. The good Sgt. Paulson strikes

³¹⁴ Report, James R. Anderson, December 29, 1970, Staff Visits, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP. Unfortunately, this document does not say how this information was used.

³¹⁵ “Armed Forces: Black Powerlessness.”

³¹⁶ Parks, *GI Diary*, 76-77.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

again. He gave me the news with a smile, I am now Forward Observer Parks...It's a Sergeant's job, but Paulson's not going to promote me."³¹⁸

On February 26, 1969 the *Chicago Daily Defender* reported on the experiences of black Chicagoan Roman Metcalf. The article includes excerpts from letters Metcalf wrote to his mother, one of which stated that blacks were placed "in the field at all times...we're always the first through to get the dangerous assignments."³¹⁹ Equally troubling, his superiors seemed committed to ensuring that Metcalf stayed in combat. Metcalf alleged that he was denied R & R in favor of other white soldiers even though he "outranked them and have [sic] been here longer."³²⁰

Lamont Steptoe dropped out of Officer Candidate School (OCS) two-weeks before being commissioned and in response the company commander demoted him to E-2 status and assigned him to become a scout dog handler, an extremely dangerous position. He recalled, "Now the mission of the scout dog is to walk point element for combat patrols in Vietnam. So I felt like they were trying to kill me." While it is certainly possible that Steptoe's commander assigned him this duty as punishment for dropping out of OCS and not because he was black, Steptoe believed that his race played a role.³²¹

Other soldiers argued that blacks were disproportionately assigned to the position of point man. The position was considered particularly dangerous because they were at the head of the platoon and as such were usually the first to be shot at during an attack by the enemy. In August 1967 the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that African

³¹⁸ Ibid., 78-79.

³¹⁹ Faith C. Christmas, "Mother of GI Seeks Probe of Bias in Viet," *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 12, 1969, 3.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Lamont Steptoe, interview by author, June 25, 2012.

Americans were overrepresented in combat units and that they often found themselves in a “position of consummate danger—point man on the leading patrol creeping warily into enemy ground.”³²² Many black soldiers agreed with this assessment. Ronald Copes believed that “a lot of African Americans were on point, on night patrols and things of that nature.”³²³ James Barnes, a black private, explained that whenever he went on patrol all the point men he saw were black, and this was done deliberately.³²⁴ Similarly, Roosevelt Gore, who served with the First Infantry Division near Di An, recalled “I was always the point man, maybe because I was black.”³²⁵ Arthur Barham, who served with the 173rd Airborne Division in 1967-1968, recalled, “Chances were whoever was going to be on point was going to be black, whoever was on the flank was going to be black.”³²⁶

Rumors of this sort extended even beyond the army or marines. Brian Settles, who served in 1968-69 as a navigator pilot with the 390th Fighter Squadron, recalled that even among black pilots and ground crews “it was widely felt that a lot of times the black GIs were being sent to point or...more dangerous positions than their white counterparts.”³²⁷

In a November 19, 1971 *Time* magazine article, African American journalist Wallace Terry stated that “the cost of being too militant was to be sent to serve as a point man on [sic] the Demilitarized Zone.” Terry believed that it was at least plausible that some military officers were purposely sending African Americans whom they assessed as

³²² George W. Ashworth, “Background Factors Send Negroes into Combat,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 31, 1967, 3.

³²³ Copes, interview by author.

³²⁴ Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War*, 91.

³²⁵ Roosevelt Gore's account as found in James R. Wilson, *Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 104.

³²⁶ Arthur Barham, interview by author, February 19, 2013.

³²⁷ Brian Settles, interview by author, October 1, 2012.

troublemakers or militants to the front lines to serve as point men as a means of punishing them.³²⁸

There is no statistical evidence to confirm that African Americans were more likely to be assigned these positions. Historian John E. Westheider has noted that it wouldn't have made any "sense to let someone lead who was not good at it, or did not want to be there, because it would endanger the individual and the entire unit."³²⁹

Similarly, Robert Louis Jr. believed that when African Americans were picked for dangerous duties like machine gunner or point man it was because they were considered strong and capable and not because of their skin color.³³⁰

While Westheider's point is valid in theory, the reality is that Vietnam was not a perfectly executed war and soldiers were sometimes asked to do things which they had no interest in doing or which they were not particularly good at doing. For example, Stan Goff recalled that his friend Carl was ordered to carry an M-60 gun despite the fact that he only weighed 130 pounds and the gun weighed 25 pounds. Carl was given the task of carrying the gun not because he was thought to be competent—he struggled to carry it and was a lousy shot—but because of shortages in the company.³³¹ It is at least possible that some incompetent or irresponsible officers could have targeted African Americans for more dangerous duties. While serving with the Third Marine Division in Vietnam, Edward Gillam of Cleveland, Ohio, was put on point duty even though he was suffering from a serious case of malaria and dysentery. Gillam was so weak in fact that a river

³²⁸ "Armed Forces: Black Powerlessness."

³²⁹ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 46.

³³⁰ Louis Jr., interview by author.

³³¹ Stanley Goff and Robert Sanders with Clark Smith, *Brothers Black Soldiers in the Nam* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1982), 75-76.

current swept him away. He was found a week later in the jungle, delirious and unarmed. Designating him as the point man was undoubtedly a poor decision lacking in sound strategy or common sense, but his superiors did it anyway.³³² While there is no specific evidence that this assignment was made because Gillam was black, it does serve as evidence that those in charge of making assignments were certainly capable of acting inconsistently, irresponsibly, and dangerously. It is also worth remembering that even if prejudiced officials targeted only able and willing African Americans, these actions would still be prejudicial if they chose them over equally qualified whites because they viewed African Americans as more expendable.

African Americans and the Draft

Ultimately, the allegation that African Americans were unfairly assigned dangerous duties was connected with larger complaints that African Americans were disproportionately drafted into the armed forces. Although African Americans accounted for 11 percent of draftees for the entire conflict, for much of the war they were drafted in disproportion to their population in the United States.³³³ In 1966 African Americans represented 13.4 percent of draftees.³³⁴ In 1967 37,000 African Americans were drafted into the military, representing 16.3 percent of all draftees.³³⁵ By 1970, the percentage of African American draftees had risen to 17.3 percent.³³⁶ Between 1965 and 1970, which

³³² Gillam, interview by author. Edward Gillam was the brother of James Gillam.

³³³ Lawrence Allen Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War: Civil Rights and Vietnam in the African American Press* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 51.

³³⁴ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 23.

³³⁵ Deckie McLean, "The Black Man and the Draft," *Ebony*, August 1968, 61.

³³⁶ Joshua D. Angrist, *The Draft Lottery and Voluntary Enlistment in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1990), 31.

was the height of American military involvement in Vietnam, blacks represented 14.3 percent of draftees.³³⁷

Equally significant, a 1967 study conducted by Congressman Robert Kastenmeier, a Democrat from Wisconsin, found that while only 29 percent of African American candidates for the draft were deemed acceptable, 64 percent of acceptable men were drafted. On the other hand, while 63 percent of white candidates were deemed acceptable, only 31 percent were drafted. Thus, eligible African Americans were drafted at twice the rate of eligible whites.³³⁸ This imbalance was even more apparent in certain localities. In New Haven, Connecticut, African Americans made up 4.2 percent of the population, but they represented over 9 percent of all draftees. In Shreveport, Louisiana, a city with a much larger black population, blacks comprised 32.7 percent of the population, but made up 41.3 percent of the draftees.³³⁹

There were also fewer avenues of escape for African Americans who wanted to avoid being drafted and sent to Vietnam. Many African Americans agreed with Freddie Edwards that blacks “didn’t have an excuse” to get out of the war like many whites did.³⁴⁰ African Americans, most of whom had attended segregated schools which were poorly funded and inadequate at preparing students for entrance to university, were far less likely to receive academic deferments.³⁴¹ African Americans were also less likely to receive medical deferments. In 1966, which was the only year in which this data was

³³⁷ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 23.

³³⁸ McLean, “The Black Man and the Draft,” *Ebony*, August 1968, 62.

³³⁹ Graham III, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 17.

³⁴⁰ Freddie Edwards, interview by author, December 2, 2011.

³⁴¹ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 26.

recorded, white inductees were 50 percent more likely to fail their pre-induction physicals than blacks.³⁴²

Local draft boards which were in charge of granting conscientious objector status or hardship deferments, also played a role in the disproportionate drafting of African Americans. The more than four thousand local draft boards were supposed to be representative of the members of the community they served, but in 1966 there was not a single black draft board member in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, despite the large African American populations of these states.³⁴³ Even in Maryland and Virginia African Americans represented only 2.7 and 2.2 percent of draft board members.³⁴⁴

Additionally, a number of draft boards showed a willingness to target individual African Americans. In Mississippi a draft board rejected the conscientious objector (CO) application of a black civil rights worker named Bennie Tucker under the reasoning that he “caused nothing but trouble.” When Tucker was later elected to city council, he immediately received four induction orders. An African American named Robert James was initially granted CO status, but this exemption was revoked when his draft board in Mississippi became aware of his civil rights work. When Jeanette Crawford, a civil rights leader from New Orleans, refused to testify before the Louisiana House Committee on Un-American Activities, her three sons received draft notices within a week. The draft board also claimed that Mrs. Crawford’s oldest son had not registered for the draft in

³⁴² Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, The War, and The Vietnam Generation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 47.

³⁴³ McLean, “The Black Man and the Draft,” 64.

³⁴⁴ Chapman, “Qualified Negro Is Found to Receive Inequitable Treatment Under Draft,” A2.

spite of the fact that he had been in the Army for 13 years and was at the time stationed in Germany.³⁴⁵ In 1966 civil rights leader and Georgia State Representative Julian Bond's antiwar position gained the attention of the chairman of the Atlanta draft board who referred to Bond as "this nigger" and expressed regret that the board was unable to draft him.³⁴⁶

Even African Americans who failed to meet the physical or intelligence standards did not necessarily avoid military service. As a result of Project 100,000, which lasted from 1966-72, ostensibly as a means by which poor and uneducated Americans could gain marketable skills from military service which they could later use in civilian life, more than 300,000 men initially deemed unfit for military service were drafted.³⁴⁷ Of these recruits, 45 percent were African American.³⁴⁸ Despite or because of their lack of qualifications, many of these men were assigned to combat infantry divisions in the Army and Marines. In the Army 44.5 percent of African Americans who entered the military through Project 100,000 were sent into combat. In the Marine Corps 58.3 percent of blacks received combat assignments.³⁴⁹ Perhaps most disturbingly, eighty thousand, roughly 20 percent, of these soldiers received undesirable, bad conduct, or dishonorable discharges.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁵ Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 99.

³⁴⁶ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 29.

³⁴⁷ Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 321.

³⁴⁸ Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*, 50.

³⁴⁹ Edward J. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam 1965-1969* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2011), 269.

³⁵⁰ Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*, 50.

“We didn’t understand why we were getting more black soldiers”

In the early years of the war, African Americans were disproportionately assigned to combat infantry. In 1965 African Americans made up a shocking 31 percent of all U.S combat soldiers in Vietnam, and in some units the percentage was as high as 70 percent.³⁵¹ Equally significant, by December 1965, 26 percent of all African Americans in the army were assigned to combat infantry units compared to just seventeen percent of white soldiers.³⁵²

On May 26, 1967, *Time* magazine reported that African Americans represented 23 percent of combat troops in Vietnam.³⁵³ In April 1968 *New York Times* journalist Thomas Johnson reported that African Americans continued to represent 20 percent of combat troops in Vietnam. Equally significant, African Americans made up as much as 45 percent of some airborne units and as high as 60 percent for some airborne rifle platoons.³⁵⁴

As Johnson’s article suggests, individual units often had an even higher percentage of black soldiers. In April 1967 *Washington Post* reporter Jesse M. Lewis after returning from a visit to Vietnam noted, “There appears to be a higher concentration of Negroes in airborne, infantry, and cavalry units than in artillery. In many of the smaller combat units in Vietnam, like platoons and squads, Negroes seem to make up 60 to 70 percent of the strength.”³⁵⁵ On May 14, 1968 Senator Robert F. Kennedy, a Democrat from New York, told college students in Omaha, Nebraska, “If you look at any regiment

³⁵¹ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 48-49.

³⁵² McLean, “The Black Man and the Draft,” 62.

³⁵³ “Armed Forces: Democracy in the Foxhole.”

³⁵⁴ Thomas A. Johnson, “The U.S. Negro in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1968, 16.

³⁵⁵ McLean, “The Black Man and the Draft,” 62.

or division of paratroopers in Vietnam, 45 percent of them are black.”³⁵⁶ In at least some cases Senator Kennedy was not far off. In a November 1969, briefing submitted to the Secretary of the Army it was noted that 42.4 percent of Marines stationed with the III MAF in Da Nang were African American.³⁵⁷

The large number of African American soldiers serving in combat did not go unnoticed by those in combat units. In December 1967 the *Cleveland Call and Post* interviewed Cleveland native and Vietnam veteran David Tuck, who claimed that of the “117 men in his unit 106 were Negro.”³⁵⁸ Ronald Bradley, who served with an aviation company attached to the Ninth Infantry Division during 1967-68, observed, “We were disproportionately, number wise, out there in the field as compared to whites.”³⁵⁹ Robert Louis Jr. claimed that when he first arrived in Vietnam his company was 40 percent African American, far higher than the percentage of African Americans in the United States. As replacements entered his company, the percentage of African Americans only seemed to grow. He recalled, “We didn’t understand why we were getting more black soldiers.”³⁶⁰

In early 1968 African American journalist Thomas A. Johnson spent fourteen weeks interviewing black and white soldiers in Vietnam. One anonymous black soldier whom Johnson interviewed commented, “You take a good look at an airborne rifle company it’ll look like there ain’t no foreign [white troops] there.” Another African

³⁵⁶ Ashworth, “Ratio of U.S. Negro Troops Declines,” 1.

³⁵⁷ Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

³⁵⁸ “Tuck Brothers Speak Out Against The Vietnam War,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, December 2, 1967, 16A.

³⁵⁹ Ron Bradley, interview by author, October 23, 2011.

³⁶⁰ Louis Jr., interview by author.

American soldier serving in the Fourth Battalion of the 173d Airborne Brigade stated that when he joined the platoon in the summer of 1967 “there were 20 brothers and 8 foreign troops.”³⁶¹

The reasons for the disproportionate assignment of African Americans to combat units are complex. Assignments were determined through standardized testing in the form of Armed Forces Qualification Tests. Given that as many as 90 percent of African Americans who served in Vietnam came from working class or poor backgrounds and that many were educated in segregated schools with inferior resources, it is not surprising that African Americans tended to do poorly on tests that were likely biased. In 1965, 41 percent of black soldiers scored at the lowest levels of the test, while only 10 percent of whites scored as low.³⁶² In August 1967 the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that the national failure rate for qualifying tests was 67 percent for African Americans and 19 percent for whites. Even more significant, only 4 percent of blacks tested in the top two classifications in comparison to 40 percent of whites. When one examines the top three classifications, the statistics remain as divergent with only 22 percent of African Americans qualifying in comparison to 74 percent of whites.³⁶³

The *Washington Post* perceptively observed in March 1967 that the “same educational and social handicaps that bring proportionately more Negroes than whites into service also channel Negroes into combat.”³⁶⁴ Cephus Rhodes, a black Vietnam

³⁶¹ Johnson, “The U.S. Negro in Vietnam,” 16.

³⁶² Appy, *Working Class War*, 22.

³⁶³ Ashworth, “Background Factors Send Negroes into Combat,” 3.

³⁶⁴ Chapman, “Qualified Negro Is Found to Receive Inequitable Treatment Under Draft,” A2.

veteran, similarly concluded that African Americans could only qualify for infantry positions because of their social and political status back in the United States.³⁶⁵

Nonetheless, there was a perception among African Americans that their disproportional service in infantry units was not the “natural” result of their education levels. A November 1969 report on race relations among members of the Navy Support Activity stationed in Saigon noted that many African Americans believed that methods of testing and training for job assignments purposely excluded blacks. As such blacks were pushed into “unskilled categories like supply, infantry,” which were positions with “little opportunity to acquire a marketable skill” but which also “increased [the] likelihood of being killed.”³⁶⁶ Scholars have supported this contemporary assessment. Christian Appy notes, “Blacks might have taken advantage of opportunities to fill higher-paying, noncombat positions, had they been offered.” However, in the early years of the war “even those blacks who scored in the highest test category were placed in combat units at a level 75 percent higher than that of whites in the same category.”³⁶⁷

It should be pointed out that many elite combat units were made up entirely of volunteers and in these units it would be difficult to claim that military officials were responsible for the high percentage of black soldiers. In fact, two of the first combat units sent to Vietnam, the 101st Airborne Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which were 21 and 24 percent African American respectively, were made up entirely of

³⁶⁵ Cephus “Dusty” Rhodes, interview by author, January 19, 2012.

³⁶⁶ Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

³⁶⁷ Appy, *Working Class War*, 22.

volunteers.³⁶⁸ Money was the primary motivation for some African Americans in joining these elite units. On average those who volunteered with paratroop units received \$55 extra a month which was as much as 50 percent more than soldiers earned in regular infantry units.³⁶⁹ In May 1968 the *Christian Science Monitor* noted that “many Negroes appear to favor combat arms, particularly such elite units as airborne, Special Forces, and Rangers” because of the “extra pay each month.”³⁷⁰

A number of black soldiers agreed. While serving with the 173rd Airborne Division in Pleiku Lawrence Harkless explained the reasons why he and other African Americans volunteered for elite units like airborne, “We join because of pride and the \$55 extra a month.”³⁷¹ Victor Hall, a black paratrooper who served in 1968, explained that African Americans volunteered for more elite units “for the same reason I did it and for the same reasons most of the Negroes here (Fort Bragg, N.C.) did it. They did it because you get incentive pay in the airborne.” Another paratrooper named Charles Donald, who also served in 1968, agreed with Hall’s assessment reasoning that he volunteered for jump duty “because of the \$55 extra.”³⁷² Similarly, Lamont Steptoe believed that many African Americans volunteered for dangerous assignments or missions for monetary reasons.³⁷³

The lack of economic opportunities available to African Americans in the United States no doubt influenced many blacks to join the military in the first place. Anthony

³⁶⁸ “Black GI Death Rate In Vietnam Cut In Half,” *Jet*, September 7, 1972, 46.

³⁶⁹ Peter B. Levy, “Blacks and the Vietnam War” in *Legacy: Vietnam in the American Imagination*, ed. D. Michael Shaffer, Boston: Beacon Press, 1990, 212.

³⁷⁰ Ashworth, “Background Factors Send Negroes into Combat,” 1.

³⁷¹ Hathaway, “Negro in Viet,” 37.

³⁷² David Lorens, “Why Negroes Re-Enlist: High Re-enlistment is Rooted in Economics and Psychodynamics,” *Ebony*, August 1968, 87-88.

³⁷³ Steptoe, interview by author.

Martin, who enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1965, likely spoke for many African Americans when he stated, “For a young African American growing up...there wasn’t a very bright outlook so the military became a venue of escape if you will.” Martin believed that his job options were limited to working with his father at the post office or as a streets and sanitation worker.³⁷⁴

Cephus Rhodes joined the military in 1953 largely because he perceived “that the military was better than life in north Florida...and the pay was better than school teaching pay,” which he believed was his only other potential job prospect.³⁷⁵ Similarly, Robert Louis joined the army after graduating high school in Petersburg, Virginia, because he believed that job opportunities for African Americans were extremely limited in his hometown.³⁷⁶ James Lewis actually joined the military twice, in 1959 and 1963, both times out of economic necessity. He recalled, “I only had one reasoning [sic] to join the military and that was I was dirt poor.”³⁷⁷ In the early 1960’s Horace Coleman attended Bowling Green State University where he was required to join the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) for two years. When Coleman’s two years were finished he decided to accept a commission which sent him to Vietnam. His motivations for doing so were largely economic.³⁷⁸ While attending Lincoln University, Ronald Copes was also required to complete two years of ROTC training, but he signed up for four because he wanted the money.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁴ Martin, interview by author.

³⁷⁵ Rhodes, interview by author.

³⁷⁶ Louis Jr., interview by author.

³⁷⁷ James Lewis, interview by author, March 20, 2012.

³⁷⁸ Horace Coleman, interview by author, June 12, 2012.

³⁷⁹ Copes, interview by author.

Money also motivated African Americans to reenlist, thus increasing their chances for combat duty and possible death. Soldiers who reenlisted received bonuses of between \$900 and \$1,400, which in the mid 1960's was the equivalent of one-third of the median family income for African American families.³⁸⁰ For many, the money was enticing. In 1965 the re-enlistment rate for African Americans in the Army was 49.3 percent, while it was only 13.7 percent for whites. In 1966 the re-enlistment rate for African Americans rose to 66.5 percent, while it was 20 percent for whites.³⁸¹

In August 1968 *Ebony* remarked that “in virtually every case, re-enlistment is, on the conscious level, a matter of dollars and cents.” One anonymous Air Force re-enlistee observed, “That’s an awful lot of money to a young black cat who’s never had more than \$150 at one time in his life.” In fact, the armed forces seemed to recognize the economic motivations behind soldiers’ interest in reenlisting as “the pitch a young man receives upon walking into an Armed Forces recruiting office has nothing to do with patriotism or loyalty. It is, plainly and simply, an economic pitch.”³⁸²

“I think we’re being killed off”

Considering the disproportionate number of African Americans serving in combat during the early years of the war, it was not surprising that a disproportionate percentage of blacks were killed during this same period. In late 1965 nearly 25 percent of combat deaths in Vietnam were African American.³⁸³ By July 1966 African Americans

³⁸⁰ Appy, *Working Class War*, 22.

³⁸¹ Johnson, “The U.S. Negro in Vietnam,” 16.

³⁸² Lorens, “Why Negroes Re-Enlist,” 88.

³⁸³ William E. Alt and Betty L. Alt, *Black Soldiers, White Wars: Black Warriors from Antiquity to the Present* (Wesport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 111.

accounted for 22 percent of those killed in action.³⁸⁴ Death rates were even higher in some individual divisions. In 1966 African Americans accounted for 26 percent of all combat deaths in the First Cavalry Division and 27.8 percent of all combat deaths in the 173rd Airborne Brigade.³⁸⁵

The significance of these high death rates was not lost on the African American press, the African American public, or black soldiers themselves. On March 19, 1966 the *New York Amsterdam News* reported, “Negroes Dying Faster Than Whites in Vietnam.”³⁸⁶ That same month, the *Philadelphia Tribune* noted the “high Vietnam Negro GI Death Rate.”³⁸⁷ On May 28, 1966 the *Pittsburgh Courier* announced that “Negro Deaths Exceed Whites’ In Viet Nam.”³⁸⁸ On March 2, 1967 the *Los Angeles Sentinel* stated that recent Defense Department statistics had shown conclusively that “the death rate in Vietnam was proportionately higher for Negro than for white U.S. servicemen.”³⁸⁹

The Pentagon was also well aware that African Americans were being killed in disproportionate numbers in Vietnam. The initial official reaction was to praise African Americans for their service. In May 1966 the *Pittsburgh Courier* quoted a Pentagon official who claimed that high death rates were a “measure of Negro valor in combat.”³⁹⁰ However, privately military officials were concerned that the disproportionate percentage of African Americans being killed in Vietnam was sending a message that black lives

³⁸⁴ Westheider, *The African American Experience In Vietnam*, 47.

³⁸⁵ Letter, F.W. Norris to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 18, 1967, Folder 2: Officer of the Secretary of Defense Comptroller Monthly Report on Race Statistics in Vietnam, Box 2: Official Papers-Reports, DCSPER.

³⁸⁶ “Valor Praised Dying Faster Than Whites In Vietnam,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 19, 1966, 1.

³⁸⁷ “High Vietnam Negro GI Death Rate Is Charged to ‘Valor,’” 6.

³⁸⁸ “Negro Deaths Exceed Whites’ In Viet Nam,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 28, 1966, 8B.

³⁸⁹ “High Vietnam Negro Death Rate Revealed,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 2, 1967, A3.

³⁹⁰ “Negro Deaths Exceed Whites’ In Viet Nam,” 8B.

were expendable. Therefore, the Pentagon ordered the armed forces to reduce the assignment of African Americans to combat positions.³⁹¹ The results were striking. By 1967 the death rate for African Americans had fallen considerably to 12.7 percent and for 1968 it remained at a similar level of 12.9 percent. By 1970, the death rate for African Americans had fallen even lower to 8.8 percent.³⁹² By 1972, the final year of active American participation, only 7.6 percent of American deaths were African American. In total, African Americans represented 12.6 percent of those 58,022 Americans who died in Vietnam between 1961 and 1975, a percentage only slightly higher than their percentage of the civilian population.³⁹³

While the overall percentage of African Americans killed in Vietnam was only slightly higher than their percentage of the American population this does not make the disproportionate death rates during the first years of the conflict insignificant. During the first two years of the war African Americans served in combat units which were disproportionately black. As a result they were more likely to be killed.

At the time these high death rates suggested to many blacks that something sinister was going on. On August 25, 1966 the widow of Lorenzo Maulden, a black soldier who was recently killed in Vietnam, wrote a letter to President Lyndon Johnson expressing her concern that African Americans were serving and dying in Vietnam in disproportionate numbers. Mrs. Maulden proclaimed, "Everyone knows that the majority

³⁹¹ Johnson, "The U.S. Negro in Vietnam," 17.

³⁹² "Black GI Death Rate In Vietnam Cut In Half," 46.

³⁹³ Westheider, *The African American Experience In Vietnam*, 49.

of the boys that are getting killed in Vietnam are negro boys...hardly no white.”³⁹⁴ Mrs. Maulden’s assertion that the majority of soldiers being killed in Vietnam were black was incorrect, but her concern that African Americans were dying in disproportionate numbers was certainly valid.

Mrs. Maulden’s letter received an official response from the Director of Military Personnel Policy Major General F.W Norris. In addition to sharing his condolences over the recent death of her husband, Norris claimed that “casualties among the units in Vietnam are generally proportionate to the number of Negroes.” He also claimed that the “belief that any one race suffers a disproportionately large percentage of the combat deaths in Vietnam” was not “borne out by the facts.” While it is hard to know what “facts” Norris was alluding to, as previously stated, African Americans were clearly being killed in disproportionate numbers at the time that Lorenzo Maulden was killed in July 1966. It is unclear if Norris was ignorant to this fact or if he was being purposely deceptive.³⁹⁵

Mrs. Maulden did not offer an explanation as to why so many African Americans were being killed in Vietnam, but others did. In the spring of 1968 *Newsday* journalist Paul Hathaway traveled to Vietnam where he spent more than a month interviewing hundreds of African American soldiers. Hathaway concluded that one of the major

³⁹⁴ Letter, Mrs. Lorenzo C. Moulder, August 25, 1966, Folder 7: Complaint Regarding Alleged Racial Discrimination in Training and in deaths in Vietnam, made by Mrs. Lorenzo C. Moulder, Box 8: Official Papers- Complaints, DCSPER.

³⁹⁵ <http://thewall-usa.com/guest.asp?recid=33080> According to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall Lorenzo Maulden was killed on July 26, 1966.

concerns of the African American soldier was whether “he is being used as cannon fodder.”³⁹⁶

Rank and file black soldiers remembered these concerns years later. Believing that black soldiers were dying in significantly greater numbers than whites, James Gillam recalled that he and other blacks in his unit “always would have conversations, you know, damn, all of us were getting killed and none of them.”³⁹⁷ Clyde Jackson believed that the high number of African Americans being killed in combat made him question whether African Americans were purposely being used as cannon fodder.³⁹⁸ Louis Perkins believed that the high percentage of African Americans in combat suggested at the very least that black lives were seen as disposable.³⁹⁹ To be sure, white soldiers also questioned whether military officials were concerned about soldiers’ lives. Patrick McLaughlin, a white soldier from Cleveland, Ohio, criticized U.S military tactics in Vietnam charging that at least some officers used ordinary soldiers, black and white, as cannon fodder.⁴⁰⁰

While many white soldiers may also have felt as though that they were being used as cannon fodder, it is hard to imagine that any white soldier believed that an objective of the Vietnam War was to exterminate whites. However, rumors spread among blacks that the military or government was using the Vietnam War as an opportunity to exterminate them. While these rumors were generally vague as to exactly who wanted to get rid of black soldiers, they almost always suggested that the motive lay in domestic concerns.

³⁹⁶ Hathaway, “Negro in Viet,” 36.

³⁹⁷ Gillam, interview by author.

³⁹⁸ Jackson, interview by author.

³⁹⁹ Perkins, interview by author.

⁴⁰⁰ Patrick McLaughlin, interview by author, Athens, Ohio, July 25, 2009.

The explanation was that someone wanted to remove blacks from the United States to damage or destroy the civil rights movement specifically and the black community more generally. Even as African American death rates plunged, the accusation remained pervasive and many black soldiers continued to believe that African Americans were disproportionately being used, sacrificed, or purposely “killed off” in Vietnam.

While there is no evidence that the government or anyone else was purposely trying to get rid of blacks in Vietnam, in the early years of the war the high percentage of blacks who were drafted, assigned to infantry units, and ultimately killed gave some credence to these rumors. These facts, no doubt, influenced prominent black leaders, the media, and black soldiers themselves to broadcast these rumors. On May 1, 1967 Cleveland Sellers, a prominent member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), refused induction into the army while charging that whites were “trying to draft black people to commit genocide.”⁴⁰¹ On October 22, 1967 the New York State NAACP voted to condemn American involvement in the Vietnam War on the basis that the war “had, at a disproportionate rate, killed off ‘black youth’ who are potential leaders.”⁴⁰²

On November 30, 1968 the *Chicago Daily Defender* noted that military elites were well aware that “the phenomenally high death rate of Blacks in combat areas means fewer Blacks coming back to the ghettos to be dealt with” suggesting at the very least that

⁴⁰¹ Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*, 54.

⁴⁰² Thomas A. Johnson, “State’s N.A.A.C.P Opposes the War and New Charter” *New York Times*, October 23, 1967, 35. The debate over this issue was intense with 102 people voting in favor of the resolution and 72 voting against. The resolution conflicted with the official national position of the NAACP which took no position on the war and was in general defensive of Lyndon Johnson’s administration.

the military was aware of and viewed positively the high death rates.⁴⁰³ At worst, the *Defender* suggested that the military was a part of a conspiracy to get rid of troublesome blacks in the United States by sending them to Vietnam. In September 1972 *Jet* pointed out that the high percentage of black casualties in the early years of the war led many African Americans to believe that the “Pentagon and the Defense Dept. were guilty of genocide.”⁴⁰⁴

A number of African American soldiers similarly believed that someone was using the Vietnam War as an opportunity to get rid of blacks.⁴⁰⁵ In May 1968 *Newsday* published an excerpt of an interview with an anonymous black soldier serving in Cam Tho. The soldier considered the possibility that African Americans were purposely being killed off in Vietnam. He recalled a recent incident in which only black soldiers were chosen for a night patrol, while the white soldiers were placed on guard. He wondered, “What if this was an ambush? We’d be wiped out and the whites would be safe.” This possibility led him to conclude, “I think we’re being killed off.”⁴⁰⁶ This anonymous soldier’s account is different because while most soldiers believed that elites in the military or American government wanted to get rid of blacks, he seems to suggest that even lower ranking officers were involved in efforts to get rid of African Americans.

In February 1971 the *New York Amsterdam News* interviewed a black airman named Richard Devore, about his experiences in Vietnam. Devore, who was stationed at

⁴⁰³ Joseph L. Turner, “Do Black GI’s Get Justice In the Army,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 30, 1968, 5.

⁴⁰⁴ “Black GI Death Rate In Vietnam Cut In Half,” 46.

⁴⁰⁵ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers*, 12. Ed Emanuel, *Soul Patrol* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2003), 58. Keith Freeman as found in Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986), 111. Hamilton, “The Black Vietnam Veteran and His Problems: Fourth in a Series,” 32.

⁴⁰⁶ Hathaway, “Negro in Viet,” 36.

Bien Hoa Air Force Base in 1969, felt that the high percentage of blacks dying in Vietnam was evidence of something sinister. He maintained, “I earnestly felt they were trying to exterminate us.” Lamont Steptoe believed that the high percentage of African Americans in combat was proof enough that at the very least the military didn’t value black lives as much as whites. He reflected, “Statistically they were putting us in harm’s way as a means of ethnic cleaning. I understood that.”⁴⁰⁷

One might think that these sorts of rumors would be confined to draftees as they would have been the primary victims of any such policy, but this was not the case. George Brummell, who entered the Army in 1962 and was a sergeant in Vietnam, remembered conversations with other black soldiers about whether or not blacks were purposely being targeted for service in Vietnam as a means of removing them from the United States. He recalled, “There was always discussion that they put us in the combat arms so that the chances were much greater to be killed or we would be more expendable.” While Brummell did not believe that it was official armed forces policy to disproportionately send blacks into combat as some sort of secret plan to get rid of them, he felt as though some individuals in the armed forces may have targeted African Americans for combat on their own.⁴⁰⁸ Cephus Rhodes entered the Army in 1953 and was a major with the First Division in Vietnam in 1966-67. While he did not believe that the government sought to get rid of blacks by sending them to Vietnam, he was well

⁴⁰⁷ Steptoe, interview by author.

⁴⁰⁸ George Brummell, interview by author, October 21, 2012.

aware of the rumor, suggesting that it was fairly widespread among black soldiers regardless of rank.⁴⁰⁹

Speaking about the rumor that the government was trying to kill off blacks in Vietnam, Willie Thomas recalled, “I heard it and I thought it myself....look at all these blacks you got over here dying, it cuts down on the problems back home.” While Thomas did not believe that the government was actively trying to kill African Americans, he did think that this was the result.⁴¹⁰ Similarly, Nate Mondy felt as though high black death rates had a destabilizing effect on black communities in the United States even if he didn’t actually believe the rumors to be true. Mondy lamented, “I think that they didn’t do it by knowing that they were doing it, but if you look at the number of blacks being incarcerated and the number of blacks who were killed and the number of children without fathers today, they are directly related to what happened in Vietnam.”⁴¹¹

Conclusion

Service in the armed forces during the Vietnam War enabled African Americans at times to experience real friendship with whites, but they also witnessed significant prejudice and discrimination. African Americans frequently complained that they were disproportionately assigned menial duties. Others complained that they weren’t being promoted to the degree that they deserved. From this perspective blacks were confined to lower-echelon positions with little to no chance of advancement. African Americans also charged that the military justice system was rife with prejudice and discrimination. Their historical experience in the armed forces had been repeated.

⁴⁰⁹ Rhodes, interview by author.

⁴¹⁰ Thomas, interview by author.

⁴¹¹ Nate Mondy, interview by author, September 19, 2012.

In many respects their service in Vietnam not only mimicked previous black experiences in the armed forces, they also mimicked the black historical experience in the United States. As discussed in Chapter One, nearly all African Americans endured prejudice and discrimination before entering the military. Some blacks were even motivated to join the military because of the lack of opportunities available to them in the United States. However, the discrimination they faced in the armed forces suggested that military service did not offer a haven for African Americans looking to escape prejudice and discrimination. They faced many of the same problems in the military that they had faced in the civilian world.

African Americans also alleged that they were disproportionately assigned dangerous duties which suggested to them that they were regarded as more expendable than white soldiers. This charge reflected the reality that in the early years of the war blacks were disproportionately drafted, placed in combat units, and killed. These facts led a number of black soldiers to conclude that the government or military was trying to get rid of them. High black fatality rates, they believed would achieve domestic goals. Ron Bradley believed that the United States wanted to “minimize the number of blacks who were educated coming back and becoming a force to be reckoned with...so they thought they could kill most of us who were high school and college educated that would slow down if not eliminate the movement.”⁴¹² Bradley, and other African Americans who agreed with him, thought that the government was using the Vietnam War to kill blacks and destroy the civil rights movement. In other words, the government was using the Vietnam War, the dominant foreign policy issue of the era, as an opportunity to eliminate

⁴¹² Bradley, interview by author.

the civil rights movement, the dominant domestic crusade of the period. The domestic scene influenced the ways in which black soldiers interpreted their experiences in the war and vice versa.

Military service in Vietnam clearly did not free African Americans from racial prejudice and discrimination. They frequently complained that the armed services discriminated against them in regard to assignments, promotions, and punishments. These perceptions alienated many black soldiers. As we will see in the following chapter, this black alienation and the ineffective response of the armed forces contributed to outbreaks of racial violence in 1969-71.

Chapter 3: “Tearing the services apart”: Racial Violence and the Other War in Vietnam

Friendship and even brotherhood frequently defined black-white relations in combat, but for soldiers stationed in rear line military bases, racial division, tension, and violence were far more common. In the aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination in April 1968 these tensions frequently escalated into violence. The riot at Long Binh jail, which began on August 29, 1968 and resulted in dozens of casualties and one death, was likely the most publicized incident of racial violence during the Vietnam War.⁴¹³

The Long Binh riot is well known to historians of the Vietnam War, but it was just one of many violent racial incidents. Between 1969 and 1971 hundreds, if not thousands, of incidents were reported in a variety of different military units in all four tactical zones of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). In 1970 alone, the Marine Corps reported a shocking 1,060 violent racial incidents.⁴¹⁴ Official armed forces’ incident reports from 1970-71, most of which deal with Army units, similarly reveal hundreds of incidents of racial violence. This situation led journalist and retired Colonel Robert D. Heinl Jr. in 1971 to conclude that racial conflicts were “erupting murderously in all services” and “tearing the services apart.”⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 242-259. Spector is one of the few historians to discuss racial violence in the military in any detail. This chapter provides an excellent account of the Long Binh Riot and some detail on other incidents of racial violence in Vietnam.

⁴¹⁴ John Darrell Sherwood, *Black Sailor, White Navy: Racial Unrest in the Fleet during the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 27.

⁴¹⁵ Robert D. Heinl, Jr., “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” *Armed Forces Journal*, June 7, 1971. Heinl was a 27 year veteran of the Marine Corps. After retiring from the military in 1964, he served as a military analyst for a number of newspapers and journals.

These incidents varied greatly in nature. For example, a 1970 report on race relations among members of the III Marine Amphibious Force stationed at Camp Horn in Da Nang reveals numerous incidents of violent confrontations between black and white soldiers. During one incident five black marines assaulted a white marine outside of the enlisted men's (EM) club. Another involved two black marines assaulting a white sergeant "possibly in retaliation for being too strict in his attitude toward other Negroes."⁴¹⁶ Another report describes an episode in which a white private threatened a white sergeant with violence, insisting that his "black brothers" would be more than willing to help, suggesting that some level of black-white cooperation was not unknown in the rear. A white corporal, who lived in the same hut as this sergeant, was later assaulted by four or five African Americans suggesting that the white private made good on his threat. Another incident began when a white marine expressed a desire to "kick some black ass tonight." Confronted by a black marine, the white marine and a friend assaulted him. During another incident a black and white marine reportedly fought over a cot, and the confrontation ended only when the white marine fired his rifle into the ceiling.⁴¹⁷

At first glance these incidents may not appear significant given that physical confrontations among male soldiers, whatever their race, occasionally occur during wartime. Yet the incidents clearly reveal racial conflict, and at the very least they suggest that incidents of racial violence were a serious problem at Camp Horn in Da Nang. Racial

⁴¹⁶ Report, George S. Bowman JR. to Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, January 18, 1970, Equal Opportunity Reporting File: Council Meetings, Box #1: U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP), College Park, Maryland.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

violence was severe enough of a problem at Camp Horn that these incidents occurred on the same base, in the same military unit, and within twenty-four hours of one another.⁴¹⁸

As we will see, Camp Horn was not unusual. Military bases in the different zones of Vietnam experienced similar levels of racial conflict.

To a considerable extent the armed forces' own behavior contributed to these outbreaks of racial violence. As discussed in the previous chapter, many African Americans complained that the armed forces discriminated against black soldiers in one form or another. However, from 1965 to 1969 the armed forces largely disregarded black allegations of discrimination and prejudice. Not surprisingly, the armed forces' unwillingness to pay attention to black concerns alienated many African Americans, led to mistrust and suspicion, and had a negative effect on black-white relations.

Even when racial conflicts began "erupting murderously in all services" between 1969 and 71 the armed forces' initial reaction was to focus attention on African American soldiers and blame them for outbreaks of violence. Military officials viewed and treated with suspicion even those African Americans who peacefully organized to express legitimate concerns about discrimination. Their response reflected their belief that African Americans were solely responsible for acts of racial violence. These officials often minimized or disregarded both the role played by whites and the root causes behind these incidents. An October 1971 report on race relations among members of the Eighty-Fourth Engineer Battalion stationed in Da Nang noted that "the belief among black soldiers that authority figures...were hostile toward them" had a great impact on the way

⁴¹⁸ Ibid. Each of these incidents occurred December 7-8, 1970.

African Americans viewed the military and interacted with their white counterparts.⁴¹⁹

Unfortunately, military officials often ignored black complaints of discrimination, not realizing that these perceptions contributed to outbreaks of racial violence.

“The further you got from combat the more bullshit there was”

In combat black-white relations were often typified by cooperation and friendship. However, on American military bases and in the cities of Vietnam, race relations were often characterized by tension and hostility. This stark contrast was due to a number of factors. While soldiers stationed in Vietnamese cities and on American military bases were at times exposed to dangerous situations, they were far less likely to be killed by enemy combatants than those engaged directly in combat. As a result, soldiers in the rear were not as dependent on one another for survival as those in combat.

Additionally, as discussed in Chapter One, soldiers often arrived in Vietnam with preconceived views about race and race relations. An October 1971 report on race relations noted, “Prejudices already ingrained in soldiers from civilian life styles” contributed to the deterioration of race relations.⁴²⁰ Combat service tended to challenge these prejudices, while relations on American military bases often paralleled the worst of black-white relations in the United States.

Many soldiers recognized that the nature of black-white relations often depended upon location. Speaking of black white relations in Tien Sha in comparison to relations in combat, G.L. Stanley, a black soldier from Milwaukee, declared, “Tien Sha is definitely

⁴¹⁹ Report, Lieutenant Perkins to Dennis M. Kowal, October 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, NACP.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

not the bush...It's more like the real world."⁴²¹ Many other soldiers concurred that life in the rear was just like the real world or back home. Ron Copes, who served with the First Infantry in 1966-67 and again with Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in 1969-70, recalled, "When you were in the field it was great" but outside of combat, relations between blacks and whites were noticeably colder and sometimes filled with tension.⁴²² Wayne Smith, who served with the Ninth Infantry Division in 1968-69, believed that race relations were excellent in combat, but problematic elsewhere. According to Smith, "the further you got from combat the more bullshit there was."⁴²³

Vietnam veteran and author Karl Marlantes pays particular attention to racial issues in his novel *Matterhorn* which is based in large part on his own experiences serving with the Third Marine Division in 1969. In *Matterhorn* much of the racial tension is portrayed as occurring in combat, but in reality these tensions occurred outside of combat. According to Marlantes relations were generally good in combat, but the exact opposite outside of it. He recalled, "It fascinated me how it could be so different coming out of the bush and going to the rear."⁴²⁴ Similarly, Willie Thomas, who served in 1969-70 with the 525th Intelligence Unit, perceived that whites and blacks were far less likely to interact with one another outside of combat. He believed that this was at least in part because those stationed in the rear were far less likely to be killed and as such they felt less of a need to cooperate with one another.⁴²⁵

⁴²¹ Zalin Grant, "Whites Against Blacks In Vietnam," *New Republic*, January 8, 1969, 15.

⁴²² Ron Copes, interview by author, November 17, 2011.

⁴²³ Wayne Smith, interview by author, October 25, 2011.

⁴²⁴ Karl Marlantes, interview by author, September 24, 2012.

⁴²⁵ Willie Thomas, interview by author, September 3, 2011.

Shortly after arriving in Da Nang, Freddie Edwards, who served with the First Marine Airwing in 1970-71, became involved in a fight with a white soldier from Texas. He recalled, "I wasn't in Da Nang three-weeks when I am in a fight with a white guy...He was racist...He just didn't like black folks." In contrast, when Edwards was stationed in a remote area outside of Da Nang, he no longer encountered any racial problems.⁴²⁶

When incidents of racial violence began occurring regularly in 1969 the armed forces recognized that the majority of racial problems were occurring away from combat. In September 1969 L. Howard Bennett, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Rights, observed that while there had not been any "reports of racial conflicts among the combat troops who are under fire in South Vietnam," violent racial incidents occurred often "among noncombat troops and those in the rear echelon."⁴²⁷ In October 1969 Commandant of the Marine Corps General Leonard Chapman acknowledged "instances among marines of violence and other unacceptable actions which apparently stem from racial differences." According to Chapman these incidents were "almost unheard of among marines in combat" but relatively common outside of it.⁴²⁸ In January 1971 the Deputy Chief of Staff of the United States Army, Brigadier General James J. Ursano, reported that "relations between races in the command are generally good. When engaged

⁴²⁶ Freddie Edwards, interview by author, December 2, 2011.

⁴²⁷ "Editorials: Military Racism," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 6, 1969, 14.

⁴²⁸ Letter, Earle Wheeler to Robert D. Murphy, December 19, 1969, Folder 5: Memorandum regarding Army and Marine Corps policies on the treatment of black servicemen for Robert D. Murphy, Box 22: Official Papers-Memorandum, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) Policy Files on Discrimination in the Army, The United States Army College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

in performances of duties or in tactical situations, there is little or no tension.” However, “in the rear areas, there have been incidents of racial unrest.”⁴²⁹

The great majority of racial incidents occurred outside of combat, but in the first few years of the war there are only a few reports of racial violence anywhere. On September 22, 1966 *Jet* reported of a “riot” which occurred on a naval installation in Vietnam involving 200 white and black sailors after “a white sailor called a Negro fireman ‘Nigger.’”⁴³⁰ On August 19, 1967 Frank Frazier, a black marine stationed at Camp McCarty in Phu Bai, revealed in a letter to his mother that “a fight broke out or should I say a race riot...One of them (whites) got his rifle and fired two rounds-meaning to kill someone.”⁴³¹ Similarly, in March of 1967 journalist Edith Payne reported about racial tensions in Cam Ranh Bay. After a series of incidents in which black soldiers allegedly assaulted whites, officials posted a reward of \$100 for any information regarding these assaults, an action which was met with skepticism by many black soldiers. One anonymous African American charged, “They don’t put up any such notice when we’re attacked... They put lynch ropes on our bunks and write warnings in the latrines, but if we even look like we want to go after them, the company commander threatens us.” Payne concurred that these sorts of incidents occurred in support units outside of combat.⁴³²

⁴²⁹ Report, James J. Ursano to unknown, January 7, 1971, Reference Paper Files, Stockade Project: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁴³⁰ “‘Nigger’ Slur Causes Racial Brawl In Vietnam,” *Jet*, September 22, 1966, 27.

⁴³¹ “Negro Marine Says He Fights Two Enemies in Vietnam,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 5, 1967, 20.

⁴³² Edith Payne, “Vietnam Troop Integration Image Marred By Near Riots,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 25, 1967, 1.

While the incidents mentioned by *Jet*, Frank Frazier, and Edith Payne should not be dismissed, they do not reveal that racial violence was a widespread problem in Vietnam during the 1965-67 period. Instead, these incidents appear to be fairly isolated. Contemporary accounts of race relations were almost universally positive. For example, *Jet* and Ethel Payne gave largely positive pictures of race relations during the period and provided no other evidence of racial violence.⁴³³

"Some redneck cracker would crack his mouth off about MLK and the fight would be on"

However, the few outbreaks of racial violence in the early years should not be seen as evidence that African Americans were satisfied with their experiences in the armed forces. Complaints of discrimination were widespread throughout the war. The rise in tensions should be viewed as a "slow burn" which developed over time and was influenced by a number of factors. First and foremost, the widespread black perception of discrimination led many to believe that the military did not intend to treat them fairly. The perception that they faced discrimination from the military alienated many African Americans, and events back in the United States intensified these feelings.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968 not only angered many blacks, but also served as confirmation of the view that black rights and lives were not respected and valued in American society. Most black soldiers viewed King as a hero who advocated non-violent tactics to solve the racial problem in the United States. Because he was an outspoken critic of the American war effort in Vietnam, many also

⁴³³ Simeon Booker, "An American is an American," *Jet*, June 30, 1966, 22. Ethel L. Payne, "GIs Tell How they Stand on the Viet War," *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 11, 1967, 2.

saw him as *the* black representative of the antiwar movement. For many African Americans in the United States and serving in Vietnam, King's assassination challenged the notion that racism, prejudice, and participation in war could be ended through peaceful protest.

Of course, not everyone agreed with King that non-violent protest was the best method of battling racism and ending the war. The civil rights movement began to split in 1966 between those who agreed with King's non-violent approach and black power groups like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the newly formed Black Panther Party. These groups and others rejected King's non-violent approach as ineffective, promoted black pride, largely excluded whites from their ranks, and advocated the creation of self-defense groups to defend black neighborhoods from police harassment. For many blacks, King's assassination seemed to confirm what black activists like Stokely Carmichael of SNCC and Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panther Party had been arguing for some time: non-violent protests were ineffective and would only get blacks killed. Violent protests or the threatened use of violence needed to be an option.⁴³⁴

Black soldiers were not immune to this line of thinking. Don Browne, who was stationed in Saigon when King was assassinated, likely spoke for a number of African Americans when he recalled, "When I heard that Martin Luther King was assassinated, my first inclination was to run out and punch the first white guy I saw. I was very

⁴³⁴ Lawrence Allen Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War: Civil Rights and Vietnam in the African American Press* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 89-94.

hurt.”⁴³⁵ Allen Thomas Jr. was serving with the Fourth Infantry Division in Kontum when King was assassinated and he realized “the young guys wanted to hurt somebody.” He and a group of other black non-commissioned officers (NCO) gathered hundreds of black soldiers in a field where they stayed for several days. Thomas remembered, “We (the black NCOs) went to the officers, asked them to back off. The last thing you wanted to do was set them off...Let them get over their anger and hurt.”⁴³⁶

In May 1968 journalist Donald Mosby traveled to Vietnam where he spoke to a number of black soldiers about the significance of King’s assassination. Mosby recognized “that these young men were deeply distressed by Dr. King’s slaying,” but also that “they had no intention of allowing things to stay the way they were when Dr. King was murdered.”⁴³⁷

In responding to King’s assassination, some African Americans were influenced by the burgeoning black power movement in the United States. This influence often went no further than the public display of symbols of black power. Soldiers decorated their “hooches” with black power symbols, wore slave bracelets, and developed complicated handshakes called “dapping” as a representation of black unity.⁴³⁸ Others formed organizations ostensibly as a means of representing the collective interests of African American soldiers but likely also to protect them. In 1969, Wallace Terry noted the existence of several black “self-defense” organizations in Vietnam like the Blackstone

⁴³⁵ Don Browne’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 167.

⁴³⁶ James E. Westheider, *The African-American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 133.

⁴³⁷ Donald Mosby, “Black GIs In Viet Won’t Wait For Their Freedom,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 29, 1968, 2.

⁴³⁸ Wallace Terry, “Racial Tensions in the Military: Black Power in Vietnam, September 1969,” *Time*, September 19, 1969.

Rangers, De Mau Mau, and Ju Ju, all of which had allegedly formed to protect black soldiers from racist whites.⁴³⁹ While Terry does not elaborate, the Blackstone Rangers were a well-known Chicago street gang. Other organizations included the American Minority Servicemen's Association, the Concerned Veterans Association, Black Brothers United (BBU), the Zulu 1200's, the Black Liberation Front of the Armed Forces, and the Black Brothers Union.⁴⁴⁰ While information about these groups is limited, it would be wrong to assume automatically that they advocated or engaged in violent activities.

Freddie Smith, a black marine who served with the Seventh Marine Division in 1970-71, claimed, "Just about every black veteran of the Marine Corps was...associated with the De Mau Mau at one time or another." According to Smith, De Mau Mau's primary concern was educating "blacks that didn't know the UCMJ [Uniform Code of Military Justice] or laws of the Marines...A lot of times they used to protest and maybe go on some type of semi-strike."⁴⁴¹ While Smith's assertion that every black marine was a member of the De Mau Mau is certainly an exaggeration, it is difficult to know how many blacks actually joined these types of organizations. Larger groups like the BBU had hundreds of members spread throughout Vietnam, while smaller organizations appear to have had as few as twenty members.⁴⁴²

King's assassination and the growing black power movement contributed to an increase in racial incidents. Jim Heiden, a white soldier, recognized the dramatic effect of

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Richard Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 58-62. David Cortright, *Soldiers In Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books), 42. "Black Militance Joins the Army," *Soul City Times*, March 19, 1970, 6.

⁴⁴¹ Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 59.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s death on race relations. He observed, "Reactions to Tet and things like that, they were minimal...But when Martin Luther King was assassinated...people fought. People had fist fights." ⁴⁴³

Journalist Zalin Grant reported that there were frequent clashes between black and white soldiers at Camp Tien Sha in Da Nang during the winter of 1968-69. He concluded that in the aftermath of King's assassination relations between blacks and whites became so fractured at Tien Sha that "the camp's biggest threat is race riots, not the Vietcong."⁴⁴⁴ Incidents were also reported outside of Vietnam. A few weeks after King was killed, black and white soldiers fought one another in Yokosuka, Japan with *Jet* concluding that the fight "broke out over Negro resentment over the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr."⁴⁴⁵

Black anger over King's assassination was often compounded by the way some white soldiers reacted to his death. President Lyndon Johnson designated Sunday, April 7, as a day of national mourning, but not everyone grieved over King's death. Zalin Grant reported seeing a Confederate flag hanging in front of the Navy headquarters at Cam Ranh Bay immediately following King's assassination. ⁴⁴⁶ On April 16, the Department of Defense received a complaint from the American Veterans Committee (AVC) that "Confederate flags were being flown in Vietnam" to the great consternation of African Americans serving there. ⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴³ Spector, *After Tet*, 249.

⁴⁴⁴ Grant, "Whites Against Blacks," 15.

⁴⁴⁵ "Negro Soldiers Scuffle with Whites in Japan," *Jet*, April 25, 1968, 45.

⁴⁴⁶ Grant, "Whites Against Blacks," 16.

⁴⁴⁷ Letter, Eugene Boyd to Clark M. Clifford, April 16, 1968, Folder 11: Complaint regarding alleged racial discrimination in the First Infantry Division, South Vietnam made by Private Julius Alexander, Box 10: Official Papers-Complaints, DCSPER.

Confederate flags were always a source of contention for black soldiers in Vietnam. In 1966 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) petitioned Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to ban the Confederate flag after white GIs were seen waving one during Bob Hope's Christmas Day performance. An anonymous black soldier complained, "No one in authority stopped to think what effect this had on the morale of the [black] GIs. No one there knew that perhaps the very next day or the next week, many of those same guys would give their lives for America." ⁴⁴⁸

In the aftermath of King's assassination, blacks viewed the Confederate flag with particular disdain. Donald Jernigan believed that whites flew Confederate flags after King's death "to intimidate and to antagonize and to let you know in a quiet kinda way that they were in support of what went down."⁴⁴⁹ Jernigan's perception was not isolated. So many African Americans complained about the Confederate flag that both the Army and the Marines briefly banned its usage. However, when southern congressmen complained, the Pentagon retreated assuring officials that the "ban had been only temporary, confined to Confederate flags, and aimed at easing racial tensions during the days following Dr. King's death." ⁴⁵⁰

The display of Confederate flags was hardly the only offensive action taken after King's assassination. Zalin Grant reported that a month after King's assassination two white soldiers burned a 12 foot high cross near a barracks occupied by African American

⁴⁴⁸ Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*, 195.

⁴⁴⁹ Interview with Don Jernigan as found in Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986), 95-96.

⁴⁵⁰ Spector, *After Tet*, 250-251.

soldiers.⁴⁵¹ Wallace Terry noted that white soldiers in Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay burned crosses as a way of celebrating King's assassination.⁴⁵² Brian Settles, a pilot from Muncie, Indiana, overheard a white major and pilot instructor react to news of King's death with "well, he finally got what he was asking for."⁴⁵³ Similarly, Gerald Lynch, a black marine from Norfolk, Virginia, remembered a drunken white soldier reacting to the news of King's death with "it should have happened a lot sooner."⁴⁵⁴ Don Browne observed, "A few days after the assassination, some of the white guys got a little sick and tired of seeing Dr. King's picture on the TV screen. Like a memorial." One soldier was particularly annoyed by the coverage, commenting, "I wish they'd take that nigger's picture off." Browne and three other African Americans reacted by giving the man "a lesson in when to use that word and when you should not use that word. A physical lesson."⁴⁵⁵ A similar incident occurred on an American base in Lahnstuhl, Germany. Gary Skogen recalled, "Some redneck cracker would crack his mouth off about MLK and the fight would be on... Really common place in the first couple of months after MLK died."⁴⁵⁶

In some cases the armed forces could have been more sensitive to the pain many black soldiers felt over King's death. On April 19, 1968 Herbert Turner, a black chaplain with the Fifty-Second Artillery Group in Pleiku, requested permission to conduct a special memorial service at a nearby chapel in honor of King. The group commander

⁴⁵¹ Grant, "Whites Against Blacks In Vietnam," 16.

⁴⁵² Terry, "Racial Tensions in the Military."

⁴⁵³ Brian H. Settles, *No Reason for Dying: A Reluctant Combat Pilot's Confession of Hypocrisy, Infidelity and War* (Charleston, S.C: Booksurge, 2009), 183.

⁴⁵⁴ Bavarskis, "Vietnam Veterans Decides To Join the Black Struggle," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 26, 1973, 10.

⁴⁵⁵ Don Browne's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 167.

⁴⁵⁶ Gary Skogen, interview by author, October 6, 2012.

denied Turner's request reasoning that "it was better not to make a big thing out of it" and "that it was not in the best interest of the group to conduct a special service."⁴⁵⁷

Similarly, on April 18 the *Chicago Daily News* published a letter written by James Woods, a black soldier stationed in Da Nang. Woods alleged that "when Martin Luther King was killed, a group of about 150 Negro soldiers went to the chapel, which always has been open 24 hours a day, to say a prayer for him." They were refused entry. When Woods and eleven others went to the enlisted men's club, "a white sergeant told us to move aside and we promptly obeyed. We began talking again and he ordered armed guards in as though we were rioting." This incident led Woods to theorize, "We are supposed to be American soldiers fighting a war in Vietnam. But it seems as though the white man thinks we're still at home."⁴⁵⁸

"One of the most serious problems facing Army leadership"

In the months following King's assassination reports of racial violence began to appear in much greater numbers in black newspapers and liberal journals like the *New Republic*. The most notable incident that attracted journalists occurred at Long Binh Jail on August 29, 1968 when a group of black prisoners overwhelmed prison guards and released the entire prison population from their cells. As the rioters swelled to several hundred, most of whom were African American, the mess hall and administration building were set on fire. When the stockade commander tried to end the riot, he was severely beaten. Authorities regained a level of control by the following morning, but

⁴⁵⁷ Letter, April 15, 1968, Folder 2: Complaint regarding denial of memorial services for Martin Luther King Jr. in Vietnam made by Private First Class Bobby L. Harris, Box 10: Official Papers-Complaints, DCSPER.

⁴⁵⁸ Letter, Mrs. Victor to Clark Clifford, April 19, 1968, Box 10: Official Papers-Complaints, DCSPER. Official report essentially confirms Woods account of events.

more than 200 African Americans rioters continued to control sections of the stockade. They maintained their control for nearly a month.⁴⁵⁹ When the “Long Binh Riot” was over, one white soldier was dead and eight stockade staff, including the commander, and twenty-six prisoners were hospitalized.⁴⁶⁰

“The Long Binh Riot” received the most publicity, but there were a number of other racial incidents during this same period. In September 1968 a white soldier had his throat cut by a group of black soldiers in the Ninth Division Base Camp in Dong Tam, an injury which resulted in 52 stitches. A report of this incident noted that there had been six other recent violent racial incidents at Dong Tam, some of which involved guns, knives, and brass knuckles.”⁴⁶¹

On November 2, 1968 the *Pittsburgh Courier* noted an increase in racial violence among black and white sailors serving on U.S. naval bases in Vietnam. One incident involved a black soldier who after being thrown out of a club located at Camp Tien Sha, pulled a .45 caliber pistol and fired into the club. Shortly after this incident, a black sailor was found dead under mysterious circumstances.⁴⁶² On November 23, 1968 the *Philadelphia Tribune* reported of large scale fighting between black and white soldiers in service clubs in Da Nang and Long Binh leading them to conclude that these soldiers were “Fighting Each Other ‘Harder’ Than [the] Vietcong.”⁴⁶³ Zalin Grant alleged that in late 1968 “racial incidents occurred at the nearby China Beach recreation area and in

⁴⁵⁹ Spector, *After Tet*, 242-259.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Report, Thaddeus J. Bara to Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel, February 16, 1969, Folder 35: Complaint Regarding Racial Violence at the Ninth Division Base Camp, Dong Tam, Vietnam, Submitted by Congressman Brotzman, Box 5: Official Papers-Complaints, DCSPER.

⁴⁶² “Navy Admits Racial Flareups In Vietnam,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 2, 1968, 1.

⁴⁶³ “Black and White Soldiers Fighting Each Other ‘Harder’ Than Vietcong,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, November 23, 1968, 40.

Danang clubs and dining halls” on an almost daily basis. In the most serious incident a black security guard was shot and killed.⁴⁶⁴

By 1969 the armed forces had begun to pay closer attention to incidents of racial violence. A 1969 Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) report noted roughly 100 “disorders” within the United States Army Pacific (USARPAC) from January to September 1969, the majority of which had racial overtones. Among these disorders was a March 8, 1969 fight between groups of blacks and whites at an NCO Club at Camp Hochmuth in Phu Bai during which an unknown soldier fired an M-16 into the club. On May 22, 1969 a white soldier was beaten to death by two black soldiers at the barracks at Long Binh Post.⁴⁶⁵

In September 1969 African American journalist Wallace Terry traveled to Vietnam where he reported “another war being fought in Viet Nam-between black and white Americans.”⁴⁶⁶ Terry described black and white soldiers regularly fighting one another on American military installations in Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay, Dong Tam, Saigon, and Bien Hoa.⁴⁶⁷

In late 1969 the armed forces began to monitor closely racial violence in Vietnam. Official armed forces reports during 1969-71 reveal hundreds of incidents involving racial violence. The Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel Walter T. Kerwin noted in

⁴⁶⁴ Grant, “Whites Against Blacks,” 15. The guard may have been accidentally killed by another black soldier.

⁴⁶⁵ Report, September 19, 1969, Blue Bell Report regarding incidents in Vietnam, Korea, Okinawa, Hawaii, Japan and Thailand from January 1 to September 18, 1969, Box 2: Official Papers, DCSPER. Other racial incidents occurred on May 26 at Camp Hochmuth, July 19th at Long Binh, and on July 31 in Qui Nhon.

⁴⁶⁶ Terry, “Racial Tensions in the Military.”

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

October 1970, “In the past year racial discord has surfaced as one of the most serious problems facing Army leadership.”⁴⁶⁸

While violent incidents involving race were frequent, there were also violent outbreaks which may not have involved race. Bruce Crawford, a white first lieutenant with the 101st Airborne, remembered that violent incidents were common in Phu Bai in 1971. Soldiers routinely fought each other and there were a number of attempted “fraggings.”⁴⁶⁹ Some of these incidents had a clear racial component, while others did not. Speaking of these incidents Crawford recalled, “All the time I was executive officer [in Phu Bai] I was afraid for my life. I slept with a 45 under my pillow and an M-16 locked and loaded by my bed. I got more sleep and rest in the jungle than when I was an executive officer”⁴⁷⁰

Historian Georges Lepre’s *Fragging* provides the most thorough account of incidents of fragging during the Vietnam War. He notes that race likely played a role in some of these incidents, but in most cases while “the races of the perpetrators and their intended victims were known” incident reports in most cases do “not provide any indication of whether the assaults were racially motivated.” Additionally, while Lepre notes instances in which soldiers, both black and white, attempted to frag one another, the

⁴⁶⁸ Letter, Walter T. Kerwin to Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, October 22, 1970, Folder 25: Memorandum and Briefing Regarding A Proposed Department of the Army Race Relations Conference for 17-20 November 1970, Box 22: Official Papers-Memorandums, DCSPER.

⁴⁶⁹ “Fragging,” derived from fragmentation grenades, refers to soldiers attempting to murder their commanding officers.

⁴⁷⁰ Bruce Crawford, interview with author, December 4, 2011.

fact that the perpetrators and victims were of different races does not mean that these attacks were racially motivated.⁴⁷¹

A 1971 Provost Marshall report revealed that in 1969 there were 238 serious incidents involving explosive devices, 96 of which were labelled “fraggings.” Of this number twelve were believed to be linked to race. In 1970 there were 386 reported incidents involving explosive devices, 209 of which were fraggings. There was a suspected racial motivation behind sixteen of these incidents. During the first three months of 1971 there were 120 incidents involving explosive devices, sixty-eight of which were fraggings. Of these there was possibly a racial motivation behind seven of the listed fraggings. In each of these years the motivation behind the great majority of fragging incidents was unknown.⁴⁷²

While the majority of fragging incidents had no clear racial motivation, this was not the case in regard to many other violent incidents. A Provost Marshall report on “Crimes of Violence With Racial Overtones” claimed that from July 1970 to April 1971 there were 269 incidents of racial violence which resulted in nine murders, ten attempted murders, and 186 aggravated assaults.⁴⁷³

This report was based largely on individual commanders’ assessments of race relations in their units. Numerous commanders provided optimistic assessments of race relations in their units while contrastingly also noting a number of racial incidents. A

⁴⁷¹ George Lepre, *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 2011), 102.

⁴⁷² Report, Dennis M. Kowal to Provost Marshall. March 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP.

⁴⁷³ Report, April 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP.

commander in charge of a medical support unit stationed in III Corps reported that relations were “considered good,” in spite of the fact that there had been twenty racial incidents in his unit. There were twenty-two racial incidents in the First Signal Brigade, but the commander reported, “Relations appear fair, but uneasiness exists.” The commander of the Eighteenth Military Police Brigade claimed that “units were free of racial tension” despite reporting thirteen racial incidents. There were twenty-five racial incidents reported in the First Aviation Brigade, which had units stationed all around the country, but their commander claimed that relations were “excellent.”⁴⁷⁴ Clearly many of these commanders provided an overly optimistic assessment of race relations in their units. Their reasons for doing so are less clear. It is conceivable that some in command were unaware of the true nature of race relations in their units. It is also possible that some did not want to face the truth and as a result were in a state of denial. There is also the possibility that some commanders were fearful of displeasing superiors and in response provided misleading assessments. Whatever the case, racial violence was clearly a significant problem.

Race War in Vietnam

In some military units racial violence was clearly out of control. In the I Corps region of RVN, racial violence was a continual problem on American bases in Da Nang, Chu Lai, and Phu Bai. From December 1969 to January 1970 there were at least 33 incidents of racial violence involving members of the III Marine Amphibious Force at Camp Horn in Da Nang indicating that incidents of racial violence occurred on almost a

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

daily basis.⁴⁷⁵ Camp Horn was not the only military installation there to experience significant racial problems. During a February 5, 1970 concert at Camp Brooks Marine Base in Da Nang, a black marine lobbed two fragmentation grenades into the arena, killing one marine and injuring sixty-two others. An investigation found that the attack was a “deliberate, carefully thought out attempt to kill a hell of a lot of people strictly because of racial problems.”⁴⁷⁶

At least sixteen incidents of racial violence were reported at Camp Baxter in Da Nang between December 1970 and October 1971.⁴⁷⁷ On December 17 a fight occurred on base involving dozens of black and white soldiers, some of whom were brandishing “clubs, knives, and hand grenades.” After the fight ended 15-20 African Americans went to the company command post and stole a M-79 grenade launcher, an M-14 rifle, and two M-16 rifles.⁴⁷⁸ On January 18, a white MP was shot and killed by a black soldier at the base camp of the 101st Airborne Division.⁴⁷⁹ On March 25 a white soldier shot and killed a black soldier leading investigators to write the word “racial” on the report.⁴⁸⁰ On September 8 after a black soldier was assaulted, a confrontation occurred involving approximately 300 black and white soldiers. During the fight someone “threw a

⁴⁷⁵ Report, George S. Bowman JR. to Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, January 18, 1970, Equal Opportunity Reporting File: Council Meetings, Box #1, NACP. An unrelated incident, in which six African Americans attacked two white soldiers, occurred on December 11.

⁴⁷⁶ Sherwood, *Black Sailor, White Navy*, 28.

⁴⁷⁷ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP and Report, 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, NACP.

⁴⁷⁸ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP and Report, 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, NACP.

⁴⁷⁹ “‘Black Power’ Activity Described in Vietnam,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, January 23, 1971, 1.

⁴⁸⁰ Report, 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, NACP.

concussion grenade in the area of the white soldiers” injuring two.⁴⁸¹ An October 1971 report on race relations among members of the same battalion noted a recent “racial confrontation” involving 65 whites and 65 blacks.⁴⁸²

Race relations were equally as fractured in Chu Lai where there were at least twenty-three incidents between July 1970 and March 1971.⁴⁸³ Racial violence was sufficiently common that a white soldier named Michael Harger was stabbed on two separate occasions.⁴⁸⁴ There were also a series of racial incidents reported on military bases in Phu Bai, Duc Pho, and Quang Tri. A white soldier named Harry Avant was stabbed on two separate occasions in September 1970 in Phu Bai.⁴⁸⁵ On January 8, 1971 two white members of the First Battalion Seventy-Seventh Armor Regiment stationed at Quang Tri became embroiled in a confrontation with a group of black soldiers over a cassette tape.⁴⁸⁶ B.W. Flint, a black radar technician with the Fifth Mechanized Infantry Division, shot both white soldiers, injuring one and killing the other.⁴⁸⁷

The II Corps region also experienced significant racial problems. There were at least thirteen incidents of racial violence reported in Cam Ranh Bay between August 1970 and March 1971.⁴⁸⁸ An incident which began on March 16, 1971 outside of the 191st Ordinance Battalion Motor Pool in Cam Ranh Bay explains to a great extent how

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Report, Lieutenant Perkins to Dennis M. Kowal, October 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, NACP.

⁴⁸³ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid. Harger was stabbed on both January 2 and 9.

⁴⁸⁵ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP.

⁴⁸⁶ Report, 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, NACP.

⁴⁸⁷ “Riot Among Americans in Vietnam Shuts Clubs,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, January 16, 1971, A1

⁴⁸⁸ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP.

racial tensions often escalated to violence. On that day Jeffrey Cole, a white soldier, called Oswald Pendleton, an African American, a “nigger,” and a fight broke out. A short time later Cole and 15 other whites assaulted another African American soldier named Robert Driver. A few hours later Cole and two other white soldiers were assaulted by a group of 40-50 black soldiers.⁴⁸⁹ Two days later in an incident which may have been related, 18-20 African American soldiers entered a billet and assaulted four white soldiers with chains and hoses.⁴⁹⁰

An Khe in II Corps also experienced significant racial violence. On September 20, 1970 a black soldier named Willie Clayborne stationed at Camp Radcliff in An Khe threatened “to kill every officer and NCO in the Unit.” Clayborne made good on his threat a few hours later firing his M-16 at a group of white soldiers, killing two and injuring another.⁴⁹¹

A series of incidents in January 1971 in An Khe culminated with the killing of a troop commander. On January 10, 1971 “two blacks were gassed with riot CS” and a few days later someone fired an M-16 into a room occupied by black soldiers. After someone “tried to gas some blacks with riot CS [tear gas]” again on January 26, a group of black soldiers warned the squadron commander “that if something were not done about the matter that night and changes made around the troop, someone would get hurt very soon.” Although a lieutenant admitted to knowing those responsible, “nothing was done

⁴⁸⁹ Report, 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fragging: Box #4, NACP.

⁴⁹⁰ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP.

⁴⁹¹ Report, September 22, 1970, Folder 21: Blue Bell Report Regarding 2 Incidents in the Republic of Vietnam, the Attempted Murder of Staff Sergeants Pearson J. Grendell and Manslaughter Charges from a Fight at An Khe, Box 2: Official Papers-Blue Bells, DCSPER.

about the matter.”⁴⁹² A few days later, two black soldiers confronted the commander over what they deemed to be unfair field assignments. When the commander randomly assigned a different black soldier to the field position in their place, one of the black soldiers pointed his finger at the commander and shouted, “I am tired of getting f—ked with.” The commander responded by reaching for his pistol. One of the black soldiers “fired an automatic burst into the Troop Commander’s head,” killing him instantly.⁴⁹³

There were additional racial incidents reported in Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang, Phu Tai, Cha Rang Valley, Phan Thiet, Cai Nhon, Phu Hiep Village, Phan Rang, Qui Nhon, An Son, and Pleiku.⁴⁹⁴ On January 9, 1971 MPs in Tuy Hoa were called to “stop a racial fight involving 200 personnel” at an EM club in Tuy Hoa.⁴⁹⁵ A short time later, an unidentified individual threw a fragmentation grenade outside of the club injuring 29 people.⁴⁹⁶ Similarly after a black soldier was arrested for his involvement in a racial assault on February 20th “incidents of Molotov cocktails and CS throwing” occurred frequently over the following week.⁴⁹⁷ In Nha Trang nine incidents of African American

⁴⁹² Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP.

⁴⁹³ Ibid. Other less serious assaults were reported at An Khe on October 4 and November 6, 1970.

⁴⁹⁴ Report, 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP and Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP.

⁴⁹⁵ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP. This was not the first racial incident at Tuy Hoa as there were other reports of violence on November 27, 1970 and January 29, 1971.

⁴⁹⁶ Report, 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, NACP.

⁴⁹⁷ Report, Harold Phillips to Commanding General, September 11, 1971, Reference Paper Files, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, NACP. The assault on February 20th was just one in a series of assaults which occurred between February 14-20.

soldiers robbing and/or assaulting white soldiers were reported in in September-October 1970 alone.⁴⁹⁸

The III Corps region also experienced significant racial friction. Long Binh was “the enclave with the largest troop concentrations,” so it is not surprising that there were at least twenty-seven reported incidents of racial violence between July 1970 and March 1971. On August 21, 1970 six African Americans and one white soldier attacked a white soldier named Smith. One might think that the participation of a white soldier would mean that no racial motivation was behind the attack, but investigators felt differently, “There were racial overtones involved in this incident.”⁴⁹⁹ On December 31, 1970 a group of black soldiers exchanged gunfire with two white members of the Criminal Investigation Command (CID): one CID member and one African American soldier were killed, while two unidentified African Americans were badly injured.⁵⁰⁰ Additional incidents were reported at Camp Frennell-Jones outside of Saigon, Di An, Saigon, Tan Song Nhut, and Bien Hoa.⁵⁰¹

There were numerous incidents involving racial violence recorded in the IV Corps region, most notably in Vinh Long. During a February 14, 1970 fight among members of the 611th Transportation Company, Ulysses Wright, a black soldier, had his jaw broken by a group of white soldiers. When Wright arrived at the hospital, he was not treated

⁴⁹⁸ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP. Some or all of these incidents likely involved the same soldiers.

⁴⁹⁹ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP.

⁵⁰⁰ Report, December 1970, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggging: Box #4, NACP.

⁵⁰¹ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP. There were other incidents of racial violence at Long Binh on January 19th, February 16th, and March 18th.

immediately, leading some blacks to complain that doctors were treating white soldiers first. A number of fights broke out causing medical officials to barricade themselves inside. When MPs arrived, things became even more chaotic as they used tear gas on the black soldiers who had gathered. The crowd was dispersed at gunpoint.⁵⁰²

In a complaint to Republican Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania a black soldier named Larry Delorne elaborated on the night's events. He claimed that tensions rose after a white soldier pinched a Vietnamese woman who was engaged to a black soldier. He described the initial fight as "GI's having a normal Saturday night brawl" suggesting that these incidents were weekly occurrences. However, after the fight was broken up Wright was "pelted in the cranial area viciously by the white soldiers with large stones...He was kicked, stomped, slugged, and beaten into a near state of unconsciousness." Particularly troubling, a white senior commissioned officer supposedly walked by the "gruesome beating" but "did not intervene nor mutter one word of protest."⁵⁰³ When Wright arrived at the hospital, white soldiers began threatening Wright, Delorne, and others with statements such as "I'll kill every one of you nigger bastards." Making matters worse, doctors seemed more interested in treating white soldiers with minor injuries than treating Wright who was bleeding profusely and had serious facial injuries, an attitude which Delorne described as "to the rear of the line, nigger."⁵⁰⁴

Delorne described MPs as needlessly aggressive outside of the hospital claiming that several black soldiers "were jabbed with clubs for no perceptible reason." Later that

⁵⁰² Letter, Dale E. Patrick to Commander in Chief, United States Army Pacific, April 16, 1970, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, NACP.

⁵⁰³ Letter, Larry Delorne to Hugh Scott, February 18, 1970, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, NACP.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

night, Delorne and a group of black soldiers were confronted and threatened by a group of armed whites, some of whom were clearly not MPs. Delorne believed that had a colonel not intervened, the group would have been “slaughtered in cold-blood.” He concluded his letter by warning that “this base has become a tinderbox, ready to explode under any spark.”⁵⁰⁵ While Wright’s depiction of events differs with the official version in a number of important respects, both accounts clearly describe a base rife with racial tension and violence. There were additional incidents of racial violence reported in Vung Tau, Binh Thuy, and Can Tho.⁵⁰⁶

Racially motivated confrontations were not restricted to Vietnam. On July 4, 1968 three black soldiers were stabbed and killed by a group of white soldiers during a brawl in Karlaruhe, Germany.⁵⁰⁷ In August 1970 a race riot occurred at the McNair Barracks in Berlin following a fight between black and white troops. The fight began after two white soldiers were overheard referring to black soldiers as “niggers.”⁵⁰⁸ During the same period racial incidents occurred on military bases in Ulm, Frankfurt, Hohenfels, Berlin, and McKee Barracks in Crailsheim.⁵⁰⁹ A white non-commissioned officer stationed in Frankfurt, Germany revealed the severity of racial problems among U.S. forces stationed in Germany, remarking “race is my problem, not the Russians, not Vietnamese...I just

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ Report, April 13, 1970, Folder 18, Blue Bell Report Regarding a Homicide in Vung Tau, Republic of Vietnam, Box 2: Official Papers- Blue Bells, DCSPER, Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, NACP, Report, 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, NACP.

⁵⁰⁷ Letter, Mr. and Mrs. Rannie Bowen to The President, July 16, 1968, Folder 3: Investigation into the death of Specialist James E. Bowen in Germany, Box 17: Official Papers-Investigations, DCSPER.

⁵⁰⁸ Report, August 1970, Folder 19: Blue Bell report regarding a disturbance at McNair Barracks, Berlin, Germany, Box 2: Official Paper-Blue Bells, DCSPER.

⁵⁰⁹ Thomas A. Johnson, “GI’s in Germany: Black is Bitter,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 1970.

worry about keeping my troops-black and white from getting at one another.”⁵¹⁰

Similarly, a black sergeant stationed in Germany claimed that his infantry unit “no longer functioned like an Army platoon but like two street gangs...Racial problems take all my time.”⁵¹¹

Race relations were equally violent in Asia. Relations were particularly poor in Okinawa. In a December 26, 1969 letter to Congressman Bob Mathias, a Republican from California, Dalinda Johnson claimed that her son Rockland Gaxiola feared for his safety in Okinawa because “white and colored (sic) service men are having their own civil war in and among our own U.S. Army installation.”⁵¹² Anthony Zinni, who served as guard officer with the Third Marines in Okinawa in 1970-71, depicted Okinawa as a bleak place where segregation, drug use, and racial violence were common. As guard officer Zinni spent the majority of his time trying to prevent violent racial incidents and then investigating them when they did occur. He recalled that black militant groups like the “Mau Mau” and the “Bushmasters” operated on base and in the surrounding town of Koza, and he responded to numerous reports of these groups attacking white marines. In one particularly noteworthy incident an officer of the day was disarmed and assaulted when he confronted a group of African American rioters. At the same time, racially

⁵¹⁰ Thomas A. Johnson, “I’ll Bleed For Myself,’ Says Black U.S. Soldier in Europe” *New York Times*, October 11, 1970.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Letter, Dalinda Johnson to Bob Mathias, December 26, 1969, Folder 3: Complaint regarding alleged racial discrimination in the 106th General Hospital, Camp Zama, Japan submitted by the Honorable Robert B. Mathis, on behalf of Specialist Rockland Gaxiola, Box 11: Official Papers-Complaints, DCSPER.

motivated actions were not one sided as the Ku Klux Klan also had a chapter on base, and Zinni investigated at least one confirmed cross burning.⁵¹³

Michael Hagee, a white platoon commander in Okinawa in 1970, provided a similar account of everyday life in Okinawa. He recalled a major telephoning him and saying “Hey Mike would you come up and meet me and escort me down to your company’... in broad daylight in the middle of a marine camp, he called me and wanted me to escort him down.” Hagee was shocked that the major was scared to travel even in broad daylight, but his fears were not unfounded as a white marine in Hagee’s company was later killed by a group of black marines.⁵¹⁴

One of most publicized incidents of racial violence occurred on October 12, 1972 aboard the *U.S.S. Kitty Hawk* which was docked off the coast of Vietnam. According to Nate Mondy, who served as the human resources manager of minority affairs on the *Kitty Hawk*, the incident began the day before when a group of black sailors was incorrectly identified as being involved in a fight in Olongapo, Philippines. In response a group of sailors organized a protest on the ship which escalated to violence after a group of marines intervened. The incident, which involved more than 100 enlisted men and lasted more than seven hours resulting in 46 injuries.⁵¹⁵

Relations were not any better on bases in the United States. Race relations at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina were particularly tense as officials reported 190 racial assaults in the first half of 1969 alone. The most significant clash occurred on July 20,

⁵¹³ Anthony Zinni, interview by author, June 22, 2011. Zinni would later become a four star General in the Marine Corps and the Commander in Chief of United States Central Command (CENTCOM).

⁵¹⁴ Michael Hagee, interview by author, June 16, 2011. Hagee would later become a four-star General and the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps.

⁵¹⁵ “Two U.S. Navy Vessels Erupt In Racial Violence,” *Jet*, November 2, 1972, 77.

1969 when a minor disagreement escalated into violence, resulting in dozens of injuries and the death of a white soldier.⁵¹⁶ Unfortunately, this was not the first death at Camp Lejeune as the previous summer a black marine was reportedly beaten to death by two whites.⁵¹⁷

“Discrimination was the spark”

As these accounts make clear, racial violence was a serious and severe problem in the armed forces. While King’s assassination and the contrasting reactions of some blacks and whites provided a significant catalyst for the breakdown in relations, black complaints of discrimination and their belief that white officers either were responsible or were unconcerned created fertile ground for the escalation of tensions. In other words, King’s assassination did not create racial disharmony in the ranks it simply intensified it. As the *Pittsburgh Courier* noted in a November 2, 1968 article concerning an armed stand-off between blacks and whites at a China Beach rest and recuperation center, “discrimination was the spark.”⁵¹⁸

It is valid to conclude that the armed forces didn’t take black complaints of discrimination seriously. Karl Marlantes believed that most of the white NCOs and officers he knew were unlikely to take black complaints of discrimination seriously, especially as many routinely referred to blacks collectively as “niggers.”⁵¹⁹ There is evidence to support his conclusion that black complaints were not taken seriously.

⁵¹⁶ Royal Brightball, “Society Blamed in Race Friction on Marine Base,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 19, 1969.

⁵¹⁷ “Marine Race Clash Coming?” *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 23, 1969, 20.

⁵¹⁸ “Navy Admits Racial Flareups In Vietnam,” 1.

⁵¹⁹ Marlantes, interview by author.

In 1968 the Office of the Inspector General (OTIG) of the U.S. Army received a total of 208 complaints of racial prejudice or discrimination. Of these complaints they concluded that only four were justified, just 1.92 percent. Breaking things down further the OTIG found that there was not a single instance of someone being discriminated against in regard to assignment, promotion, demotion, and duty on the basis of race. In 1969 the OTIG received 326 allegations of racial prejudice, but found that only six of these complaints were justified, a miniscule 1.84 percent. Furthermore, they found there was not a single justified complaint of prejudice in assignment, demotion or promotion for the entire year. African Americans complained again and again that based on race they were given menial, difficult, or dangerous assignments and that they were not promoted to the rank that they deserved, but the OTIG believed that there was not a single justified complaint in either of these areas for the past two years. This is, of course, hard to believe but the OTIG stated without a hint of irony that “the small number of justified discrimination cases received in OTIG during FY 68 and FY 69 provides no basis for determining a trend.”⁵²⁰

The official judgment of these black soldiers’ complaints is hard to accept as it is difficult to believe that in the armed forces in the 1960’s nearly 99 percent of all allegations of racial discrimination were unfounded. Certainly, the OTIG’s decisions did not encourage blacks to voice their complaints through official channels. There was clearly a significant gulf between the level of discrimination perceived by African Americans and the decisions of these officials. While the armed forces clearly took racial

⁵²⁰ Report, F.W. Oseth to Colonel Townsend, 1970, Folder 1: Report on Racial Discrimination cases received in the office of the Inspector General, Box 29: Official Papers-Reports, DCSPER.

violence seriously, they did not take charges of racial discrimination seriously, never realizing that the two issues were closely connected.

Equally troubling, in 1969 the Army had commissioned a study titled “Racial Harmony in the Army” which revealed that between November 1966 and October 31, 1969 commanders had failed to report 423 cases of alleged racial discrimination to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel in the Army.⁵²¹ Clearly, one of the major impediments to ending racial discrimination in the military was that officials often refused to acknowledge that complaints of racial discrimination existed and were sometimes legitimate. To quote an anonymous white officer, “When my battalion commander tells me there is no discrimination in this outfit...I say there is no discrimination in this outfit whether there is discrimination or not.”⁵²² Even Air Force Brigadier General Daniel “Chappie” James Jr. and Army Brigadier General Frederic E. Davison, the only two black generals in the military during the period, claimed in 1970, “There is no such thing as inequality of opportunity in the armed forces today.”⁵²³

The experiences of individual black soldiers often supported the conclusion that black complaints were not taken seriously. In January 1968 an African American soldier named Ray Morrisette stationed in Baumholder, Germany complained that someone lit his door on fire and left a burning cross and a sign with a racist message on it. The following day someone placed a sign in front of his door with the phrase “niggers don’t

⁵²¹ Report, August 29, 1969, Folder 4: Special Study-Racial Harmony in the Army, Box 28: Official Papers-Reports, DCSPER.

⁵²² Johnson, “GI’s in Germany: Black is Bitter.”

⁵²³ Johnson, “Blacks Don’t Feel They Get a Fair Shake.”

have the balls to come out and fight and they know it” written on it. When Morisette complained, his troop commander accused him of orchestrating the incident.⁵²⁴

When investigators were informed, they were equally unsympathetic. They acknowledged that “there were two signs posted in the troop area that were of a derogatory nature regarding the Negro race; a door in the troop was singed in connection with one of the before mentioned signs and a cross was burned outside the troop billets,” but gathered little other useful information and made no effort to catch the perpetrators. Investigators did, however, devote part of the report to criticizing Morrisette, noting that he was known for defying authority and avoiding work.⁵²⁵

In the months preceding the July 1969 riots at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, a biracial group of officers warned their superiors that the majority of white commissioned and non-commissioned officers at the camp “were prejudiced and that black marines were subject to discriminatory action by the military police.” They also alleged that the “lack of informed courageous leadership in dealing with racial matters is widening the gulf of misunderstanding between the races,” and if the situation was not fixed violence was imminent.⁵²⁶ No action was taken, but their statements confirm that discrimination against black soldiers was common at Camp Lejuene and that high-ranking officers were aware of it, but were unwilling or unable to do anything.

⁵²⁴ Letter, Ray Morrisette to mother, January 14, 1968, Folder 27: Complaint regarding race problems in Baumholder, Germany, submitted by Secretary of Defense, J.L. Leflore, Box 9: Official Papers-Complaints, DCSPER.

⁵²⁵ Letter, Edward Bautz Jr. to J.L. LeFlore, January 1968, Folder 27: Complaint regarding race problems in Baumholder, Germany, submitted by Secretary of Defense, J.L. Leflore, Box 9: Official Papers-Complaints, DCSPER.

⁵²⁶ “In the Wake of Fatal Melee: Say Marines Knew of Race Ills,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 12, 1969, 6.

Some officials were cognizant of the degree to which black allegations of discrimination were damaging the armed forces' reputation and contributing to a rise in racial tension and violence. Two days after the riot at Camp Lejeune, Colonel Louis S. Hollier, chair of an ad hoc Committee on Equal Treatment, reported to the commanding general of the Second Marine Division. The report, which sought to determine the reasons for recent racial troubles, placed considerable blame on "white officers and noncommissioned officers [who] retain prejudices and deliberately practice them...the major offenders in this regard are among the relatively senior officers and enlisted marines." These officers were such an impediment that all attempts by black and white soldiers to encourage better relations were "blocked and frustrated."⁵²⁷

As discussed in the previous chapter, when L. Howard Bennett traveled to Vietnam in 1969, he reported a widespread perception among black soldiers that they faced discrimination. Bennett believed that there was some justification to these allegations, and he made a number of suggestions for improving the situation. He recommended that the armed forces begin tracking promotions more closely so as to ascertain whether blacks were being overlooked.⁵²⁸ He also recommended that the armed forces change their policies to ensure greater transparency and universality in the military justice system. He argued that every soldier who received a punishment needed also to receive a list of "all charges and specifications," "a printed outline of his rights, and the procedures he should follow to exercise and protect them," and "an outline of the manner

⁵²⁷ "Text of Camp Lejeune Committee's Report to Commanding General," *New York Times*, August 10, 1969, 67.

⁵²⁸ Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, NACP.

in which regulations prescribe that the case shall proceed including timetables and formats for motions, evidence, witnesses, and appeals.”⁵²⁹

In an obvious reaction to black complaints regarding Article 15 punishments, Bennett recommended that, “Every company commander maintain, on a standard Departmental form, a log of non-judicial punishments administered by case number, rank, race, offense, prior offenses, other mitigating or negative considerations and punishment awarded.” Bennett clearly believed that these changes would create a universal standard for punishments, as well as provide a paper trail as to who received what punishment and from whom. In doing so, Bennett hoped not only to discourage officers from unfairly targeting black soldiers for punishment but also to educate soldiers about their rights.⁵³⁰

Last and perhaps most important, Bennett suggested that the armed forces create a race relations council to oversee racial matters in the armed forces, a recommendation he had voiced previously. Unfortunately, military officials almost completely ignored the majority of Bennett’s recommendations. There is no evidence that the armed forces made any changes in regards to promotion policies. In 1970, the armed forces began to experiment with Human Relations Councils in an effort to determine the root causes of racial tension in the military. However, these efforts were often hindered by commanders who refused to cooperate with Human Relations initiatives, preferring instead to “use

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

special discharges, pretrial confinement in the stockade and transfers to other units” as a means of easing racial tensions.⁵³¹

In 1971 Frank W. Render II, Bennett’s successor, spent considerable time investigating black allegations of discrimination in Vietnam and elsewhere. Render determined that African Americans were disproportionately punished through Article 15s and courts-martial. He also noted the damaging effect which black allegations of discrimination in promotions and delegation of duties had on troop morale. However, Render was fired after fourteen months on the job by Assistant Secretary of Defense Roger T. Kelley allegedly “because the rate of complaints about the maladministration of military justice had not decreased.” However, Kelley admitted that Render “had no authority to order changes or enforce regulations already in effect.” Not surprisingly, Render often felt “like a second lieutenant or a staff sergeant” rather than the highest ranking African American in the Pentagon whose “rank was the equivalent of two and a half star general.”⁵³² Between July 1963, when the position was created, and 1972 nine different men served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Rights, suggesting dissatisfaction among all those involved.⁵³³

Over time a number of military officials came to recognize the negative effect that complaints of discrimination were having on race relations. On January 7, 1971 Brigadier General James J. Ursano wrote that racial violence occurred in part because of the perception that there was “discrimination in promotions, punishment and

⁵³¹ Thomas A. Johnson, “Pentagon and Racism: Directive Stems From Tensions That Have Plagued Services for 3 Years,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1971, 14.

⁵³² “Black GIs Caught In Vise,” 15-16.

⁵³³ Morris J. MacGregor Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces: 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1981), 559.

assignments.”⁵³⁴ In December 1971 Major Richard F. Ward, Human Relations officer for the United States Army Republic of Vietnam (USARV), asserted that racial discrimination provided the “root causes of racial tension” in the armed forces specifically “complaints of discrimination in promotions, military justice and assignments.” According to Ward, these complaints were sometimes justified as “there is evidence that real racial discrimination does exist” in the form of “everyday selections, preferences, and actions.”⁵³⁵

Not until March 1971 did the Department of Defense announce that there would be a “compulsory education program in race relations for the entire American military,” a policy which L. Howard Bennett had recommended for several years.⁵³⁶ It wasn’t until 1972 that the armed forces adopted some of the suggested reforms in military justice which Bennett had earlier recommended.⁵³⁷ By this time racial tensions had already escalated out of control.

“I found little understanding for and empathy with minority groups”

The way in which military officials reacted to incidents of racial violence often aggravated tensions and further alienated black soldiers. Frequently, officials reacted to outbreaks of racial violence by focusing their attention almost entirely on the actions of black soldiers. This focus would appear to have some validity as the reports already cited reveal far more incidents of black soldiers assaulting whites than whites assaulting

⁵³⁴ Report, James J. Ursano to unknown, January 7, 1971, Reference Paper Files, Stockade Project: Box #2, NACP.

⁵³⁵ Report, Major Ward, December 1971, Reference Paper Files, Stockade Project: Box #2, NACP.

⁵³⁶ Johnson, “Pentagon and Racism,” 14.

⁵³⁷ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 101. It is not entirely clear why the Department of Defense decided to finally make these changes. One can assume that they came to believe that complaints concerning military justice issues had some merit.

blacks. That said, one should be careful when interpreting individual violent incident reports. While these reports collectively show that racial violence was a severe and widespread problem, they often provide very little context or detail regarding individual incidents. In most cases the perpetrators, as well as factors that might have caused an incident are unknown. Generally speaking, the information about an incident came only from those who remained at the scene. Investigations were often perfunctory.

There is a noticeable difference in the way these incident reports depict black and white soldiers. For example, in a number of instances white soldiers who brandished weapons are described as doing so either for their own protection or in an attempt to calm tensions. Whites are occasionally depicted as justified in using weapons, but this is never the case for blacks.

In general the possibility that whites bore some responsibility for racial violence was downplayed by military officials as was the possibility that blacks were responding to white racism. In April 1965 eleven white officers attended a party on a military base in Germany dressed as Ku Klux Klansman, even placing a burning cross at the head of their table. A senior officer eventually ordered them to remove their costumes and extinguish the cross, but the men were not punished for their actions because they were not thought to be “indicative of harmful intent.” Instead, an internal investigation concluded that their decision to dress as Ku Klux Klansman was influenced by the “accessibility of costume materials” in the form of white sheets and not racist ideals.⁵³⁸ This explanation

⁵³⁸ Letter, April 29, 1965, J.L Richardson to Hy Silverman, Folder 30: Complaint regarding incident of Army Officers Wearing Ku Klux Klan Costumes to a party at an Officers Club in Germany, Box 6: Official Papers-Complaints, DCSPER.

and the fact that the offending officers were not punished is evidence that the military did not always take displays of white racism seriously.

In 1968 a white soldier named Bobbie Lee Pace serving in Augsburg, Germany was revealed to be a high ranking member of the American Nazi Party. Even after this revelation he was promoted. His commanding officer stated that “he was a ‘good soldier’ who kept his racial theories separate from his duties.” While it is unclear whether the armed forces expressly forbade these types of associations, many African Americans believed that military officials would have been far less lenient had Pace been African American and a member of a black militant organization. As we will see black soldiers were often justified in thinking this way.⁵³⁹

In September 1970 Congressman Louis Stokes, a Democrat from Ohio, received a letter from Jerry Boyd, an African American soldier stationed in Babenhausen, Germany. Boyd claimed that Ku Klux Klan like groups were allowed to operate on base with impunity, leaving many soldiers, black and white, to conclude that the “army has a laissez-faire attitude toward the racial situation in Europe.” In Boyd’s estimation the army’s failure to act against these groups had a disastrous effect on troop morale as it embittered African Americans and empowered white racists.⁵⁴⁰

In September 1969 the Deputy Commanding General on Okinawa produced a memorandum on racial disturbances based in part on statements made by the majority of unit commanders. While this document reflects the leadership’s growing concern with racial tensions and violence, it focuses entirely on African Americans, never considering

⁵³⁹ Curtis Daniell, “Germany Trouble Spot For Black GI’s,” *Ebony*, August 1968, 126.

⁵⁴⁰ Letter, September 10, 1970, Jerry Boyd to Louis Stokes, Folder 11: Complaint regarding Ku Klux Klan like incidents in Germany made by Specialist 4 Jerry Boyd, Box 11: Official Papers-Complaints, DCSPER.

what role white soldiers might have played in these incidents. This focus is especially noteworthy as there were reported cross burnings at Okinawa and incidents of whites attacking blacks.⁵⁴¹

When Anthony Zinni arrived in Okinawa a year later, he remembers concluding that poor leadership was a major factor contributing to racial violence. He found a significant split in the officer corps between those who favored such strong actions as wholesale arrest and others who wanted to ignore the situation. He felt strongly that both positions made things worse and contributed to further violence.⁵⁴² Instead, Zinni believed that the military needed to be sympathetic to African American complaints and address them openly and honestly, while at the same time arresting anyone committing an act of violence. He noted that “the previous philosophy of there are no black marines or white marines, all marines are green” was insufficient as it allowed “no appreciation for what minorities might be going through or how they feel, either real or perceived.”⁵⁴³

Zinni recruited African Americans to serve in the guard which he commanded, but a number of battalion commanders “complained to the regimental commander, ‘he’s not going to be able to recruit any black guys, they’re not going to want to be a part of the guard,’ and of course that wasn’t true. But see there was an assumption there.” In Zinni’s estimation many white officers looked at every African American and saw a “Mau Mau” or “Bushmaster” rather than a marine.⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴¹ Memorandum, Robert A. Little to Chief of Staff, October 6, 1969, Folder 19: Report on Racial Tension in Okinawa, Box 29: Official Papers-Reports, DCSPER.

⁵⁴² Zinni, interview by author.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

The general response of military officials to racial violence was to regulate the behavior of African American soldiers. Many African Americans soldiers complained that white officers banned the practice of dapping and the wearing of afros, slave bracelets, or any other clothing they associated with the black power movement.⁵⁴⁵

In November 1972 Human Relation Councils' officials traveled to Long Binh to investigate complaints that commanders in the Thirty-Ninth Signal Brigade had prohibited these practices. The investigation revealed that dapping had in fact been banned with the intent "to eliminate it altogether if possible." When the officials informed the commander that slave bracelets were not prohibited by official armed forces policy, he refused to reverse his previous decision to ban them. Perhaps not surprisingly, investigators concluded that they "found little understanding for and empathy with minority groups."⁵⁴⁶ This report is particularly significant as it suggests that even late in the war when Human Relation Councils' initiatives were supposedly fully implemented, some commanders remained resistant to change.

Equally troubling, even as the number of violent incidents was escalating, officials seemed unable or unwilling to differentiate between African Americans who had legitimate criticisms of military policy and those who were engaging in racially motivated attacks on whites. The armed forces were particularly concerned about groups of African Americans congregating. Robert Vonner, a black marine, complained that officials "told blacks that they couldn't congregate together. Couldn't have more than

⁵⁴⁵ Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 56, 83. Westheider notes that in September 1969 Marine Corps Commandant General Leonard F. Chapman banned dapping during working hours.

⁵⁴⁶ Report, November 27, 1972, Paul J. Bailey, Equal Opportunity Reporting Files, Staff Visits: Box #5, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

two...50 whites can get together, but no more than two blacks can get together.”⁵⁴⁷

Similarly, in 1971 Major Richard F. Ward, the Human Relations Council officer for the USARV, noted that often when a group of “black GI’s are together it is viewed as a threat to all. While Caucasian soldiers cause no concern when they group together.”⁵⁴⁸

Army counterintelligence reports from 1970 certainly suggest that military officials were only interested in the actions of African Americans. These reports noted, “During the past four and a half months a concentrated effort has been made by army counterintelligence to detect and neutralize any organized effort to create a racial unrest within the US Army Vietnam.” At face value these goals appear commendable, but the “real” aim of counterintelligence was to “neutralize” any effort by African Americans to organize. The report noted that “commanders at all levels must be especially vigilant when they encounter incidents or activities involving black troops.”⁵⁴⁹ They viewed and treated peaceful gatherings in the same manner as meetings where violence was discussed. In fact, investigators believed “that most incidents have evolved from so-called black grievance committee or group meetings, which were formed by blacks to discuss what they believed were injustices being experienced by all blacks in the military as well as in the civilian communities.” While the report admitted that there were some “black organizations striving to improve social conditions of black troops,” it also stated that “it is this type of group, which under the guise of a legitimate activity such as

⁵⁴⁷ Robert Vonner, interview by author, Lubbock, Texas, March 15, 2008.

⁵⁴⁸ Report, Major Richard F. Ward, December 1971, Reference Paper Files, Stockade Project: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁵⁴⁹ Report, Major Pace, November 20, 1970, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Plan, Racial Unrest: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

grievance committees” will eventually be subverted by extremist black groups.⁵⁵⁰ In other words, no gathering of blacks could be permitted as participants would eventually fall under the influence of violent extremists.

Some African American soldiers did seek to solve their problems in the military through violent means. Army counterintelligence was justified in part in focusing its attention on African Americans who either engaged in violent acts or who advocated the use of violence. Yet, the fact that some blacks committed crimes should not have led officials to conclude that blacks would automatically engage in violence. Similarly, Army counterintelligence should not have concluded that every time blacks the agenda was violent. In October 1970 a base commander banned a group of African Americans from joining the NAACP under the pretense that it was a subversive and violent organization equal to the Ku Klux Klan and the Communist Party.⁵⁵¹

Counterintelligence reports reveal that African Americans who viewed violence as an option often saw it as a last resort. On September 14, 1970 100 blacks and ten whites in Saigon presented “five senior camp commanders a list of grievances which the blacks related, if not corrected would result in violence of an unspecified nature.”⁵⁵² During a meeting of 130 blacks which took place in Long Binh on December 1, 1970 a council was formed “to take black grievances to the appropriate commanders. If the commanders took no action on the grievances blacks would then themselves ‘rectify’ the

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Letter, January 31, 1968, Leonard H. Carter to Robert S. McNamara, Folder 3: Request for information regarding the right of military personnel to belong to or participated in the NAACP, Box 31: Official Papers-Requests, DCSPER.

⁵⁵² Report, Major Pace, January 6, 1971, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Plan, Racial Unrest: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

situation.”⁵⁵³ These black soldiers did not immediately turn to violence, but rather out of frustration because they believed their grievances were not being heard.

More often than not, the only thing army counterintelligence uncovered were groups of African Americans meeting to discuss their grievances. On November 22, 1970 in Da Nang, sixty African Americans with the 855th General Support Company met at Camp Carter to discuss some of their grievances including the disproportionate number of black soldiers in stockades. The following week on November 29, fifty blacks from the same battalion met at Camp Carter to form a “solidarity group” to discuss and articulate black grievances. Large groups of African Americans met at least four more times in December to discuss similar complaints of discrimination.⁵⁵⁴

During the weekend of September 11-13, 1970 army counterintelligence closely observed a number of meetings attended by as many as 75-100, mostly black soldiers, at Camp McDermott in Nha Trang. The meetings were in response to a broadsheet that had recently been found on base with insulting comments about blacks. While army surveillance clearly believed that the meeting might lead to violence, nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, those who organized the meeting were more interested in voicing their concerns over the lack of promotions and the targeting of African Americans with Article 15s and courts-martial. Army counterintelligence was not sympathetic to these criticisms, labelling them “ridiculous” and the soldiers who made them as having “low IQ’s.”⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵³ Ibid. It is noteworthy that between November 1970 and January 1971, large groups of African Americans met in Long Binh on at least eleven occasions.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Briefing, Macfarlane to Welborn G. Dolvin, September 1970, Equal Opportunity and Racial Unrest, Equal Opportunity Reporting File-Survey: Box #1, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP. Unfortunately, MacFarlane’s first name is illegible.

On November 23, 1970 a group of 40-50 black soldiers “gathered at the USO club” and marched towards the division headquarters of the 23 Infantry Division in Chu Lai where they “requested permission to present a list of grievances to a General Officer.” A lieutenant persuaded the group to disperse and the report noted that “the Negro soldiers apparently felt that their grievances were not being communicated to the CC (Company Commander) through the chain of command.”⁵⁵⁶

A June 15, 1971 report on alleged black extremists in the armed forces reveals that the armed forces kept a close eye on the BBU in Cam Ranh Bay. This group, led by Sergeant Andrew Love, held “regular meetings of several dozen members and investigated allegations of discrimination regarding promotion, punishment, and command.” Their primary concern was teaching black soldiers about military law, regulations, and proper use of chain of command. In addition they formulated petitions, wrote letters, and organized demonstrations. Significantly, they took a strong anti-violence and anti-drug position.⁵⁵⁷

Army counterintelligence clearly viewed the BBU as a militant and dangerous organization even when investigators found that “discussions at BBU meetings are often centered around personal problems encountered by members of the BBU.” They also concluded that the BBU leadership “never made any statements advocating violence or hostile acts toward Caucasians.” The report also recognized that “meetings which are

⁵⁵⁶ Report, April 16, 1971, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial Overtones, MACV Publications: Box #3, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁵⁵⁷ Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*, 59-60.

held by blacks in the Long Binh area are mostly for listing grievances to be presented to the military authorities.”⁵⁵⁸

When black soldiers felt that officers were sympathetic to their complaints, tensions tended to ease. On May 14, 1971 roughly 50 black soldiers approached the USA Support Command headquarters in Cam Ranh Bay and requested to speak with the company commander and deputy commander. When the deputy commander came to speak to the group, they expressed their concern about the confinement of two black soldiers named Prints and McDowney. While the Commander did not agree to release the men and the group left the meeting unsatisfied, the Deputy Commander’s willingness to speak with them likely helped alleviate some of the tension.⁵⁵⁹

On November 23, 1970 roughly 100 African Americans with the Twenty-Third Infantry Division at Chu Lai met with the inspector general and voiced grievances regarding “alleged racial injustices and discrimination in the award of medical profiles, medical treatment, job assignments in rear areas, promotions, and disciplinary action.” The group also “indicated that commanding officers and first sergeants either would not listen to their problems or did not understand them” suggesting that these complaints were hardly new. The inspector general assured the group that “appropriate corrective action would be taken” in response to their complaints and “the group then dispersed and returned to their units.”⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁸ Report, James J. Ursano to Major Richard F. Ward, June 15, 1971, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Plan, Stockade Project: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁵⁵⁹ Report, 1971, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army, Fraggings: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁵⁶⁰ Report, January 6, 1971, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Plan, Racial Unrest: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

Most notably, after a fight between black and white soldiers in Da Nang, a group of African Americans met on December 17, 1970 to discuss some of their grievances. After choosing four representatives, the group demanded a meeting with Colonel Meerbot. During the meeting these representatives complained that a black soldier named Billy Lee from the 870th Transportation Company had been unfairly placed in pre-trial confinement. After reviewing Lee's case, Colonel Meerbot agreed that "an injustice had been done to Lee" and ordered his immediate release. The incident report concluded that "the tensions eased after Lee's release." This incident is significant as it shows that at least in this case African Americans had legitimate grievances with the armed forces. It also shows that some blacks preferred a non-violent approach. Also when blacks believed their complaints were taken seriously, tensions diminished.⁵⁶¹

Conclusion

In combat friendship and unity often defined black-white relations. However, outside of combat race relations were noticeably more strained and tension-filled. While incidents of racial violence were rare in the early years of the war, between 1969 and 1971 hundreds, if not thousands, of incidents of racial violence occurred on and around American military bases.

These outbreaks of racial violence occurred for a number of reasons. Tensions heightened considerably in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April 1968. Many African Americans responded to King's death by embracing aspects of the burgeoning black power movement, while others joined "self-defense" organizations which professed to represent the interests of black soldiers. While black soldiers reacted

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

to King's death with sadness and anger, some whites treated the assassination as a cause for celebration. Violence was almost certain to follow these conflicting reactions.

However, while King's assassination certainly contributed to the rise of racial violence, the event was simply the catalyst for already simmering tensions. As noted in the previous chapter, black soldiers had long complained of prejudice and discrimination in the armed forces. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases black complaints of discrimination were ignored by military officials. This failure to address black concerns early in the war helped to create an environment of racial tension and distrust which had a significant effect on black-white relations. The armed forces' failure to take black complaints seriously alienated many African Americans. They concluded that military life was no less discriminatory than civilian society. Some officials like L. Howard Bennett and his successor Frank W. Render II recognized that black perceptions of discrimination contributed to the deterioration of black-white relations, but these voices were generally ignored.

As incidents of racial violence began to occur frequently in 1969 military officials became concerned about the detrimental effect these incidents were having on unity and morale. However, they focused their attention almost exclusively on African American soldiers and held them responsible. In doing so they not only ignored the role played by white soldiers but also gave the impression that all African American soldiers, regardless of their thoughts and behavior, were responsible for violence against white soldiers. Because they viewed events from this perspective they failed to recognize or to address

the root cause behind much of the racial violence: the wide spread black perception that they were discriminated against and had no way of gaining fair treatment.

By examining incidents of racial violence during the Vietnam War, we learn not only how common and widespread these incidents were but also gain a better understanding of the interplay between race relations in the United States and in Vietnam. King's assassination contributed to the worsening of race relations in the armed forces particularly because of the conflicting responses of black and white soldiers. Some black soldiers began to embrace the black power movement which had already gained prominence back home. Some white soldiers celebrated King's death by flying Confederate flags, an action which black soldiers saw as support for racism and racial segregation. Domestic events loomed large in the experiences of black soldiers in Vietnam. King's death brought to the fore the discrimination they experienced at home and in Vietnam. A black soldier could physically leave the United States, but he could not leave behind the racism and prejudice that often defined the black experience there.

Chapter 4: “I thought of my own people back home”: African American Soldiers and Vietnamese Civilians

On May 1, 1968 African American veteran Akmed Lorence was interviewed about his experiences in Vietnam for a soon-to-be released documentary, *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger*. In the interview, Lorence discussed his experiences with institutionalized racism in both civilian and military societies, race relations in Vietnam, and his thoughts on the burgeoning Black Power movement. Lorence also opened up about being a poor black growing up in New York City, citing lyrics from a song he had written—“soon I’ll be going back to the place where the rats and the roaches roam—to express his feelings about returning to his infested apartment in Harlem.”⁵⁶²

Lorence also spoke about his sympathy for the Vietnamese. He recalled an incident in which an elderly woman, accompanied by a number of children, approached him to ask for food. He initially refused, but after she spent more than an hour begging, Lorence relented and gave her two boxes of c-rations. He remembered, “I looked at her and I saw in this woman’s face, real sincere begging. And I thought to myself this woman could be my mother, this could be my grandmother and that child she’s holding could have been a relative of mine.”⁵⁶³ The men in his unit were not happy with Lorence’s act of charity as he had given away some of their food too, but he justified his charitable act stating, “It was her land we had come to and destroyed and she needed food for her child.” As it turned out, the elderly lady reciprocated Lorence’s act of generosity, returning a few hours later to give him a bag of roasted peanuts. He recalled, “This really

⁵⁶² *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger*, 1968. *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger* Video, accessed December 16, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVVh1JEe7Bw>

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

played a heavy part on me because it brought the Vietnamese people, through this lady, closer to me or closer to understanding them and their problems.”⁵⁶⁴

At first glance, Lorence’s account may not appear to be noteworthy. However his interaction with this woman serves as an accurate representation of the relationship which many African Americans believed they had with the Vietnamese. That African American soldiers largely were sympathetic towards Vietnamese civilians is supported by contemporary accounts. Over a nine-week period during the spring of 1967, journalist Ethel Payne conducted hundreds of interviews with black soldiers in Vietnam. These interviews revealed that many African Americans empathized with the Vietnamese. Payne found that “Negro soldiers tend to equate the struggle of the Vietnamese people with the civil rights movement at home.”⁵⁶⁵

In 1970, *Time* journalist Wallace Terry distributed 833 questionnaires to black and white soldiers serving in a variety of units and locations in Vietnam. These questionnaires revealed that more than half of black enlisted men opposed the war either because it was “a race war pitting whites against nonwhites or because they flatly don’t want to fight against dark skinned people.”⁵⁶⁶

Similarly, a 1975 study by three psychologists of American-Vietnamese relations, which was based on a questionnaire administered anonymously to 126 black and 359 white veterans, revealed that African American soldiers were far less likely to express negative views of the Vietnamese than their white counterparts. Psychologist Duncan

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Ethel Payne, “GIs Tell How They Stand On The Viet War,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 11, 1967, 2.

⁵⁶⁶ Wallace Terry, “Bringing the War Home,” *Time*, October 8, 1970. According to Terry’s questionnaires white soldiers did not have a racial interpretation of the conflict.

Stanton argued that white soldiers were much more likely to describe the Vietnamese collectively as “lazy, cowardly, and subhuman.”⁵⁶⁷ In contrast, Stanton found that blacks were “more likely to interact as social equals with the local populace than were whites.”⁵⁶⁸ The study also concluded that black soldiers may have felt greater empathy for the Vietnamese “because both groups had been the target of extensive racial prejudice and had experienced the despair and frustration that are consequences of such treatment.”⁵⁶⁹

In 1978, the Veterans Administration commissioned a general study of soldiers’ attitudes and experiences titled *Legacies of Vietnam*. When asked about their general feelings toward the Vietnamese people, without distinguishing between civilian or combatant, 48 percent of black veterans reported positive feelings, while only 27 percent of white veterans felt similarly. Perhaps even more striking, 32 percent of white veterans reported holding negative opinions toward the Vietnamese, while only 9 percent of blacks reported these same feelings.⁵⁷⁰

Knowing very little about the Vietnamese or Vietnam in general, African American soldiers interpreted their experiences in the Vietnam War from a perspective shaped almost entirely by their own experiences back home. As minorities and persons of color in their own country, black soldiers, not surprisingly, identified with members of another non-white group. Many African American soldiers saw a parallel between the

⁵⁶⁷ Byron F. Fiman, Jonathan F. Borus, and M. Duncan Stanton, “Black-White and American-Vietnamese Relations Among Soldiers in Vietnam,” *Journal of Social Issues*, Fall 1975, 42.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁷⁰ Arthur Egendorf, et al. *Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative of Vietnam Veterans and Their Peers*. prepared for the Veterans’ Administration (pursuant to Public Law 95-202, the GI Improvement Act of 1977) ; submitted to the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), 392.

poverty that most blacks experienced in the United States and the poverty experienced by the average Vietnamese in South Vietnam.

This perspective largely explains why Lorence was willing to hand over two boxes of c-rations to an elderly Vietnamese woman he didn't know. He clearly related her hunger and poverty to that of his own family back in Harlem, going as far as to compare the woman to his own mother and grandmother. Having lived in a "place where the rats and the roaches roam" he was empathetic to those living in poverty, whether in the United States or in Vietnam. Incidentally, the experience taught him that "if you want to help people then the best thing to do is to give them food, clothes, instead of going over and trying to tell them what to do," which he believed would remedy poverty not only in Vietnam, but also in the United States.⁵⁷¹

Many African Americans saw Vietnamese civilians as victims of racial discrimination at the hands of whites, a situation much like the one they experienced at home. In most respects this perception guided their interactions with the Vietnamese. The assumption was that whites had placed the Vietnamese in servile jobs. They treated blacks the same way back in the United States. Equally significant, a number of African Americans claimed that white soldiers were far more likely to abuse or mistreat the Vietnamese than black soldiers. Dwyte Brown, who served with the navy in 1968-69, believed that many white soldiers interacted with Vietnamese people from a position of "I am conqueror. I am supreme" and this led them to "treat Vietnamese, like dirt."⁵⁷² To Brown and many other African American soldiers the way in which some white soldiers

⁵⁷¹*No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger.*

⁵⁷²Dwyte Brown's account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House, 1984), 264.

treated Vietnamese civilians was familiar. Brown articulated this perception when he stated, “Me, myself, as a person, knowing from the experience that I had with whites back here in America, I could not go over there and degrade another human being. I see a little Vietnamese in trouble, I even bend over and help him out.”⁵⁷³ As we will see this perception of white mistreatment of Vietnamese civilians often created a gulf between black and white soldiers.

“Vietnamese were not Vietnamese”

Most American soldiers, white or black, arrived in Vietnam with little knowledge of Vietnam or its people. Most, but not all, had never even traveled outside of the United States. Those with better educations were equally ignorant. Between 1954 and 1968 there were only two tenured professors at American universities who spoke Vietnamese. During the same period only 22 of 7,615 graduate dissertations in modern history, political science, or international relations dealt with Vietnamese issues.⁵⁷⁴

Obviously knowledge of and interest in Vietnam increased as the war progressed, but many soldiers took only a cursory interest in the Vietnam War and especially Vietnamese people before entering the military. Albert French, who served with the Third Marine Division in 1965, remembered, “I didn’t understand too much about Vietnam. I knew where it was, I had looked on a map. I didn’t watch TV and really didn’t know what was going on, other than that troops had been sent in we were going to join

⁵⁷³Ibid., 265.

⁵⁷⁴ Gerard J. Degroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 83.

them.”⁵⁷⁵ French’s views about the war and the attention he paid to it were typical.

Anthony Martin, who served with the Third Marine Division in 1966-67, recalled reading the newspaper every morning and absorbing some information on the Vietnam War, but he admitted to having only a superficial understanding of the conflict. He remembered, “We weren’t sophisticated enough...all we knew is that communism was bad and this was our time to go and fight communism.” Not surprisingly, he had no strong feelings concerning the Vietnamese people themselves.⁵⁷⁶

Bill Bryels, who served with the 101st Airborne Division in 1967-68, also thought very little about Vietnam or the Vietnamese people before he was sent to Vietnam. He stated that he “had no quarrel with the Vietnamese--never even heard of Vietnam until the war. It was not something we were taught in world history. We knew about China, but Vietnam was not something I knew about.”⁵⁷⁷ James Gillam, who served with the Fourth Infantry Division from late 1969 until early 1970, learned about the Vietnam War from watching television news, but his interest in the conflict expanded when his brother Edward began serving with the Marine Corps in Vietnam.⁵⁷⁸

Of course, many soldiers took a greater interest in the conflict when they learned they were going to Vietnam, but they had little knowledge of the Vietnamese or their history. Before he arrived in Vietnam in 1967, Horace Coleman researched the conflict and Vietnam’s history at the base library. He was shocked to find out that the United

⁵⁷⁵ Albert French, *Patches of Fire: A Story of War and Redemption* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1997), 18.

⁵⁷⁶ Anthony Martin, interview by author, September 12, 2011.

⁵⁷⁷ Bill C. Bryels account as found in Robert E. Vadas, *Cultures in Conflict: The Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 99.

⁵⁷⁸ James T. Gillam, interview by author, Lubbock, Texas, March 14, 2008.

States was not the first country which had tried to impose its influence over Vietnam. When he read about the French Army's defeat at Dien Bien Phu, he began to question whether the war was a good idea.⁵⁷⁹

Generally speaking, the earliest information they received about the Vietnamese came during basic training. During their training each soldier was given a small card listing the "Nine Rules of Conduct," which included instructions such as "treat women with politeness and respect" and "always give the Vietnamese the right of way."⁵⁸⁰ Soldiers also usually received a brochure with translations of key phrases in Vietnamese and a short description of the country. Any additional training was largely left to the discretion of commanders.⁵⁸¹ Anthony Martin recalled being told in basic training to treat the Vietnamese with courtesy and kindness and to remember that as Americans they were guests in a foreign country.⁵⁸² However, Martin's experience appears to be the exception. It was far more common for trainees to be told negative things about the Vietnamese. In basic training, officers often collectively referred to the Vietnamese as "dinks," "slopes," "zipperheads," and "gooks."⁵⁸³ Historian Peter S. Kindsvatter correctly notes that the dehumanization of the enemy was done in an effort to stir up hatred and aggression against a group of people, whom the average Vietnam-era trainee had little "animosity toward and hence no particular urge to kill."⁵⁸⁴ However, more often than not, these racist terms were used to refer to all Vietnamese and not simply enemy forces.

⁵⁷⁹ Horace Coleman, interview by author, June 12, 2012.

⁵⁸⁰ Edward Doyle et al., *A Collision of Cultures: The Americans in Vietnam, 1954-1973* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1984), 27.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁸² Martin, interview by author.

⁵⁸³ Appy, *Working Class War*, 106-107.

⁵⁸⁴ Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea & Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 194.

Additionally, trainees were told that all Vietnamese civilians posed a threat and should not be trusted.⁵⁸⁵

It is of course true that some Vietnamese civilians could in fact not be trusted. These instructions were no doubt influenced by the fact that American soldiers often struggled to distinguish Vietnamese who supported the communist resistance from those who supported the government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), or even those who tried to remain uninvolved. Lamont B. Steptoe's poem "Uncle's South Sea China Blue Nightmare" accurately reflects the confusion of Americans about the Vietnamese and their inability to distinguish friends from foes.

In country
Vietnamese shine boots wash laundry
make love to you
some even try to end your
life with a bang⁵⁸⁶

To the American soldier, a Vietnamese could be a servant, a sexual partner, a co-combatant, or a killer. While soldiers recognized that civilians supported opposing sides in the war or wanted to be uninvolved, they found it difficult to determine their affiliations or lack thereof. In many cases soldiers did not know if the Vietnamese they encountered were friendly or hostile and this reality influenced the way Vietnamese civilians were depicted in basic training.

Not surprisingly, most African Americans reported that drill instructors told them negative things about the Vietnamese during training. During basic training, Robert

⁵⁸⁵ Appy, *Working Class War*, 106.

⁵⁸⁶ Lamont B. Steptoe, *Uncle's South Sea China Blue Nightmare* (Philadelphia: Plan B Press, 1995), 42.

Louis, who served with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry in 1966-67, was told by a drill instructor that all Vietnamese people were “gooks” and that even those that appeared to be trustworthy would murder you in your sleep if given the opportunity.⁵⁸⁷ Haywood Kirkland, who served with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division in 1967-68, remembered that almost immediately “they told us not to call them Vietnamese. Call everybody gooks, dinks.”⁵⁸⁸ Arthur Barham, who served with the 173rd Airborne Division in 1967-68, recalled that instructors during Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) training used slurs in reference to the Vietnamese “because they were trying to get us to hate these people” and reinforce the message of “don’t trust anybody.”⁵⁸⁹

Beginning in 1968, soldiers in basic training were provided with slightly more information about the Vietnamese and their customs. For example, U.S. Military Assistance Command (MACV) recommended, among other things, that soldiers avoid taking pictures of civilians without their permission. They also instructed soldiers that it was improper to “walk hand-in-hand with a Vietnamese woman.”⁵⁹⁰ Nonetheless, many officers continued to express racist feelings towards the Vietnamese during basic training. Wayne Smith, who served with the Ninth Infantry Division in 1968-69, also remembered that in basic training the Vietnamese were universally referred to as “gooks,” “chinks” and “slopes.” Like the men in Louis’s training group, drill instructors told Smith’s group never to trust any Vietnamese people.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁷ Robert Louis Jr., interview by author, November 30, 2011.

⁵⁸⁸ Haywood Kirkland’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 90.

⁵⁸⁹ Arthur Barham, interview by author, February 19, 2013.

⁵⁹⁰ Doyle et al., *A Collision of Cultures*, 29.

⁵⁹¹ Wayne Smith, interview by author, October 25, 2011.

Lamont Steptoe served with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry in 1969-70 and he remembered that in Officer Candidate School (OCS) the Vietnamese were consistently referred to as “gooks.” The officers in charge passed along demeaning rumors about the Vietnamese including that Vietnamese women had horizontal vaginas. He remembered, “They did everything in their power to convince us that the Vietnamese were non-human to justify our violent response to them.”⁵⁹² Jim Gillam recalled that the trainers “othered” the Vietnamese, remembering, “Vietnamese were not Vietnamese, they were referred to as gooks, and dinks, and slopes and all those racist terms.” Like Steptoe, Gillam believed that the military used this language to “reduce the other person to something less than human” which would allow soldiers to do whatever they wanted to them.⁵⁹³ Freddie Edwards, who served with the First Marine Airwing in 1970-71, recalled that all they told him in training about the Vietnamese was that they were “gooks.”⁵⁹⁴

The racialization and dehumanization of enemy soldiers in times of war was nothing new. During World War I and World War II, American soldiers were taught to call the German enemy “Krauts” or “Huns.”⁵⁹⁵ Historian John Dower’s *War Without Mercy* notes that during the Pacific War the Japanese were depicted by military officials as universally immoral, animalistic, subhuman, and obsessed with killing Americans. This characterization of the Japanese as essentially evil had real repercussions as “race hate fed atrocities and atrocities in turn fanned the fires of race hate.”⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹² Lamont Steptoe, interview by author, June 25, 2012.

⁵⁹³ Gillam, interview by author.

⁵⁹⁴ Freddie Edwards, interview by author, December 2, 2011.

⁵⁹⁵ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 193.

⁵⁹⁶ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books: 1986), 11.

Yet, as Peter Kindsvatter points out it wasn't until the Vietnam War that the dehumanization of the enemy "became integral to the training process."⁵⁹⁷ The nature of the conflict made it difficult to determine which Vietnamese was an enemy. This likely explains why the negative characterizations of the People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) were extended to include South Vietnamese civilians.

"We didn't have the greatest house in the world, but it wasn't cardboard"

Considering what they learned in basic training, one could understand if most black soldiers saw the Vietnamese in negative terms. However, in most cases African Americans did not accept the indoctrination that officers taught them during basic training. When Robert Louis arrived in Vietnam, he quickly realized that the information that he had been giving about the Vietnamese was inaccurate. He remembered, "When you got over there you found that, well, don't know who they were talking about because it's not the people I am looking at...the people I am looking at are just poor."⁵⁹⁸

Louis's description of the Vietnamese he encountered as poor is significant. While South Vietnam did have wealthy landowners, an urban elite, and a middle-class, American soldiers did not have much contact with these groups. The majority of Vietnamese people with whom American soldiers had the opportunity to interact were poor and uneducated. Soldiers serving in combat were most likely to encounter tenant farmers. These farmers worked small plots of land or rice paddies for subsistence and

⁵⁹⁷ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 193.

⁵⁹⁸ Louis, interview by author.

made up three-fourths of the population in rural Vietnam. They lived in thatched houses with dirt floors and without toilets, running water, refrigeration, or electricity.⁵⁹⁹

Vietnamese refugees were another group whom American soldiers were likely to encounter. It is estimated that the Vietnam War caused the displacement of at least 5 million South Vietnamese, more than a fourth of the population. The majority of refugees lived in makeshift shantytowns or camps surrounding cities, towns, and even military bases. Their houses were often made from discarded American garbage.⁶⁰⁰ Sewage and sanitation services were almost non-existent, and residents often “bathed, urinated, and washed their clothes in the same meager amount of water found in gutters, puddles, or drawn from wells.” Not surprisingly, disease was rampant and Saigon had the highest combined rate of smallpox, cholera, bubonic plague, and typhoid in the world during the war.⁶⁰¹

Many soldiers, especially those stationed in cities or on military bases, also had interactions with Vietnamese civilians employed by the military. As the war continued, the economy of the RVN became almost entirely dependent on American expenditures, and Vietnamese refugees and poor urbanites became more and more dependent on the American military for employment. The military officially employed roughly 100,000 Vietnamese civilians, but it is likely that an even higher number worked unofficially. These workers, mostly young women, typically worked on American bases in such menial positions as cleaners, launderers, or maids. American soldiers could hire Vietnamese women, colloquially referred to as “hooch maids,” to make their beds, shine

⁵⁹⁹ Appy, *Working Class War*, 288.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 289.

⁶⁰¹ Doyle et al., *A Collision of Cultures*, 77-78.

their boots, clean their floors, and wash and iron their clothes for about five dollars a month. While American soldiers were by no means rich, as the lowest ranking soldier made between \$150 and \$200 a month, all of them could afford the services of a “hooch maid” if they wanted one.⁶⁰²

Christian G. Appy has pointed out that African American soldiers overwhelmingly came from working-class backgrounds and that many grew up in relative poverty.⁶⁰³ While few if any African American soldiers had experienced the level of poverty that many Vietnamese farmers and refugees had always known, they were able to link the poverty of the Vietnamese to their own poverty and that of other African Americans.

For many African Americans the poverty they witnessed was shocking even in comparison to the poverty many African Americans experienced in the United States. David Parks, who served with the Ninth Infantry division in 1966-67, stated, “The villages we passed through were really poverty-stricken. People go to the bathroom in the streets, and the kids ran alongside the convoy begging for food.”⁶⁰⁴ As a child, Horace Coleman had been surprised by the poverty he witnessed during a family visit to Mississippi, but this was nothing compared to what he witnessed in Vietnam. Walking through the streets of Saigon, he was shocked to see numerous people with small pox scars and uncorrected cleft palates. He recalled seeing what he believed to be a beautiful Vietnamese woman walking in the distance, but as he drew closer he realized she had

⁶⁰² Appy, *Working Class War*, 289.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁰⁴ David Parks, *GI Diary* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1984), 49.

small pox scars all over her face. He recognized that “even the poorest kids would get free shots from the clinic” in the United States.⁶⁰⁵

James Daly, who served in the Army in 1967-68, was initially surprised by the level of poverty in Vietnam, noting that “the people here are about a hundred years behind the Americans and I feel sorry for them.”⁶⁰⁶ Yet, Daly was able to relate what he saw to his own experiences growing up in a housing project in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn.⁶⁰⁷ Similarly, Samuel Vance connected the poverty of his African American community to the poverty he saw in South Vietnam. He “often looked at the poor, deprived children and thought of my own people back home and how little they had...I often prayed that other people could look at my people and other minority groups and feel this compassion.”⁶⁰⁸ Vance related the struggles of the Vietnamese to that of black Americans and wished that the mistreated in both countries would gain attention and assistance.

Robert Louis compared the poverty he experienced growing up in rural Louisiana to the poverty he witnessed in Vietnam. He recalled, “I am from dirt deep down in poor, poor Louisiana and these people were worse off than I ever was or ever could have imagined.” Louis was particularly stunned by the poor quality of the houses in which most rural Vietnamese people lived. He observed “huts made out of straw and sticks, that’s what they were living in, and this was their whole society, not just a few. The condition, if you will, of the entire society; that was a shock. Made that little four room

⁶⁰⁵ Coleman, interview by author.

⁶⁰⁶ James Daly, *Black Prisoner of War: A Conscientious Objector's Vietnam Memoir* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 52.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., 70-71.

⁶⁰⁸ Samuel Vance, *The Courageous and Proud* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1979), 159.

shack I was born in look good; didn't make me feel any better."⁶⁰⁹ Louis not only recognized the extreme poverty of many Vietnamese people, he also compared it to the poverty he experienced in the United States and concluded it was much worse. He experienced such a level of sympathy for the Vietnamese peasants that he even felt guilty that he had grown up in better conditions. The fact that the Vietnamese people he encountered were living in houses made of straw and sticks made him feel neither proud nor superior but rather sad and reflective.

George Hicks, who served with Army Security Agency in 1969-70, was equally shocked by the level of poverty he witnessed. Growing up fairly poor in rural Virginia, he was surprised to find that many Vietnamese people lacked the basic things that even he had as a boy. He remembered, "The one thing that I really couldn't wrap my arms around was that they didn't have any bathrooms." According to Hicks many Vietnamese people he encountered lived in houses constructed partly of cardboard. He recalled, "A cardboard house? We didn't have the greatest house in the world, but it wasn't cardboard."⁶¹⁰

For Emmanuel J. Holloman, who served with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry in 1966-69 and again in 1971, black poverty had significance as "blacks got along better with the Vietnamese people, because they knew the hardships the Vietnamese went through."⁶¹¹ Holloman maintained that the majority of white soldiers looked down on the Vietnamese and believed them to be stupid and generally worthless, but blacks were able to empathize with them because of their poverty. In Holloman's words, "I had five brothers

⁶⁰⁹ Louis, interview by author.

⁶¹⁰ George Hicks, interview by author, April 28, 2012.

⁶¹¹ Emmanuel J. Holloman's account as found Terry, *Bloods*, 83.

and three sisters. My mother worked, still works in an old folks home. An attendant changing beds and stuff...I had to leave school after the eighth grade to work in North Carolina.”⁶¹² As he saw it, his poverty allowed him to see the Vietnamese in a more sympathetic light. However, he also implied that only black people were truly able to relate to the Vietnamese. Whites, poor or not, were largely unsympathetic. To Holloman blacks were able to relate to Vietnamese civilians because they had experienced both economic and social inequality. While some whites were poor, they had never experienced the social discrimination that a person of color faced.⁶¹³

This isn't to say that white soldiers were incapable of experiencing some of these same feelings of empathy for the Vietnamese. Richard Marlotas, a white soldier who served with the 116th Transportation Company at Cam Ranh Bay, grew up in abject poverty in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Speaking of his childhood, Marlotas recalled, “I had nothing. I used to wear the same clothes. We had no money to buy stuff—food or anything.” Like many soldiers Marlotas was shocked by the level of poverty he witnessed in Vietnam relating it to his own experiences as a poor person in America, “You know, those people don't have anything either.” Marlotas showed compassion towards the Vietnamese he encountered giving them small gifts like soap. Speaking of these gifts, Marlotas recalled, “Small things like that they look at as great—a bar of soap! That's how poor those people are!”⁶¹⁴

⁶¹² Ibid.

⁶¹³ Ibid., 82-83.

⁶¹⁴ Appy, *Working Class War*, 291.

“You’re going to call them gooks, you’re going to call me nigger”

While many African American soldiers saw the common experience of poverty as linking them to the Vietnamese, others highlighted the fact that both Vietnamese people and African Americans were persons of color and victims of racial discrimination. This was a claim that white soldiers were not able to make.

For many African American soldiers the use of slurs like “gook” and “slope” to refer to the Vietnamese reminded them of the way whites often talked about African Americans in the United States. While enlisted men of both races had picked up these demeaning words in basic training, whites continued to use them. The use of these derogatory words by many whites, not only led many African American soldiers to sympathize with the Vietnamese, but it also often alienated them from their fellow white soldiers.

When Anthony Martin arrived in Vietnam he was eager to find out as much about Vietnamese culture as possible, but he quickly realized that his curiosity was not shared by many of the other white soldiers he encountered. Most were more interested in demeaning or mistreating the Vietnamese than trying to understand them. He remembered that soldiers casually referred to Vietnamese people as “slopeheads,” which he reacted against “because I knew that’s the way I was talked about.” His attitude was ““you said that about them, I can only guess what you are saying about me behind my back.””⁶¹⁵ Martin believed there was a sharp contrast between the way whites and African Americans talked about the Vietnamese: “I think most of the black guys there...I think a lot of us felt the same way that I felt. These were people who were being discriminated

⁶¹⁵ Martin, interview by author.

against just as we were...I don't recall any blacks that I hung around with being vulgar toward these people.”⁶¹⁶ Martin saw both African Americans and the Vietnamese as victims of racial discrimination. This shared experience led him to empathize with the Vietnamese and their struggles.

Arthur Barham believed that many white soldiers believed that they were superior to the Vietnamese and the way they talked about them was a reflection of this. He recalled, “A lot of times you heard white soldiers talking about the Vietnamese and calling them gooks and yellow monkeys and slant eyes... They always referred to them as objects, you know things. Black soldiers didn't do that.” Barham also understood that the use of racial slurs in reference to the Vietnamese was not unlike the use of slurs against African Americans in the United States.⁶¹⁷

Robert Louis also made the connection between the use of racial slurs against Vietnamese people and the use of racial slurs against black people. He recalled thinking that soldiers willing to use terms like “gook” or “slope” would probably use the slur “nigger” in reference to African Americans if they thought they could get away with it.⁶¹⁸ Brian Settles, who served in 1968-69 as a navigator pilot with the 390th Fighter Squadron, thought similarly about the use of racial slurs against the Vietnamese. When he heard white soldiers use terms like “gook” and “slopehead” in reference to the Vietnamese they “rang loud and too clear as synonyms for nigger, jigga-boo, jungle

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

⁶¹⁷ Barham, interview by author.

⁶¹⁸ Louis, interview by author.

bunny, spear-chucker, terrapin, and Sambo.”⁶¹⁹ He also noted that to many whites “there was no distinction drawn between North or South Vietnamese or Viet Cong; they were all gooks.”⁶²⁰

Lamont Steptoe’s decision to drop out of OCS two-weeks before being commissioned as an officer was influenced by “the constant references to Vietnamese people as gooks...I just didn’t like what they were turning us into.”⁶²¹ While racial slurs dehumanized the Vietnamese, in reality they had the opposite effect on Steptoe, who immediately became more sympathetic to them in large part because the slurs “resonated the word nigger” to him.⁶²²

Horace Coleman believed that the Vietnam War was a “xenophobic racist war” and the way Vietnamese people were talked about and treated reflected this reality. He recalled an incident in which he was riding on a bus from Tan San Nhut airbase to Saigon and overheard two white soldiers talking about how dumb the Vietnamese were with the proof being that “they don’t even speak English.”⁶²³ Like Martin, he also believed that Vietnam provided white soldiers with an opportunity to project racist feelings prevalent in American culture on to the Vietnamese. Vietnam gave “people who might have used their attitudes towards some other ethnicity that they encountered in the United States to make themselves feel better or justify whatever, they had somebody to displace their negative attitudes towards.”⁶²⁴

⁶¹⁹ Brian H. Settles, *No Reason for Dying: A Reluctant Combat Pilot’s Confession of Hypocrisy, Infidelity and War* (Charleston, S.C: Booksurge, 2009), 286.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 176.

⁶²¹ Steptoe, interview by author.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Coleman, interview by author.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

Louis Perkins, who served in 1966-67 and again in 1968-69, had a similar perception. He believed that Vietnamese people “were genuine good people” but that this was not an opinion shared by many white soldiers. He remembered, “We [blacks] could relate to them and the problems that they were having...because the white man has a tendency to degrade everybody and I say that in respect that you gotta give them a nickname, ‘the gooks,’ or this, that, the other.”⁶²⁵ Perkins resented the use of these terms and refused to use them even for the Viet Cong. He saw the use of racial slurs against the Vietnamese as identical to the use of other slurs against African Americans stating, “You’re going to call them gooks, you’re going to call me nigger.”⁶²⁶

Wayne Smith “resisted ever calling the Vietnamese gooks or dinks or slopes or nips.”⁶²⁷ He did not use these slurs because he had a number of Asian friends back in the United States, but he also understood that these terms were being used to dehumanize the Vietnamese and to convince soldiers “we’re not killing human beings we’re killing gooks.” Additionally, he understood “intellectually and emotionally...if we were fighting in the Congo everybody would be calling them niggers.”⁶²⁸

Freddie Edwards recalled being confused by the use of racial slurs to refer to the Vietnamese. He observed, “I couldn’t understand the hatred military people seemed to have for the Vietnamese.”⁶²⁹ The use of these words was particularly offensive to Edwards as it conflicted with everything he had learned from his mother and his Christian faith. He believed that all people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or political

⁶²⁵ Louis Perkins, interview by author, December 17, 2011.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Smith, interview by author.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Edwards, interview by author.

affiliation deserved equal treatment and was saddened to find that many in the military not only used racial slurs to refer to people they were supposed to be helping but also seemed to hate them. Edwards's feelings about the use of racial slurs became so strong that he began telling "some of my military friends, I don't like that word, please don't use it around me," whenever he heard someone referring to a Vietnamese person as a gook or slope.⁶³⁰

In January 1971, Deputy Chief of Staff of the United States Army James Ursano sent a group of investigators to interview prisoners at the Long Binh Stockade in Vietnam. These interviews revealed that black soldiers strongly resented "white prejudice against the Vietnamese as personified by the use of the word 'Gook,'" seeing this as just "another example of the white man's prejudice against non-whites."⁶³¹ While one would expect that imprisoned soldiers would have many complaints, the fact that the report which followed these interviews highlighted the mistreatment of the Vietnamese by whites as one of the more commonly heard complaints from black soldiers is not insignificant.

Incidentally, there is some evidence that the armed forces actually recognized that for some white soldiers disliking the Vietnamese and disliking blacks went hand in hand. In June 1972 MACV circulated a leaflet containing a cartoon drawing of white soldier next to the caption, "I wish people would quit telling me to be nice to the Vietnamese—

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ Report, James Ursano to Major Ward, March 29, 1971, Reference Paper Files, Stockade Project: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, Record Group 472, National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP), College Park, Maryland.

it's hard enough trying to get along with all the colored.”⁶³² In a letter explaining the significance and meaning of the leaflet, Major General A.J Bowley, Director for Personnel, United States Air Force (USAF) stated that it was meant to illustrate the “commonality of black/white bigotry and U.S/Vietnamese bigotry.”⁶³³

Some African Americans undoubtedly used racial slurs to refer to the Vietnamese. Others may have been hesitant to admit in interviews that they used slurs like “gook” or “slope.” Yet, even if some veterans may have provided an overly positive view of their behavior toward Vietnamese civilians, they obviously felt that it was important to give the impression that they did not use these types of slurs against the Vietnamese. At the very least they recognized that many African Americans viewed the use of these slurs as no different than the use of slurs like “nigger” against African Americans.

“This could be my mom, this is what my mom would do”

Many black soldiers saw themselves as not all that different from the Vietnamese. Sinclair Swan, who served with the First Infantry Division in 1966-67, recalled that many African Americans related to the struggles of Vietnamese people and as a result empathized with them because they were the “low man on the totem pole” in Vietnam, a place normally held by African Americans in the United States.⁶³⁴ Similarly, Thomas Brannon, who served with the First Cavalry regiment in 1966-67, believed he was able to relate to Vietnamese people because he could see “they were put upon, as was part of our history.” Furthermore, he recognized that many Vietnamese “were struggling like hell

⁶³² Letter, A.J Bowley to Lieutenant Randall, June 6, 1972, Equal Opportunity Reporting Files, MACV Publications: Box # 5, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁶³³ Ibid.

⁶³⁴ Sinclair Swan, interview by author, August 11, 2011.

and a lot of us who are black Americans, if not having lived it ourselves, can tell you about the times in our collective history where our families have struggled with the boot on the neck.”⁶³⁵

Ed Emanuel, who served as a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrolman (LRRP) with the Fifty-First Infantry in 1968-69 recalled, “I acquired a secret admiration for the Vietnamese people in general. In many ways Vietnamese people endured the same harsh problems as the American black population. Both were victims of social and economic inequality.”⁶³⁶

When discussing Vietnamese people, a number of African American soldiers focused on the civilians employed by the American military. While the military thought they were providing much needed employment for the Vietnamese, many black soldiers viewed the relationship differently. They saw the Vietnamese employed in these positions as victims of white exploitation. Racist whites in the United States had forced American blacks into a subservient position and now they were doing the same thing to the South Vietnamese.

Even before arriving in Vietnam, David Parks predicted that the southern whites he met in basic training would “probably treat the Vietnamese civilians like they treated the black people back where they came from.”⁶³⁷ Other black soldiers found his predictions to be accurate. Bill Bryels immediately noticed that “they had a number of Vietnamese people doing the kind of things I was accustomed to seeing African Americans do—laundry, sweeping, cleaning, garbage details, and those kinds of

⁶³⁵ Thomas Brannon, interview by author, December 6, 2011.

⁶³⁶ Ed Emanuel, *Soul Patrol* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2003), 130.

⁶³⁷ Parks, *GI Diary*, 31.

things.”⁶³⁸ Bryels clearly saw the Vietnamese occupying the subordinate place in Vietnam that African Americans held in America. He confessed, “The thought occurred to me, which was later made very popular by Richard Pryor: They were the new ‘niggers.’”⁶³⁹

Richard Guidry, who served with the First Battalion of the Fourth Marines in 1967, made similar observations about the Vietnamese who worked in his military camp. While eating lunch at the military base in Da Nang, Guidry noticed that all the people washing dishes were Vietnamese. He mentioned to his white friend Ciantar, “Isn’t that just like Americans, always have to have someone cleaning up after them?” Ciantar disagreed completely with Guidry countering with “before you start branding anyone an ugly American, Who do you think is going to wash the damn pots, a bunch of pot washers from Kansas? Besides, these guys probably make more money than they ever dreamed of.” Guidry remained unconvinced by Ciantar’s reasoning.⁶⁴⁰

Guidry and Ciantar’s statements are revealing. The men clearly interpreted differently the significance of the Vietnamese dishwashers. Guidry sympathized with their plight and suggested that they had been placed in this subservient position by American whites. Ciantar held a paternalistic view toward the Vietnamese and believed that the American military was actually helping them. He believed that washing pots was appropriate for Vietnamese civilians. It wouldn’t make any sense to hire Americans to clean the pots. In stating “isn’t it just like the Americans” Guidry suggests that he saw

⁶³⁸ Bryels as found in Vadas, *Cultures in Combat*, 99.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 99.

⁶⁴⁰ Richard Guidry, *The War in I Corps*. (Raleigh, North Carolina: Ivy Books, 1997), 21.

himself as somewhat distanced from his fellow Americans. Clearly Guidry did not want to be seen as someone who agreed with the placement of the Vietnamese in a servile role.

Guidry also observed a change in Vietnamese behavior as a result of their subservient position. Walking through a village, Guidry's platoon spotted an elderly couple. The other members of the platoon were initially suspicious, and when the old woman ran inside her hut, they raised their weapons in anticipation. However, a few minutes later "the old woman emerged from the hut with a pot and several tin cups, wearing a smile that I had often seen southern blacks put on for white bosses."⁶⁴¹ Again Guidry created an image of the Vietnamese as the African Americans of Vietnam. To be sure African American soldiers' experiences with Vietnamese civilians were extremely limited; anytime they saw Vietnamese civilians they were subordinate to Americans. It was an easy step to compare that relationship to their own with whites in the United States.

Guidry was not the only one to make this connection. Ron Bradley, of the Ninth Aviation Division in 1967-68, believed that many soldiers, especially white soldiers, treated Vietnamese people as if they were their personal slaves.⁶⁴² Wayne Smith recalled an incident in which his unit walked into a small village where they were greeted by a Vietnamese woman. The woman quickly handed over some soup and chicken which she had clearly prepared for her own family. Smith was touched by the gesture, especially because the woman reminded him of his own mother. He remembered, "I could identify with the Vietnamese...I thought this grandmotherly person who made dinner for us or

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁴² Bradley, interview by author.

gave us dinner from their dinner. This could be my mom, this is what my mom would do.”⁶⁴³

While touched by this woman’s action, Smith, like Guidry and Bradley, found the relationship between the Vietnamese and the American forces troubling. He perceived that many Vietnamese people were treated as the “equivalent of like the southern states in the 1700’s and 1800’s with African American slaves. You know like they were always there, but were semi-invisible.”⁶⁴⁴ Their poverty, their subordination, and the racial slurs directed at them led Bradley and Smith to connect the Vietnamese of the 1960’s to the black slaves of the antebellum South.

“There was this thing towards the Vietnamese like they were a lower life form”

As the preceding accounts suggest, many black soldiers empathized with the daily struggles of the Vietnamese people. They typically viewed Vietnamese from the vantage point of their own experiences with poverty, discrimination, and prejudice in the United States. They also saw the average Vietnamese as a victim of white mistreatment. Many believed that some white soldiers were dismissive if not outright hostile towards Vietnamese civilians. Black soldiers believed that white mistreatment of the Vietnamese extended beyond either insulting attitudes or racial slurs. Many agreed with Ronald Copes’s assertion that “there was this thing towards the Vietnamese like they were a lower life form.”⁶⁴⁵

Historian Christian Appy has noted that there was often little consistency in the way individual soldiers treated Vietnamese civilians. Some soldiers treated the civilians

⁶⁴³ Smith, interview by author.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Ronald Copes, interview by author, November 17, 2011.

they encountered with compassion, while others treated them with hostility and contempt.⁶⁴⁶ It is also true that many soldiers were capable of both. Even for those soldiers who treated Vietnamese people poorly their behavior “covered a huge spectrum, from taunts and insults to kicks and shoves to murder.”⁶⁴⁷ Of course not all white soldiers mistreated the Vietnamese and some undoubtedly empathized with their struggles to the same degree that some black soldiers did. Additionally, most African Americans probably recognized that not all white soldiers mistreated civilians. That said, many African American soldiers believed that whites were more likely to mistreat Vietnamese people than blacks. There is at least some statistical evidence that suggests that this was true. Dr. Jerome Kroll of the Rockland Psychiatric Center examined the sentences handed down to 293 prisoners serving at Fort Leavenworth. His study, which was released in February 1976, revealed that white soldiers were six times more likely to be imprisoned for crimes against Vietnamese people than blacks.⁶⁴⁸

Not surprisingly, a number of black soldiers recalled incidents of white soldiers harassing and mistreating the Vietnamese. The treatment of the Vietnamese by some white soldiers led to friction with black soldiers. Harold Bryant, who served with the First Cavalry Division in 1966-67, likely spoke for many black soldiers when he concluded, “I learned that white people weren’t the number one race. I found out that some of them

⁶⁴⁶ Appy, *Working Class War*, 290-294.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁶⁴⁸ William Thomas Allison, *Military Justice in Vietnam: The Rule of Law in an American War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 85-86.

were more animalistic than any black people I knew. I found out that some of them didn't have their shit together.”⁶⁴⁹

While some of the incidents of mistreatment described by black soldiers were fairly minor, a good number involved cruel and violent acts committed against seemingly innocent and helpless Vietnamese civilians. It is difficult to determine how often these sorts of assaults happened in Vietnam. Robert Louis remembered an incident in which his unit was walking through a hamlet in the Iron Triangle region of Vietnam. As the men walked past a dike they came upon a Vietnamese child. While most of the men ignored the child, a staff sergeant pushed the kid into the dike unprovoked.⁶⁵⁰

Roosevelt Gore remembered that black soldiers who served with the First Infantry Division in 1967-68 gave food and candy to Vietnamese children. In contrast white soldiers in his unit routinely mistreated these children. The behavior of these soldiers clearly upset Gore, “The biggest thing that bothers me has to do with some of our soldiers who would use their rifle butts to hit Vietnamese kids on the side of the head. The kids was [sic] begging the GIs for food, asking for a piece of C-ration candy or whatever, and the guys would just knock them out.”⁶⁵¹

Dwyte Brown witnessed incidents in which white soldiers slapped civilians for no reason and even purposely ran into Vietnamese civilians with their cars. In the mess hall one day, a white soldier requested some extra chicken from a Vietnamese server, but when she only gave him two pieces, “the guy grabbed her by the neck and stuck her head

⁶⁴⁹ Harold Bryant's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 23.

⁶⁵⁰ Louis, interview by author.

⁶⁵¹ Interview with Roosevelt Gore as found in James R. Wilson, *Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 106.

in the mashed potatoes.”⁶⁵² Lamont Steptoe recalled that “guys would take c-rations like canned soup or something and as we rode by Vietnamese on their motorcycles, they would hit them in the head and cause them to crash.”⁶⁵³

Robert Holcomb witnessed a similarly violent incident while serving with the 101st Airborne in 1970. Ordered to transport spoiled milk to a dump, he was walking to his destination when he spotted white members of his company throwing the bottles of milk at civilians riding motorcycles. Holcomb was irate at their behavior and stopped them before they could hurt anyone else.⁶⁵⁴

David Parks alleged that white soldiers in his unit made a game of abusing Vietnamese civilians. Parks remembered, “We’re riding along and there’s a group of hungry kids. Someone throws a piece of bread on the road. The kids go for it like a pack of wolves. Often one of them gets hit by a truck or several get hurt in the scramble.” White soldiers were amused by such incidents, but Park maintained that you would “never see a soul doing anything like that.”⁶⁵⁵

Holloman also distinguished between black and white behavior. He remembered that “anything blacks got from the Vietnamese, they would pay for. You hardly didn’t find a black cursing a Vietnamese. And a black would try to learn some of the words. And try to learn a few of their customs so they wouldn’t hurt them.”⁶⁵⁶ He believed that most white soldiers looked down on the Vietnamese, and he remembered a number of

⁶⁵² Dwyte Brown’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 265.

⁶⁵³ Steptoe, interview by author.

⁶⁵⁴ Robert Holcomb’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 207.

⁶⁵⁵ Parks, *GI Diary*, 71. African Americans in Vietnam were sometimes called souls both by fellow black soldiers and even the Vietnamese.

⁶⁵⁶ Emmanuel J. Holloman’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 83.

instances when white soldiers abused Vietnamese civilians. Once while shopping in a village, a white soldier threw tear gas grenades into a crowd of civilians causing a number of them to pass out. He described another incident where a white soldier sat on a bridge shooting people with a slingshot. He also mentioned another incident in which an “MP who sat on that bridge all day and shot people going to work with his BB gun. I rode behind him once, and he shot at everybody for 5 miles.”⁶⁵⁷

These accounts described white soldiers purposely abusing Vietnamese citizens, and a number of African American soldiers remember incidents involving white soldiers that were even more violent, including rape and murder. While some may see the raping and murdering of Vietnamese civilians as isolated incidents, recent historiography on the subject suggests that these events may have been more common than previously thought. While the killing of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai is well known, Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss’s *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War* and Deborah Nelson’s *The War Behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth About U.S War Crimes* and most recently Nick Turse’s *Kill Anything That Moves* have each documented numerous incidents of soldiers raping and killing Vietnamese civilians.⁶⁵⁸

A number of African American soldiers confirm these accounts. Anthony Martin believed that Vietnamese civilians were often treated like animals by American soldiers, and he was disgusted by the level of destruction caused by Americans. His disgust grew the day he overheard white soldiers bragging about raping Vietnamese women. He

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 81-82.

⁶⁵⁸ Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss, *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), Deborah Nelson, *The War Behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth About U.S. War Crimes* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

recalled that “the amount of females, Vietnamese women, who are probably alive today who have been raped by Americans ‘just because’ was appalling to me.”⁶⁵⁹ Martin was quick to differentiate the way these soldiers acted from the black soldiers he served with stating, “I don’t recall any blacks that I hung around with being vulgar toward these people or even considering the idea of you know ‘let’s take this chick and rape her.’”⁶⁶⁰

Unfortunately, Martin was not the only black soldier to accuse white soldiers in his unit of raping Vietnamese women. David Parks wrote in his diary that “some of the guys have indulged in some raping too. They even brag about it.”⁶⁶¹ Dwyte Brown claimed that many white soldiers thought they were entitled to sex with Vietnamese women. Even female workers on American military bases were vulnerable to sexual assault or rape. Brown raised a hypothetical situation in which a Vietnamese female comes on base to shine shoes for the soldiers. A black soldier would give a dollar tip, but a white guy would say, “You ain’t do it good enough. Maybe smack her or throw her daughter down, pull her clothes up, try to have sex with her. She just thirteen or fourteen. She there tryin’ to sweep the floor.”⁶⁶² Harold Bryant witnessed a white soldier raping a dead Vietnamese woman.⁶⁶³ Holloman claimed that many soldiers raped local women, and superior officers did little to stop the attacks; some even participated.⁶⁶⁴ Holcomb found himself guarding a white sergeant accused of raping a number of Vietnamese

⁶⁵⁹ Martin, interview by author.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ Parks, *GI Diary*, 110. Parks does not outright say that the accused rapists were white, but the fact that he always identifies black soldiers as such, suggests strongly that they were.

⁶⁶² Dwyte Brown’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 265.

⁶⁶³ Harold Bryant’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 27.

⁶⁶⁴ Emmanuel J. Holloman’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 82.

women. He told Holcomb that Vietnamese people “were animals and didn’t deserve to be treated like people.”⁶⁶⁵

James Lewis, who served with the 589 Engineer Battalion Combat in 1968-69, described an incident in which soldiers in the Corps of Engineers drove their vehicle over a hut because they were too lazy to turn it around. They killed two small children and an old woman who were in the hut at the time.⁶⁶⁶ Just before Lewis left Vietnam, his driver told him that some of the white soldiers in the unit would occasionally shoot at Vietnamese farmers as their trucks passed. Lewis was understandably disturbed by this information, but he was not surprised that black soldiers were not involved. He recalled that “black troops never did that...black troops did not go out of their way to harm them as far as I know. They spoke about them in much nicer terms.”⁶⁶⁷ He theorized that while white and black troops generally got along quite well, some white troops projected their racist feelings onto Vietnamese civilians.⁶⁶⁸

As a “closet antiwar sympathizer,” Brian Settles often felt conflicted about his role in the war effort, but he was glad that his job was to navigate a two-seater fighter plane in Vietnam and not fire on anyone.⁶⁶⁹ During one particular mission, Settles escorted smaller RF-4 planes into North Vietnam to film enemy truck and troop movements across the border. The mission was strictly for reconnaissance and although pilots had permission to respond to enemy ground fire, they rarely did. Settles expected a fairly boring mission and it was until the other pilots, who were all white, decided to

⁶⁶⁵ Holcomb’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 206.

⁶⁶⁶ Lewis, interview by author.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁹ Settles, *No Reason For Dying*, 179.

strafe a number of Vietnamese fishing boats with machine gun fire. Settles was outraged by their behavior and confronted Jeth, the pilot whose idea it was to shoot at the fishermen. He recalled not being able to comprehend “how the United States could hold itself up to the world as some kind of moral authority if we could do some shit like firing on the water around those sampans.”⁶⁷⁰

Emanuel Holloman described a particularly gruesome murder. Three white soldiers in his unit came upon a young Vietnamese boy riding a water buffalo. Wanting to scare the boy they fired in his direction, but the bullet ricocheted, hitting the boy in the back and killing him almost instantly. Holloman argued that this sort of thing happened often.⁶⁷¹ Bryant saw a drunk white GI kill an elderly Vietnamese man, seemingly for no reason.⁶⁷² Bob Sanders, who served with the 173rd Airborne in 1968-69, also saw an elderly Vietnamese man killed by American soldiers. Some soldiers tried to justify the killing, claiming that the man was likely a member of the NLF, but Sanders was not convinced.⁶⁷³

“Anybody with a heart wouldn’t turn people down like that”

In contrast, many African American soldiers recalled trying to help and even befriend Vietnamese civilians. Often this proved difficult as the average soldier had few opportunities to help Vietnamese people in any sort of systematic fashion, but a number of accounts exist of black soldiers trying to help civilians. For many soldiers donating food was the easiest way to help the Vietnamese. McArthur Moore of Paducah,

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid., 181-182.

⁶⁷¹ Holloman’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 82- 83.

⁶⁷² Bryant’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 26.

⁶⁷³ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers*, 157. Although Sanders believed that the soldiers in question were wrong in killing the elderly man, he did not report the incident to authorities.

Kentucky, described numerous instances of hungry Vietnamese civilians asking him for food. Despite being told by officers not to give them any food, Moore rationalized that “anybody with a heart wouldn’t turn people down like that” and he gave his food away. Moore’s experience with these civilians and their living conditions had a profound effect on his outlook on life. Moore remembered, “I saw those conditions and I saw the conditions that the people lived under, and I resolved that I was not going to be a complainer.”⁶⁷⁴ James Daly gave food to Vietnamese civilians and in a letter home asked his family to send him candy to hand out to children. Robert Holcomb made a considerable effort to provide Vietnamese civilians with whatever they needed.⁶⁷⁵ Holcomb claimed he gave away “big cans of beans, peaches, carrots, poncho liners, blankets, boots, socks, t-shirts” to the numerous Vietnamese he befriended.⁶⁷⁶

Some African Americans held positions which permitted them to provide more substantial help. A medic, Wayne Smith had the opportunity to interact with the Vietnamese in a different way than the average infantryman. Reflecting on his time in Vietnam, Smith asserted, “I am glad that my focus wasn’t on killing the Vietnamese and really, truly, when they were wounded or injured or had diseases and if I had medications or if I could treat them, I did.”⁶⁷⁷ Smith even helped a Vietnamese woman give birth. He thought of this one particular event as a redemptive moment in which he was able to bring a new life into the world in the midst of death and war.⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁴McArthur Moore, interview by Terry L. Birdwhistell, June 25, 1985, University of Kentucky Libraries Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project, King Library, Lexington, KY,21-22.

⁶⁷⁵ Daly, *Black Prisoner of War*,52.

⁶⁷⁶ Holcomb’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 209.

⁶⁷⁷ Smith, interview by author.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

Luther C. Benton III, who served in 1967-68, worked in hospital assistance in Hoi An. Since he was responsible for providing medicines and drugs to small villages, he had many opportunities to help Vietnamese civilians. He made sure the provincial hospital had a working x-ray, ambulances, and the latest drugs. According to his own account, he went far beyond his normal duties to provide whatever assistance village leaders requested. He made sure local villages were provided with rice and livestock. When he wasn't working, he went into the city and bought shoes, food, and soap for local orphans.⁶⁷⁹ He clearly felt considerable sympathy for the Vietnamese community and did his best to help them.

Perhaps the most compelling story of an African American soldier helping Vietnamese civilians is that of Emanuel Holloman who worked as an interpreter for four tours in Vietnam. One of his responsibilities was to file a report when his unit accidentally killed a civilian or destroyed someone's home. Holloman stated that his unit was "destroying quite a bit of stuff. Without me, they would make payments only once in a while. But I would go out of my way to let the division hear about anything the Cav did. I would tell them we destroyed this or we killed that, so we must pay it."⁶⁸⁰ The majority of soldiers in his unit believed that the American military owed no damages to the Vietnamese. His insistence on compensation led many whites in his unit to call him a traitor who cared more about the enemy than his own men. Nonetheless, Holloman continued to do his best to help the Vietnamese both on and off the job. He collected food in the cafeteria and took it to orphanages or gave it to refugees. On one occasion his

⁶⁷⁹Luther C. Benton III's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 65-68.

⁶⁸⁰ Holloman's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 80.

sergeant reproached Holloman with “give them gooks everything. Make em fat. Raise em’ up so my kid will have to grow up and come over here to fight em’ too.” Luckily, the sergeant’s superior overruled him and allowed Holloman to continue collecting food for the orphans and refugees.⁶⁸¹ Holloman believed his actions led him to become,

real close to the people. I taught English to the orphans. If a house was destroyed someplace, me and my driver and some Vietnamese would rebuild the building. People got hurt, we’d go there and sit and eat and drink with them. If somebody got killed, it would be real tough. I would go to the wake or funeral, and they would all be looking at me. And they’re sad...I would try to make the payment as quickly as possible.⁶⁸²

Holloman became so committed to his extracurricular activities that he passed up promotion three times and extended his tour four times by six months each. His commitment to Vietnamese civilians was so great that he was willing to extend his tour again and again and risk being killed in the line of fire, and he developed close relationships with Vietnamese in many communities.⁶⁸³

Holloman spoke Vietnamese fluently and this no doubt made it easier for him to form relationships with Vietnamese people. The fact that most soldiers spoke only a few sentences of Vietnamese and the majority of Vietnamese civilians spoke little English created a significant barrier for any GI interested in befriending a Vietnamese person.

In spite of these obstacles, Holloman was not the only African American to develop friendships with Vietnamese civilians. Joshua Page, a naval cook from Columbus, Ohio, volunteered to work with a Village Assistance Team (VAT) in Tam To, a small village outside of Da Nang. Page oversaw the building and repairing of schools,

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 80-81.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

houses, wells, sewage, and drainage ditches. He also took a personal interest in the health of the village children, educating them and their families on the dangers of smoking cigarettes. During the Tet Offensive, he worked with villagers in organizing a self-defense force. This was an especially worrisome issue for Tam To's residents, who were Catholic refugees from North Vietnam and who feared being captured or killed by the enemy.⁶⁸⁴ Page's efforts made him a well-known and well-liked man in town and he developed a number of meaningful relationships. Page became close friends with a local Catholic priest, who nicknamed him "Mr. Mountain" because of his height.⁶⁸⁵ He also became close friends with an elderly Vietnamese woman, whom Page frequently helped with chores and advised on family and medical issues. After receiving a poor medical prognosis from her doctor, she asked Page if he would drive her in his jeep in her funeral procession when she died. Page recalled it being "one of the most touching incidents of his life."⁶⁸⁶ Page developed another close friendship with a Vietnamese woman he met immediately upon arriving in Tam To. Speaking of their friendship, Page proclaimed, "She's my second mother. Vietnamese are beautiful, beautiful people." Like Holloman, when Page's one year tour of duty was up, he reenlisted so that he could stay in Tam To.⁶⁸⁷

Luther Benton made a concentrated effort not to make friends with any American soldier because he was afraid of befriending someone who might later be killed, but he

⁶⁸⁴Tom Chance, "'Mr. Mountain:' U.S. Navyman fights his own very special war," *Ebony*, January 1969, 59-61.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., 61. It is not entirely clear if Page relied on an interpreter or if he spoke Vietnamese to the villagers.

developed relationships with numerous Vietnamese. Benton “spent a great deal of time discussing the problems of Vietnam with the Vietnamese people, what they felt, and what they thought about the Americans and their involvement.”⁶⁸⁸ From these discussions Benton learned that many Vietnamese were ambivalent about the survival of RVN but were not enthusiastic supporters of the PAVN or NLF. The Vietnamese he met supported neither option and had therefore decided to allow both sides to fight it out.⁶⁸⁹

Benton also developed close relationships with many orphans who also supplied him with information about Vietnamese views on the war. It was not uncommon for soldiers sometimes to develop friendships with the young orphans, who spent their days wandering around villages and American military bases. For example, Richard Ford’s unit became so close to an orphan boy that they planned to adopt him.⁶⁹⁰ Richard Guidry developed a friendship with two little girls named Mai and Mili who lived at the Dong Ha city dump in Quang Tri Province. He visited the area every time he was in Dong Ha. Lingering memories of his friendship with Mai and Mili remained with Guidry well past his tour of duty, and he reported that “many years later, when I read of the Spring Offensive that rolled over Quang Tri Province in 1972, my thoughts were of Mai and Mili.”⁶⁹¹

Guidry also befriended a ten-year-old boy in Phong Dien village. While Guidry’s friendship with Mai and Mili mainly consisted of his supplying them with gifts, this boy

⁶⁸⁸ Benton’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 67.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid. It is unclear if these conversations occurred in English or Vietnamese. The young men in Hoi An whom Benton knew were middle-class and educated to a degree. It is at least possible that they spoke some English.

⁶⁹⁰ Richard Ford’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 43.

⁶⁹¹ Guidry, *The War in I Corps*, 98.

was not very interested in the gifts Guidry provided. Guidry recalled, “He sat with me and told me about his village and family, and I told him about big-city life in the USA, our conversation taking a humorous turn when I mentioned something about snow.”⁶⁹² Guidry and the boy also talked about the much more serious topic of the Vietnam War and America’s role. Guidry expected the boy to be guarded in his discussions of the war; instead, he openly affirmed his support for the NLF and let Guidry know that its supporters in the area were numerous. While it is difficult to understand why the boy would be unguarded in his praise for the NLF, Guidry suggested that the boy was either too young to know any better or had correctly gauged that Guidry was sympathetic to the Vietnamese.⁶⁹³ While Guidry and the boy never discussed race, it is at least plausible that the boy thought that he could be more open with someone who was not white.

While staying in Da Nang for a week, Anthony Martin spent all of his time talking with the Vietnamese about their country and its culture. He recalled, “I wanted to know more about their culture. For me, even if I didn’t realize it at the time, I was on more of an educational quest more than anything else. I was very inquisitive about the culture, the women and the men, and you know how they did things and why they did things.”⁶⁹⁴ Like Guidry, Martin quickly developed a close friendship with a young Vietnamese boy. He remembered, “I got real close to him. And he would ask me a lot of questions about the United States and what it’s like to be you know a black man in the United States...I just thought he was as curious about me as I was about him.”⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹² Ibid., 99.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., 99-100.

⁶⁹⁴ Martin, interview by author.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

“I had fallen in love with a Vietnamese woman”

Many soldiers interacted with Vietnamese women whether they were prostitutes, bar girls, maids, or even girlfriends. While little has been written on the topic of prostitution in Vietnam, it was not uncommon for a platoon to enter a village and immediately be approached by a young boy offering to arrange sex with his beautiful “sister.”⁶⁹⁶ Lamont Steptoe claimed that his unit commander actually arranged for prostitutes to be brought into the area three or four times a week.⁶⁹⁷ Wayne Smith remembered “steam baths” on the Tan Tru military base which were essentially “whorehouses.” Smith was particularly shocked when he learned that the “steam baths” were Army sanctioned.⁶⁹⁸ Smith’s perception of what was going on at Tan Tru were likely correct. In 1966 nearly one third of GIs stationed with the U.S First Cavalry Airmobile in An Khe were afflicted with venereal disease. In response, General Harry Kinnard declared An Khe off limits. When soldiers complained, Kinnard reluctantly endorsed the building of the “An Khe Plaza,” a 25 acre area filled with numerous brothels. The plaza, which was colloquially referred to by soldiers as “Disneyland,” was surrounded by barbed wire and closely monitored by American Military Police (MP). The prostitutes who worked there were given ID cards which proved that they were regularly tested for sexually transmitted diseases.⁶⁹⁹

Brothels were also available in larger Vietnamese cities like Saigon and Da Nang. While it was not uncommon for black and white soldiers to frequent the same prostitutes,

⁶⁹⁶ Herman Graham III, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 59.

⁶⁹⁷ Steptoe, interview by author.

⁶⁹⁸ Smith, interview by author.

⁶⁹⁹ “Disneyland East,” *Time*, Friday, May 6, 1966.

many blacks sought out the services of Cambodian and Senegalese-Asian women who worked in the Khan Alley area of Saigon, which was nicknamed “Soul Alley,” because of its black clientele. Black soldiers preferred Cambodian and Senegalese women because their darker skin reminded them of African American women.⁷⁰⁰

Robert Holcomb’s unit paid for a prostitute, but he refused to participate because he felt sorry for her.⁷⁰¹ Similarly, Wayne Smith felt disgusted at the prevalence of prostitution in Vietnam. He compared the Vietnamese women, whom he saw as victimized, to his own family in the United States stating, “Having five sisters, I remember thinking these could be my sisters.”⁷⁰²

While many soldiers did frequent prostitutes, African American soldiers also had other types of relationships with Vietnamese women. Some black soldiers recalled forming platonic friendships with “hooch maids” who worked on American bases. While stationed at Cam Ranh Bay, Eddie Wright developed a close friendship with one of these maids.⁷⁰³ Brian Settles befriended two maids named Dao and Bong while stationed at Da Nang Air Base. In many respects, Settles felt closer to Dao and Bong than he did with many of the pilots with whom he served, some of whom he believed were prejudiced against African Americans and Vietnamese. Speaking of their friendship, Settles recalled, “I treated them with genuine respect as people, beyond being Vietnamese and maids.”⁷⁰⁴ Settles was able to form a friendship with Dao and Bong in large part because they both

⁷⁰⁰ James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 77.

⁷⁰¹ Holcomb’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 210.

⁷⁰² Smith, interview by author.

⁷⁰³ Eddie Wright’s account as found in Wright, *Thoughts*, 68. Although *Thoughts* primarily contains interviews Wright had with African American soldiers, he is an African American Vietnam veteran himself and also discusses his own experiences.

⁷⁰⁴ Settles, *No Reason For Dying*, 279.

spoke English. Settles became particularly close to Dao and had long discussions about their respective lives in the United States and Vietnam. Settles's friendship with both women also made him "feel better inside, somehow connected---less guilty for what I was doing to some of their people on missions at night while they slept dreaming of marriage, family, and perhaps peace."⁷⁰⁵ However, not everyone was happy that Settles had become such close friends with two Vietnamese women. Champ Henderson, a white pilot from Alabama, whose room was across the hall from Settles, frequently teased him about sleeping with Dao and Bong. Settles admitted to being attracted to both woman, but he was careful to ensure that their relationship never became sexual. When Henderson ended up sleeping with Bong, both Dao and Settles were devastated because they recognized that Henderson saw her as little more than "a gook, a dumb zip, or a slope head" to be used and abandoned.⁷⁰⁶

Lamont Steptoe also developed a friendship with a young Vietnamese "hooch maid." Unlike, Settles, he wanted to be more than this young woman's friend. He remembered, "I had fallen in love with a Vietnamese woman, who was a hooch maid... And I had asked her one time, you know, 'would you come back to America with me.'" The woman refused Steptoe's offer because her family had already arranged for her to marry a South Vietnamese soldier. When her new husband began abusing her, an enraged Steptoe tried to find the man and confront him.⁷⁰⁷

Armed forces officers ignored and sometimes even encouraged prostitution, but they actively discouraged soldiers from dating and especially marrying Vietnamese

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid., 284.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid., 286.

⁷⁰⁷ Steptoe, interview by author.

women. It was official military policy to prohibit soldiers from marrying Vietnamese women until ninety days before their tour of duty was due to end.⁷⁰⁸ Soldiers needed to obtain permission from their commanding officer and chaplain before marrying.⁷⁰⁹ They were also required to submit twenty documents “with the marriage application, including a security clearance which showed the family of the girl to be free from contact with the Vietcong.” Considering that even some of the RVN’s top officials had family members who fought for the PAVN or NLF it is difficult to imagine that the majority of Vietnamese women would not have had family members with similar affiliations.⁷¹⁰ In spite of these policies, there were approximately 6,000 marriages between American soldiers and Vietnamese women during the war.⁷¹¹

Despite official disapproval, a number of soldiers managed to develop what they considered to be serious relationships with Vietnamese women. Robert Holcomb dated a woman who worked at the Army base and they would eat together, talk about their lives, and listen to music. While it would be easy to be cynical about their relationship, but Holcomb insisted that they were both sincere and neither was trying to take advantage of the other. Holcomb’s girlfriend came from an upper middle-class background, spoke English fluently, and was not dependent on Holcomb for financial support.⁷¹² Bob Sanders developed a close relationship with a Vietnamese woman who worked at the Army cafeteria. Sanders stayed at her house in Nha Trang, and she even hid him when

⁷⁰⁸ Doyle et al., *A Collision of Cultures*, 38.

⁷⁰⁹ Judy Klemesrud, “Vietnamese War Brides: Happiness Mixed With Pain,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1971, 42.

⁷¹⁰ Lance Woodruff, “Many Vietnam Infants Fathered by Negro GI’s Left Abandoned,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 26, 1967, 20.

⁷¹¹ Doyle et al., *A Collision of Cultures*, 38. It is unknown how many of these marriages involved black soldiers.

⁷¹² Holcomb’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 211.

the NLF came into the town. Like Holcomb, he believed that his relationship with her was genuine. He reflected that “she would take care of me. I hated to leave her, often I think back on her, wonder how she’s doing.”⁷¹³ Anthony Martin also had a girlfriend in Da Nang to whom he frequently sent money so that she could feed her family.⁷¹⁴ Willie Thomas dated a Vietnamese girl whose family had fled North Vietnam after the country was partitioned in 1954. He even went over to her house to meet her parents on a number of occasions.⁷¹⁵ Both Martin and Thomas believed that their relationships were legitimate.

Emanuel Holloman married a Vietnamese woman named Tran Thi Saly in a Vietnamese ceremony in 1968.⁷¹⁶ When he tried to get the marriage certified at the American Embassy so that he could be able to bring Saly to the United States, officials discouraged him from doing so. When he insisted, they made the process as difficult as possible. He recalled, “They knew that if you were in a combat unit, you didn’t have time to go to Saigon and wait in line from here to there forever. When the paper work did get approved, it was too late. I was shipped home.”⁷¹⁷ Holloman not only married Saly he also had two children with her.⁷¹⁸ Holloman was hardly alone, as it is estimated that 15,000 to 20,000 Amerasian children were born of relationships between Vietnamese women and American men during the Vietnam War.⁷¹⁹ One must be careful not to generalize about the relationships which produced these children, but one study

⁷¹³ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers*, 203.

⁷¹⁴ Martin, interview by author.

⁷¹⁵ Willie Thomas, interview by author, September 3, 2011.

⁷¹⁶ Holloman’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 84.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Anne Keegan, “Children of Vietnam Find Few Fathers at U.S. Doors,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 13, 1987, 1.

conducted at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center found that 81 percent of the mothers of Amerasian children lived with the fathers at one time. This suggests at the very least that many of these children were not the result of brief relationships or one night stands.⁷²⁰

It is difficult to estimate how many of these children had African American fathers. During the war the black press took an interest in black Amerasian children. In December 1966 the *Philadelphia Tribune* reported, “Brown Babies Plentiful in Vietnam’s War Zone.”⁷²¹ The following year the *Tribune* alleged, “Many Vietnam Infants Fathered by Negro GI’s Left Abandoned.”⁷²² Neither article provided any statistics on the number of black Amerasian children. In June 1973 the *New York Amsterdam News* noted that as many as half of the 1,000 Amerasian children in local Saigon orphanages “obviously had Black American fathers,” but this was probably more a reflection of the taboo nature of black-Vietnamese relationships, a topic that will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, than evidence of a greater number of black Amerasians than whites.⁷²³ In December 1972, when the American military effort in Vietnam was effectively over, *Ebony* discussed the difficulty in determining just how many black Amerasians there actually were in Vietnam noting that reports were anywhere from 500 to 10,000.⁷²⁴

⁷²⁰ McKelvey, Robert S. *The Dust of Life: America’s Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 45.

⁷²¹ “Brown Babies Plentiful in Vietnam’s War Zone,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 31, 1966, 6.

⁷²² Lance Woodruff, “Many Vietnam Infants Fathered By Negro GI’s Left Abandoned,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 26, 1967, 20.

⁷²³ George Todd, “What About These Black Babies Left in Vietnam?” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 2, 1973, A7.

⁷²⁴ Era Bell Thompson, “The Plight of Black Babies in South Vietnam,” *Ebony*, December 1972, 107.

Whatever the number, there were certainly some African American soldiers who willfully abandoned their children in Vietnam. At the same time it is difficult to know just how many soldiers were aware they had children in the first place. For example, Thu-Hien Lam was born in Saigon in 1970, but her father “Ernie,” an African American supervisor of the Bachelor Officers Quarters, “returned to the U.S. before her mother had a chance to tell him she was pregnant.”⁷²⁵ It is also possible that some of the soldiers who fathered children were killed in action. Others may have been in a situation similar to Emmanuel Holloman, who tried numerous times to bring his wife Saly and child to the United States, but was unsuccessful. He continued to send money, but when the RVN government collapsed in 1975, communications between the two were cut off entirely. Holloman certainly did not believe that he abandoned his family and years later he remained hopeful that he would one day be able to bring both Saly and his son to the United States.⁷²⁶ Other black soldiers complained that the U.S. government made it difficult not only to marry a Vietnamese woman but also to bring home any children they fathered.⁷²⁷

In much the same way that the U.S. government did not encourage GIs to marry their Vietnamese girlfriends, they did not show much interest in the welfare of Amerasian children. In contrast, children born of a French parent during the First Indochina War were granted French citizenship, but the U.S. government made no such allowances for Amerasians, a policy which would have likely complicated any attempt by soldiers to

⁷²⁵ “Adopted By Family in U.S., Vietnamese Beauty Now Searches For Her Father, A Black Vietnam War GI,” *Jet*, October 11, 1999, 36.

⁷²⁶ Holloman’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 85. Holloman’s first child died in infancy. Holloman later remarried, but he told his wife that he remained committed to getting Saly and his son out.

⁷²⁷ “And Now a Domestic Baby Lift,” *Ebony*, June 1975, 134.

bring their children to the United States. Complicating matters further the RVN government viewed Amerasians as solely Vietnamese. In 1969 the RVN heavily restricted the adoption of Vietnamese children, including Amerasians by foreign couples.⁷²⁸ Some black Amerasians were adopted after this period as evidenced by the experiences of Thu-Hien Lam, a black Amerasian adopted by an American couple in 1973, but the RVN was not interested in any mass adoption of Amerasians. As the American military commitment decreased, African Americans in the United States showed an interest in adopting black Amerasians, but these efforts were largely stymied by RVN policies.⁷²⁹

“Where’s he going to go for shelter with his family”

Despite the empathy that many African Americans had for the Vietnamese, they were also expected to follow military orders. Often times, the contrast between the way many black soldiers felt about the Vietnamese and the way they were ordered to treat them proved difficult to reconcile. In the course of the war Vietnamese civilians were often injured or killed by American fire-power, and these casualties led many African Americans to empathize further.

Robert Louis recalled being ordered on a number of occasions to burn the huts of poor villagers. At first he burned the huts without compunction, but over time he felt guilty about what he was being ordered to do. Louis recognized that he was being ordered to burn more than a random hut, but someone’s actual home and that in doing so he was

⁷²⁸ “Many Illegitimate Children Stay in Vietnam as GI Fathers Leave,” *Hartford Courant*, November 9, 1972, 18.

⁷²⁹ Ibid. More information on these matters can be found in Thompson, “The Plight of Black Babies” and “Orphans of the Storm,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 25, 1973, 13.

almost certainly placing already poor Vietnamese villagers in an even worse position. Speaking of these people, he wondered “what’s this guy going to do, it’s rainy season? It’s going to start raining at two o’clock this afternoon and you just burned this little hooch down. Where’s he going to go for shelter with his family?”⁷³⁰

Louis’s concern for these villagers is noteworthy. Burning the huts of villagers, who were seen as sympathetic to or supportive of the Viet Cong, was common military practice in Vietnam, and most soldiers likely did not question it, assuming that if they were ordered to burn the huts it was likely justified. Louis questioned the morality behind these actions. He empathized with the villagers and wondered what sort of negative effect his own actions and the actions of the other men might have on them. Louis credited his “own upbringing and knowing how tough that it is” with influencing him to empathize.⁷³¹ Like other African American soldiers, Louis’s interpreted his experience in Vietnam from the perspective of his experience in the United States which included mistreatment and prejudice.

On a number of occasions, black soldiers had to decide whether to participate in the killing of Vietnamese civilians. A number claimed that they refused to kill Vietnamese civilians even when ordered to do so. While serving with the Ninth Regiment Marines in 1965-66 Reginald Edwards refused to kill civilians on numerous occasions. During one incident, Edwards’s unit was moving into a village when an old man ran by them. A white sergeant ordered Edwards to kill the man, but Edwards “missed this old

⁷³⁰ Louis, interview by author.

⁷³¹ Ibid.

man. Cause I really couldn't shoot him.”⁷³² Unfortunately, another man in Edwards's unit fired his grenade launcher at him. The old man was running back to his house to protect a group of children. Both the old man and the children were killed. As Edwards continued moving through the village, he came upon a Vietnamese civilian yelling “don't shoot.” It was the policy of his unit to shoot first and ask questions later, but he listened to the man and learned that a nearby hut was filled with women and children. Edwards's refusal to follow orders saved them.⁷³³

Edwards's unit was later involved in the killing of unarmed civilians at Cam Ne, but he refused to be involved. On August 5, 1965 as they approached the village, Edward's became “afraid that there was going to be shooting people that day, so I just kind of dealt with the animals. You know, shoot the chickens. I mean I just couldn't shoot no people.”⁷³⁴ Terry Whitmore, who served with the First Marine Division in 1967-68, had a similar experience. After taking a number of casualties, Whitmore's unit commander ordered his men to destroy a local village and kill everyone in it. Whitmore refused to kill anyone and kept busy shooting cattle.⁷³⁵

African American soldiers were in a difficult position. Despite their empathy for the Vietnamese, their options were limited. They believed there was no higher authority to which they could appeal. There were few black officers. Donald Jernigan accurately described the situation: “There were guys that brutalized the women, slapped them, shot them--the kids, and the blacks that were there sometimes had to witness it because we

⁷³² Edwards's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 2.

⁷³³ Ibid., 2-3.

⁷³⁴ Ibid., 14. It is unclear how many civilians were actually killed at Cam Ne.

⁷³⁵ Terry Whitmore, *Memphis, Nam, Sweden: The Story of a Black Deserter* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), 62.

weren't always in command at the level that we, maybe needed.”⁷³⁶ Jernigan not only saw blacks behaving differently than whites but also distinguished black officers from their white counterparts. He suggested that had more blacks been officers, Vietnamese civilians would not have been mistreated to the same extent.

Black soldiers were rarely in positions of authority, but they did occasionally try to protect Vietnamese civilians from mistreatment. Wes Geary, who served with the First Infantry Division in 1966-67, recalled an incident when he saw a Vietnamese girl being chased by a white soldier. Geary immediately recognized the girl as someone who regularly sold soft drinks to the soldiers. The young girl was yelling “not one, not sale” as the white soldier grabbed at her. Realizing that the soldier was trying to rape the young girl, Geary grabbed him and “shook him about four or five times and told him I would kick his butt” if he didn't leave the girl alone.⁷³⁷ The man backed off and even later apologized to Geary for his behavior, but Geary remembered the event as an indication that some soldiers were willing to abuse nearly anyone even a “little kid” selling soft drinks.⁷³⁸

Dwyte A. Brown protected a Vietnamese woman and her daughter from the unwanted sexual advances of a white soldier. While he was showering at a military base, Brown noticed that several Vietnamese maids were starting to clean one of the showers. He kept a towel around his waist out of respect for the women, but a white soldier

⁷³⁶ Interview with Don Jernigan as found in Wright, *Thoughts*, 94.

⁷³⁷ Wes Geary, interview by author, Dearborn, Michigan, August 7, 2009.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

removed his towel and grabbed the daughter of the maid and tried to assault her sexually. Brown rebuked the man and prevented him from going any further.⁷³⁹

While serving in the Central Highlands with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division in 1967-68, Richard Ford and his unit came across a group of villagers. Ford quickly recognized that they were Degar tribesmen, known to the Americans as Montagnards, and not ethnic Vietnamese. As one of the Montagnards came around the corner, a white soldier whispered that he intended to shoot him. Davis, Ford's black friend, quickly intervened, telling the white soldier to "get that thought out of your mind, cause I'll blow your brains out just for thinking it."⁷⁴⁰ Ron Bradley recalled an incident in which a white sergeant began torturing a Vietnamese civilian. Outraged, Bradley threatened to shoot the sergeant if he didn't let the civilian go.⁷⁴¹

Gerald Lynch, who served in 1968-69, recalled an incident when his marine unit was travelling through a crowded street and they came upon a group of children. When the children began to beg for food, a white soldier threw a carton of c-rations at the group in a clear attempt to injure them. Angered by the soldier's callousness, Lynch hit him with his rifle. While Lynch felt as though his actions were justified he was saddened when "everybody looked at me like I was the criminal." In Lynch's mind the only one who had done anything criminal was the white soldier.⁷⁴²

On February 14, 1970, a fight broke out between black and white soldiers serving in the 611th Transportation Company on Vinh Long Army airfield. An U.S Army

⁷³⁹ Brown's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 265.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁴¹ Bradley, interview by author.

⁷⁴² Bavarskis, "Vietnam Veteran Decides To Join The Black Struggle," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 26, 1973, 10.

investigation concluded that the incident was “initiated when a white member of the company pinched a Vietnamese waitress while she was waiting on the table.” The waitress informed a group of black soldiers, who confronted the soldier in question. When the white soldier was unrepentant a fight broke out.⁷⁴³

While many African Americans believed that whites were far more likely to regard the Vietnamese as inferior and mistreat them, some African American soldiers were guilty of similar behavior. African American soldier Dwight Williams admitted, “We (blacks) called the Vietnamese gooks too. Almost everybody took on some racist feelings, no question.”⁷⁴⁴ African American soldiers were not always kind to Vietnamese civilians. Horace Coleman admitted that at least some African Americans abused Vietnamese people because they thought “this is my opportunity to be on top for once.”⁷⁴⁵ A number of African American soldiers in Harold Bryant’s unit rigged their cigarettes to explode in the face of any Vietnamese civilian who was unfortunate enough to ask them for one.⁷⁴⁶

Other black soldiers were involved in much more serious crimes, including rape and murder. Walking through a village, Haywood Kirkland came across black soldiers from another unit raping a Vietnamese woman.⁷⁴⁷ Terry Whitmore witnessed members of his unit kill unarmed Vietnamese civilians, most notably a black marine who killed an

⁷⁴³ Letter, Dale E. Patrick to Commander in Chief, United States Army Pacific, April 16, 1970, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁷⁴⁴ Appy, *Working Class War*, 225.

⁷⁴⁵ Coleman, interview by author.

⁷⁴⁶ Bryant’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 26.

⁷⁴⁷ Kirkland’s as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 93.

unarmed Buddhist monk.⁷⁴⁸ David Parks described an incident in which a black soldier named Jones killed an unarmed civilian who didn't have proper identification papers in front of his own children.⁷⁴⁹

African Americans were among the soldiers who participated in the My Lai Massacre.⁷⁵⁰ Varnado Simpson, an African American infantryman from Jackson, Mississippi, admitted to killing as many as twenty-five unarmed civilians, most of them women and children, at My Lai.⁷⁵¹ There were other incidents though none on the scale of the My Lai Massacre in which African American soldiers killed civilians. Deborah Nelson's *The War Behind Me*, which is based on recently declassified Army documents regarding war crimes allegations during the Vietnam War, includes an incident involving an African American soldier who threw a grenade into a bunker filled with civilians, killing two children and a woman.⁷⁵²

However, even in such cases, more often than not other African American soldiers condemned this behavior. Whenever Horace Coleman saw black people displaying racism towards the Vietnamese or otherwise mistreating them his immediate thought was "you ought to know better than that."⁷⁵³ Whitmore was disgusted by much of what he saw in Vietnam, but he was especially disgusted by the actions of the black marine who killed the Buddhist monk, believing, like Coleman, that the marine should

⁷⁴⁸ Whitmore, *Memphis, Nam, Sweden*, 62.

⁷⁴⁹ Parks, *GI Diary*, 110-111.

⁷⁵⁰ Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 3. The My Lai Massacre took place on March 16, 1968 when members of the Eleventh Light Infantry Brigade of the Americal Division entered an undefended village on the coast of Central Vietnam. Over a roughly four hour period, they murdered upwards of five hundred old men, women, and children.

⁷⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁵² Nelson, *The War Behind Me*, 126.

⁷⁵³ Coleman, interview by author.

also have known better.⁷⁵⁴ Parks was horrified to learn that Jones had shot an unarmed civilian, and he partly blamed himself for not tying the man up which was proper protocol when holding a suspect without proper identification. He didn't follow procedure because he believed it would make the man's family "feel bad." Recalling the incident later in his journal, Parks wrote, "I can't stop thinking about those kids. They'll hate us for the rest of their lives. And who can blame them?"⁷⁵⁵

Most soldiers, regardless of race, were disgusted when the details of the My Lai massacre were released, and black soldiers were no exception. Anthony Martin was not surprised when he learned about My Lai, "but it did surprise me that African Americans were involved in these atrocities."⁷⁵⁶ While it is not known how many African Americans participated in the raping and killing of civilians at My Lai, a number of African Americans refused to kill anyone. Herbert Carter, an African American tunnel rat, was the only American casualty during the massacre. He shot himself in the foot, possibly intentionally, in an attempt to ensure that he didn't have to kill anyone.⁷⁵⁷ In the early stages of the massacre, Carter reacted with disbelief and opposition when William Calley informed his men that he expected them to kill a group of Vietnamese children.⁷⁵⁸ In an earlier incident, Carter had been accused of assaulting a male Vietnamese suspect, but he appeared to draw the line at killing women and children.⁷⁵⁹ Speaking to investigators later, Carter stated, "That day I tried my best to stay out of that whole mess. Some people

⁷⁵⁴ Whitmore, *Memphis, Nam, Sweden*, 62.

⁷⁵⁵ Parks, *GI Diary*, 111. Parks had fallen asleep while waiting for local police to come and identify the man. He was jarred awake by the sound of Jones shooting the man.

⁷⁵⁶ Martin, interview by author.

⁷⁵⁷ Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, 134.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

might say that it was a cowardly act, but I just tried to stay out of it...I don't know how those guys can sleep. I can hardly sleep now and I didn't even participate in any of this mess.”⁷⁶⁰

Robert Maples, of Englishtown, New Jersey, was another African American soldier present at My Lai. Maples had long disapproved of the behavior of many of the soldiers in the company. He was disgusted by those who insisted on collecting the ears of enemy soldiers believing it “gross” and “unwarranted.”⁷⁶¹ Maples’s disgust for his fellow soldiers only grew once he walked into the village and realized that they had already killed numerous civilians and were in the process of killing more. Upon reaching an open ditch filled with civilians, Calley turned to Maples and said “load your machine gun and shoot these people.” Maples shook his head and refused telling Calley “I’m not going to do that.” Calley then aimed his gun at Maples as if to shoot him. Maples recalled being surprised when some of the other soldiers intervened and prevented Calley from shooting him.⁷⁶²

Harry Stanley, an African American soldier from Gulfport, Mississippi, also refused a direct order to shoot women and children at My Lai. Raised by a single mother, Stanley was taught to “believe that everybody’s equal” and he brought this perspective to Vietnam.⁷⁶³ In many ways Stanley was the exact opposite of Calley and other soldiers in the company who, even before My Lai, showed hostility to Vietnamese civilians. Instead, Stanley was intrigued by Vietnam, its people, and culture. Within three months of

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid., 299.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., 111.

⁷⁶² Ibid., 123.

⁷⁶³ Ibid., 49.

arriving in the country he “had taught himself to speak the language better than the company’s GI interpreters.” Other soldiers referred to him as a “gook lover.”⁷⁶⁴

Stanley was shocked when he came upon dead Vietnamese civilians and was horrified when he realized that the goal was to kill everyone in the village.⁷⁶⁵ When ordered to kill women and children, Stanley refused, later arguing that any order that required him to kill unarmed civilians was not an order worth obeying.⁷⁶⁶ Stanley not only refused to participate in the massacre, he also tried to save some of the Vietnamese people he came across. When he and Carter came across a small boy, Stanley urged the boy to run away and hide.⁷⁶⁷ A Vietnamese survivor recalled that an African American man who spoke Vietnamese, which was almost certainly Stanley, accompanied him and six family members to the edge of the village and told them to run away quickly to another village. Another family of five provided a similar account.⁷⁶⁸

The fact that three black soldiers allegedly refused to participate in the May Lai massacre is not insignificant as it speaks to the perception held by that many African Americans that blacks were less likely to mistreat or kill civilians. This is not to say that some whites may have been just as hesitant or oppositional to killing civilians at My Lai and elsewhere. In the case of My Lai it was a helicopter gunship manned by three whites that landed several times in the middle of the massacre and attempted to stop it. In addition helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson immediately reported the massacre to

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid., 161.

officials.⁷⁶⁹ In this respect race should not be seen as the sole determinant in how individual soldiers reacted to the mistreatment of the Vietnamese—personal values also played an influential role.

Deborah Nelson's reportage on war crimes in Vietnam was based in part on the accounts of soldiers who witnessed incidents of murder and rape. She pays particular attention to accusations made by George Lewis, an African American soldier from Columbus, Ohio. Lewis was a sergeant in the Ninth Infantry Division who served in Vietnam from June 1968 to June 1969 and earned a Purple Heart and a number of other combat accommodation medals.⁷⁷⁰ After leaving Vietnam, Lewis sent three letters to General William Westmoreland and other Army leaders detailing incidents involving the killing of unarmed civilians. Lewis alleged that the men in his unit were ordered to shoot any Vietnamese person that tried to run away, that snipers regularly shot unarmed farmers from 400 yards away, that the division forced civilians to walk point through minefields, and that there was an overreliance on gunships and artillery strikes. Lewis believed that the use of artillery strikes was done in a pursuit of high body counts. He stated, "We were 'told' to kill many times more Vietnamese than at My Lay[My Lai], and very few per cents[sic] of them did we know were enemy."⁷⁷¹

In a second letter written to General Orwin C. Talbott, commanding general at Fort Benning, Georgia, Lewis added, "The generals have got to do something about this pretty soon before anymore [sic] people get killed."⁷⁷² In a final letter, Lewis threatened

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁰ Nelson, *The War Behind Me*, 82.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid., 75-78.

⁷⁷² Ibid., 80.

to write letters of complaint to two members of the Democratic party, California Representative Ron Dellums and Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy stating, “All of you can explain why you got these letters and done nothing about the war crimes.”⁷⁷³

Lewis’s statements are revealing in a number of respects. His concern for the Vietnamese is clear and is similar to the concerns voiced by other African American soldiers. While the pursuit of high body counts was apparently regarded as sound military practice, Lewis viewed it as immoral. He labeled this policy, when it meant the intentional killing of civilians, as a war crime. He did not argue that it was poor strategy, had a negative effect on the war effort, or lessened morale. Rather his argument focused on the humanity of the Vietnamese and the immorality of killing innocent civilians.

Conclusion

Lewis’s empathy for the Vietnamese represented something larger. Like Lewis, many African American soldiers expressed concern for Vietnamese civilians. These feelings were largely based on a perception that Vietnamese people faced struggles that were similar to those faced by African Americans back home. Arriving in Vietnam with little knowledge of the country or its people, African Americans viewed the Vietnamese from a perspective shaped almost entirely by their own experiences. They often related the poverty of the Vietnamese to their own relative poverty back home. Others recognized that the racist way in which some whites talked about the Vietnamese and even treated them was similar to the way racist whites treated African Americans. They sympathized with the situation of the Vietnamese not just because they were poor but also because they were being treated by whites as an “inferior race.”

⁷⁷³ Ibid., 81.

Black soldiers recounted their own attempts to help Vietnamese civilians and claimed that many white soldiers often had little sympathy for them. While some whites undoubtedly treated the Vietnamese fairly, in much the same way that some blacks mistreated the Vietnamese, many African Americans portrayed white soldiers as far more abusive towards Vietnamese civilians. Some black soldiers claimed that they either prevented the unwarranted mistreatment or killing of Vietnamese civilians or at the very least they refused to be involved. The reality is that some black soldiers were involved in horrendous crimes against Vietnamese civilians. However, many African American soldiers believed that without question white soldiers viewed and treated the Vietnamese differently. African American soldiers believed that their own experiences back home led them to empathize with the daily struggles of the Vietnamese.

Chapter 5: "'You and me-same same" and "They called me 'monkey'": Conflicting Racial Views of the Vietnamese

In the documentary, *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me a Nigger*, James Daly, a black marine who had recently returned from Vietnam, claimed that it was not just African Americans who empathized with the Vietnamese, but that the Vietnamese reciprocated these feelings.⁷⁷⁴ Daly believed that the Vietnamese saw a great contrast in the ways that black and white soldiers treated them. According to Daly, the Vietnamese understood that white soldiers were far more likely to use of slurs like “gook” and “slope” while “a lot of colored guys wouldn’t call a Vietnamese a gook or a slope...because it’s a racial epithet.” He was also convinced that many Vietnamese identified with the struggles of African Americans in the United States. He claimed “the Vietnamese then saw what was happening back in the States was happening right there in their own country. There was racism right there in front of their eyes.”⁷⁷⁵ According to Daly the Vietnamese perception that both Vietnamese and African Americans were victims of white racism led them to empathize with black soldiers. Daly recalled that the Vietnamese frequently approached him and said “me and you same same” or “hey soul brother!” These greetings apparently reflected the Vietnamese belief that they shared a special bond with black soldiers as both groups faced similar hardships and struggles.⁷⁷⁶

⁷⁷⁴ *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger*, 1968. *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger* Video December 16, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVVh1JEe7Bw>

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid.

On the surface, Daly's observations may seem outlandish. Most Vietnamese civilians whom soldiers had an opportunity to meet were uneducated and poor.⁷⁷⁷ Most did not speak more than a few words of English, and most American soldiers did not speak more than a few words of Vietnamese. Additionally, most of the exchanges between soldiers and civilians were occurring in the midst of an ongoing war. It is unlikely that very many rural peasants, refugees, or civilian workers had even a cursory knowledge of American history or American race relations. Most of the Vietnamese whom soldiers interacted with knew little more about the United States than that it was a powerful country which had sent hundreds of thousands of soldiers to Vietnam.

Equally important, the Vietnamese had their own conception of race which predated the American arrival. Vietnam was not an entirely homogenous society, and ethnic minorities faced discrimination from the Vietnamese ethnic majority. Given these realities, conclusions about "progressive" Vietnamese views regarding race or African Americans specifically should be viewed with some skepticism.

We should question whether it was even possible for black soldiers to understand fully what the Vietnamese thought about them. Nonetheless, many black soldiers shared Daly's opinion that the Vietnamese held positive views about African Americans and were sympathetic to the black struggle against racial prejudice and discrimination. Because the Vietnamese were not white and because they faced racial discrimination from whites black soldiers assumed that the Vietnamese would naturally be sympathetic to African Americans who had experienced similar injustices. They believed that skin

⁷⁷⁷ Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 288-289.

color, race, and common experiences were as important to the Vietnamese as they were to African Americans.

Black soldiers serving in Vietnam were not the first African Americans to believe that other non-white peoples would naturally be sympathetic. They shared, most likely unknowingly, the perception of other 20th century African Americans that all non-white peoples shared similar struggles and therefore were naturally sympathetic to one another. Historian Marc Gallicchio's *The African American Encounter with Japan & China* highlights the efforts of such African American leaders as W.E. B. Dubois and Marcus Garvey to create an international alliance which linked the African American struggle for civil and political rights with global anticolonial movements. These "black internationalists" believed that as victims of racism and imperialism "darker" races had a common interest in overthrowing white supremacy and establishing an international order based on racial equality. In the years before World War II, these internationalists were particularly interested in forming an alliance first with Japan and then with China, after the Pacific War began, because they believed that these non-white peoples would naturally sympathize with the African American struggle for greater civil and political rights.⁷⁷⁸

In recent years, historians Gerald Horne, Michael Krenn, Mary Dudziak, and Thomas Borstelmann have argued that with the advent of the Cold War the inclination of African Americans to link their struggle for equality to international events and to the

⁷⁷⁸ Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan & China* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

struggles of other non-white peoples became all the more common and pronounced.⁷⁷⁹

While it is difficult to substantiate that African American soldiers serving in Vietnam were influenced by these earlier movements, they often viewed their relationship with the Vietnamese from a similar perspective. In their minds Vietnamese civilians understood that African Americans and the Vietnamese faced similar types of discrimination by whites. This shared perspective supposedly bonded black soldiers and the Vietnamese.

Yet the reality was that some ethnic Vietnamese mistreated and discriminated against racial minorities in Vietnam and black soldiers. While many African Americans believed that the Vietnamese were naturally sympathetic, others encountered individual Vietnamese who either expressed racist sentiments or discriminated against blacks. However, more often than not, blacks believed that racist whites were responsible. They believed that whites brought their prejudices to Vietnam and had taught the Vietnamese to discriminate against African Americans. While white soldiers were hardly responsible for every act of discrimination by the Vietnamese against African Americans, as we will see, there is considerable evidence that some white soldiers did encourage the Vietnamese to hate or mistreat African American soldiers.

“Me and you same same”

A number of contemporary journalistic accounts describe the belief of many African American soldiers that the Vietnamese were sympathetic to them. In January 1965 the *Cleveland Call and Post* published an article on the experiences of black

⁷⁷⁹ Thomas Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Boston: Harvard University, 2003), Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2011), Gerald Horne, *Ends of Empire: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), Michael Krenn, *Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1959-1969* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

soldiers in Vietnam. When asked about the Vietnamese, black Air Force staff sergeant Felton McFarland asserted that the Vietnamese were “most receptive, especially toward Negroes.” He also claimed that on numerous occasions, the Vietnamese “confided to him that colored people were warmhearted and friends, not cold and haughty like the French colonialists and some white Americans.”⁷⁸⁰

In June 1966 Whitney M. Young Jr., executive director of the National Urban League, spent ten days traveling throughout Vietnam. As might be expected, Young spent his time meeting with black soldiers, and one of the issues that came up repeatedly was Vietnamese-black relations. Young reported that with few exceptions relations between the two groups were quite positive. Furthermore, he noted that most African Americans believed that the Vietnamese “feel special sympathy toward the Negro soldiers.”⁷⁸¹ That same year the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported that African American soldiers believed that the Vietnamese had positive feelings for them.⁷⁸²

Most black soldiers agreed with the views expressed in the *Cleveland Call and Post*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and by Young. Howard Jackson, a black marine from San Diego, reported from Vietnam in April 1967 that “the Vietnamese have no overt racial prejudice.”⁷⁸³ Speaking of his interactions with Vietnamese people, Anthony Martin, who served in 1966-67 with the Third Marine division in Con Thien Province, recalled “everything that I received from Vietnamese people was a whole lot of curiosity and

⁷⁸⁰ Dan Daly, “Call-Post Correspondent Reports From War-Torn Vietnam: Negro GI’s ‘Not Angry; Just ‘Confused,’” *Cleveland Call and Post*, January 2, 1965, 1A.

⁷⁸¹ John Randolph, “Integration Needs Viet Approach, Negro Says: Leader Impressed by Teamwork Found Among U.S. Troops on Visit to Saigon,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1966, F5.

⁷⁸² Bob Lucas, “‘Jim Crow at Home’ Added Foe for GI’s,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 20, 1966, A1.

⁷⁸³ Ethel Payne, “GIs Tell How They Stand On The Viet War,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 11, 1967, 2.

love.”⁷⁸⁴ Martin also believed that some Vietnamese took an interest in the black experience in the United States. He befriended a young boy who spoke some English and asked Martin “a lot of questions about the United States and what’s it like to be you know a black man in the United States.”⁷⁸⁵ Don Jernigan observed that “you certainly felt the kinship with the people of color that you were combating and in the villages and the hamlets, sometimes you felt that brotherhood in terms of reaching out and the warmth that you got from certain papasans and certain mamasans.”⁷⁸⁶ In 1969 Asa Martin of Chicago wrote a number of letters home to his mother from Vietnam. In one of these letters he informed her that “the Vietnamese people treat ‘brothers’ like kings.”⁷⁸⁷

Louis Perkins, who served in 1966-67 and again in 1968-69, believed that the Vietnamese liked African American soldiers better than whites because they perceived that white soldiers were more likely to hold prejudicial views towards them. In his estimation, “the Vietnamese knew who were genuine and who were full of crap to be honest with you, and that’s why they could relate to us blacks a lot better than the whites.”⁷⁸⁸ While Perkins credited the behavior of African Americans with engendering preferential treatment from the Vietnamese, others claimed that the Vietnamese favored them because they were persons of color and victims of discrimination.

In November 1965 journalist Simeon Booker reported from Vietnam that black soldiers were commonly welcomed into bars by women who “point to their skin as a sign

⁷⁸⁴ Anthony Martin, interview by author, September 12, 2011.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁶ Interview with Don Jernigan as found in Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986), 94. “Mamasan” and “Papasans” were colloquial terms used by American soldiers in Vietnam when referring to older women and older men.

⁷⁸⁷ “Mother Seeks More Info On Son Slain in Vietnam,” *Jet*, April 3, 1969, 25.

⁷⁸⁸ Louis Perkins, interview by author, December 17, 2011.

of brotherhood in the worldwide order of darker people.”⁷⁸⁹ Emanuel Holloman, who served with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry in Cu Chi in 1966-69 and again in Long Binh in 1971, claimed that Vietnamese people preferred the company of African Americans and that they would instinctively “warm right up to a black person even if they had never seen one.”⁷⁹⁰ Holloman’s statement implies that the Vietnamese identified almost immediately with African Americans at least in part because both were non-whites. The simple fact that African Americans had dark skin led the Vietnamese to identify with them. James Lewis, who served in the Army Corps of Engineers in 1968-69, also concluded that the Vietnamese generally viewed African American soldiers in a positive light because both were non-whites.⁷⁹¹ Harold Bryant believed that the Vietnamese favored blacks because Buddha, who many Vietnamese worshipped, shared similar physical characteristics. He theorized, “Buddha was black. Take a good look at a Buddha. You’ll see that he has thick lips and has a very broad nose and very kinky hair.”⁷⁹² There is no evidence to substantiate Bryant’s allegation that the Vietnamese made any connection between the physical characteristics of Buddha and African Americans. Nevertheless, Bryant’s account demonstrates that black soldiers were often looking for some kind of confirmation of empathy from Vietnamese civilians.

A number of African Americans claimed that the Vietnamese explicitly expressed their affinity for African Americans. James Daly recalled a number of incidents in which Vietnamese people told him “me and you same same,” and others remembered the

⁷⁸⁹ Simeon Booker, “Negroes in Vietnam: ‘We too, Are Americans,’” *Ebony*, November 1965, 89.

⁷⁹⁰ Emmanuel J. Holloman’s account as found Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 84.

⁷⁹¹ James Lewis, interview by author, March 20, 2012.

⁷⁹² Harold Bryant’s account as found Terry, *Bloods*, 25.

Vietnamese using similar terminology.⁷⁹³ Dan Dubose, who served in the Mekong Delta with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in 1966-67, observed that the Vietnamese were a “very open-minded people” in terms of racial issues. He claimed that it was not uncommon for a Vietnamese person to approach an African American soldier and state, “You and me, same-same.”⁷⁹⁴ On more than one occasion, Thomas Brannon, who served in 1966-67 with the First Cavalry Division in the Iron Triangle region of Vietnam, recalled a Vietnamese person telling him “you same same me.”⁷⁹⁵ Similarly, Wayne Smith, who served with the Ninth Infantry Division in 1968-69 in the Mekong Delta, remembered, “There were some Vietnamese that said same-same soul brother, same-same soul sister. They wanted to identify with African Americans.”⁷⁹⁶

Thomas Belton claimed that on numerous occasions Vietnamese approached him and said “You GI you black you same same like me, have same problems.” These Vietnamese apparently saw themselves and African Americans as facing similar problems. Belton also claimed that some Vietnamese even questioned as to why he had come to Vietnam in the first place considering that African Americans faced a far more important “war at home” against prejudice and discrimination.⁷⁹⁷ Belton’s account suggests that at least some Vietnamese were somewhat aware of the status of African Americans in the United States.

Ron Bradley, who served in an aviation company with the Ninth Infantry division in 1967-68, claimed that the Vietnamese “preferred being with the black soldiers and

⁷⁹³ *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me A Nigger*.

⁷⁹⁴ Dave Dubose, “Combat Knows No Color,” *Vietnam*, December 1990, 20-22.

⁷⁹⁵ Thomas Brannon, interview by author, December 6, 2011.

⁷⁹⁶ Wayne Smith, interview by author, October 25, 2011.

⁷⁹⁷ Thomas Belton’s Account as found in Wright, *Thoughts*, 68.

identifying with us and we got along better. They used to call the white soldiers devils with horns.”⁷⁹⁸ He felt that Vietnamese people developed an affinity for African Americans because they treated them in a more humane manner than the average white soldier. However, he also perceived that the Vietnamese “identified with us because of what they heard about we were going through in America and how we were being treated as third class people.” According to Bradley, at least some Vietnamese saw parallels in the way some whites treated African Americans in the United States and the way they were often treated by white soldiers.⁷⁹⁹

Mel Adams of Orangeburg, South Carolina, who served in 1966-67 and 1971-72, also believed that the Vietnamese, especially those with some degree of education, recognized that African Americans were often victims of discrimination and prejudice in their own country and they empathized with them as a result. He recalled that some Vietnamese people “thought you had it worse off than they did because they’re reading the paper 67, 68, Martin Luther King, the riots, and the police dogs and all that stuff.” In Adams’s estimation the struggles of African Americans meant that some Vietnamese people “wanted to identify with you from the standpoint that you’re like them. The North Vietnamese are trying to run over you and the white people are trying to run over you.”⁸⁰⁰

Brian Settles, who served in 1968-69 as a navigator pilot with the 390th Fighter Squadron, also believed that Vietnamese people favored African Americans over whites. He felt that “There were a lot of Vietnamese women and men too who related to the

⁷⁹⁸ Ron Bradley, interview by author, October 23, 2011.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁰ Melvin Adams, interview by author, March 14, 2012.

brothers more than white dudes because of some understanding of how white-black relationships were in the United States and relating more to the brothers as victims of oppression in America.”⁸⁰¹

Occasionally, the affection which Vietnamese allegedly showed towards black soldiers proved beneficial. At least a few African Americans believed that their friendships with the Vietnamese provided them with some protection in potentially dangerous areas. A December 1967 *Chicago Tribune* article, “Viet Cong Put Bounty on Yank But Villagers Snub Big Offer” discusses the efforts of an African American marine named Melvin Smith to organize a group of Vietnamese villagers into a militia in the hamlet of Tuy Loan. Smith was so effective in organizing this militia that the Viet Cong offered \$1,700 to anyone who could either kill or capture him. The *Tribune* noted that while it was not unusual for the Viet Cong to offer rewards, the “amount offered for the sergeant was exceptionally high.”⁸⁰² The Viet Cong even distributed leaflets and broadcast the reward offer using bullhorns, but none of the villagers, all of whom were poor, turned Smith in. The article suggests that Smith, known as Trung Si Mel to the Vietnamese, was so well liked by the villagers that instead of killing or capturing him for the Viet Cong they protected him.⁸⁰³

Serving with the Fourth Infantry Division in Pleiku and An Khe in 1970, Robert Holcomb often gave food and other supplies to needy Vietnamese. While his gift giving was done primarily out of a sincere concern for their welfare, he also recognized that his

⁸⁰¹ Brian Settles, interview by author, October 1, 2012

⁸⁰² “Viet Cong Put Bounty on Yank But Villagers Snub Big Offer,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 16, 1967, 7.

⁸⁰³ Ibid.

actions gained him trust and respect in the community. After he purchased some eucalyptus oil from a local woman, she provided him with information about Viet Cong troop movements.⁸⁰⁴ Luther Benton, who served in Hoi An in 1967-68, claimed that his friendships with a number of orphans allowed him to drive through different villages without harassment.⁸⁰⁵ Emanuel Holloman believed his friendship with the Vietnamese community allowed him to move around freely. He stated “the Americans were amazed, you know, at the way I was able to move around. Like I would go places where you couldn’t take a tank.” While Holloman was likely exaggerating, the fact that he spoke Vietnamese fluently, was married to a Vietnamese woman, and was friends with numerous villagers, probably meant that he was able to move around more freely than other soldiers.⁸⁰⁶

Friendly Vietnamese civilians on occasion provided black soldiers with information regarding potential enemy attacks. While stationed at Cam Ranh Bay in 1966-67, Eddie Wright developed a friendship with a maid who worked on the base. One night, at around four in the morning, Wright heard a knock on the door, and the maid rushed in. Wright stated that “she grabbed my arm and said ‘Papa San Dee Dee’ and she risked her life to tell me that the Viet Cong would hit Cam Ranh Bay in two days and she didn’t want me to be there.”⁸⁰⁷ This incident says much about their relationship. The young maid had a close friendship with Wright and that she ran to tell him about the

⁸⁰⁴ Holcomb’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 208.

⁸⁰⁵ Luther C. Benton’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 68.

⁸⁰⁶ Holloman’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 81.

⁸⁰⁷ Eddie Wright’s account as found in Wright, *Thoughts*. 120.

attack as soon as she heard about it. She had come to his door well past curfew, risking death as it was military policy to shoot any Vietnamese found on the base after curfew.

Lee Ewing reported a similar incident. While assisting in bridge construction over the Perfume River in 1967, he befriended a young Vietnamese woman who sold soft drinks to the soldiers. The woman provided warnings to Ewing and his fellow soldiers: if the National Liberation Front (NLF) was planning an attack, she would either not show up or leave early, signaling to them that they should prepare for an attack.⁸⁰⁸ While these actions could have been motivated by more than simple friendship, there is no evidence of a more intimate relationship.⁸⁰⁹

“I’m colored to her, same as I’m colored to anybody else”

While many African Americans believed their feelings towards the Vietnamese were reciprocated, others were skeptical. Clyde Jackson, who served in Phu Bai in 1968-69, claimed that it was fairly common for Vietnamese civilians to approach African American soldiers and say “soul-brother number one and you know white boy ten thousand.”⁸¹⁰ However, he did not believe that these statements reflected their real views. Instead, he believed that some Vietnamese pretended to favor African Americans in hopes that they would buy them things or help them in some way. Jackson’s comments suggest that some Vietnamese civilians may have had ulterior motives when they claimed “sameness” with African Americans.

⁸⁰⁸ Lee Sleemons Ewing, interview by Pat McClain. Veterans History Project, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 5.

⁸⁰⁹ Of course, some Vietnamese civilians certainly helped or provided information to white soldiers as well.

⁸¹⁰ Clyde Jackson, interview by author, January 8, 2012.

A September 1965 *Jet* article discussed an anonymous black airman's experiences with Vietnamese civilians. The man stated, "You go into a bar and the girl sits down next to you and points at her skin and then she points at mine. That's supposed to mean we're all the same." However, the airman did not believe that these sorts of declarations of equality were genuine. He reasoned, "Hell, I know she's just trying to con me out of my money. I'm colored to her, same as I'm colored to anybody else."⁸¹¹ To him the idea that the Vietnamese favored African Americans was nothing more than a myth.

As these accounts suggest, Vietnamese appeals to African Americans may have been as much about receiving some form of favoritism from black soldiers as anything else. There is no evidence that Vietnamese civilians used language like "me and you same-same" in their appeals to white soldiers. Certainly they befriended white soldiers to obtain money or goods from them.

Some African American soldiers recognized that the Vietnamese were not free of prejudice. Lamont Steptoe had a positive impression of the Vietnamese, but he also thought that the Vietnamese were "racial purists" who did not believe it was acceptable to be anything but Vietnamese in Vietnam.⁸¹² Steptoe suggests that Vietnamese conceptions of race were far different from what some African American soldiers perceived them to be.

Others understood that even if some individual Vietnamese people liked African Americans this wasn't necessarily an endorsement of their presence in Vietnam. Ron

⁸¹¹ "GI's In Vietnam Have Their Say On L.A. Riot," *Jet*, September 2, 1965, 60.

⁸¹² Lamont Steptoe, interview by author, June 25, 2012.

Bradley believed that while the Vietnamese liked African American soldiers better than whites, most wanted all American soldiers to leave the country as soon as possible. The general attitude of the civilians he encountered was “we don’t need you, we don’t want you.”⁸¹³ Likewise, Ron Copes was empathetic towards the Vietnamese he encountered, but he did not think they preferred African Americans or had any interest in or knowledge of American racial issues. Most Vietnamese just “wanted to be left alone...we were all interrupters of their lifestyle...they didn’t want to deal with Americans period.”⁸¹⁴

The skepticism of these African Americans is likely a more realistic and more perceptive assessment of Vietnamese racial views. There is considerable evidence that many Vietnamese did not hold particularly “progressive” views about race. In the spring of 1968 African American journalist Thomas A. Johnson interviewed a Vietnamese journalist named Nguyen Lao, who wrote a popular column in the English language *Saigon Post*. Lao admitted that “Vietnamese normally prefer a light skin over a dark skin. This is why you will not see Vietnamese girls sunbathing.”⁸¹⁵ Lao also explained why some African Americans might have felt that Vietnamese people preferred them to whites. He stated, “You will also find that Vietnamese will frequently approach a darker person before approaching a white person, feeling more comfortable, less afraid and perhaps superior to the darker person.”⁸¹⁶

⁸¹³ Bradley, interview by author.

⁸¹⁴ Ron Copes, interview by author, November 17, 2011.

⁸¹⁵ Thomas A. Johnson, “The Negro in Vietnam: An Opportunity to win the career man’s reward,” *Globe and Mail*, April 30, 1968, 7.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid.

Other evidence suggests that many Vietnamese were not only uncomfortable with dark skin but also with the threat presented by the presence of different races. Historian Nu-Anh Tran describes an incident involving an American serviceman named James R. Kipp. On April 4, 1966 Kipp wrote to the English language *Saigon Daily News* criticizing Vietnamese society and culture. When the article was reprinted in the Vietnamese language version of the same paper, many Vietnamese readers angrily responded. Tran argues that their responses underline “how the American presence generated acute anxiety among the South Vietnamese reading public concerning the maintenance of an authentic, autonomous identity.”⁸¹⁷ All the letters asserted that Americans and Vietnamese were different peoples. A number even claimed that the Vietnamese were far superior.

Much of Kipp’s original letter criticized Vietnamese women who, in his estimation, were always looking to sleep with American servicemen. A number of Vietnamese commentators concentrated on this assertion, some claiming that any Vietnamese woman who slept with a foreigner was no longer Vietnamese but a race traitor. A respectable Vietnamese woman was expected to be loyal to Vietnamese men and ignore American men. This incident suggests that these Vietnamese were not only opposed to Vietnamese women having sex with someone of another “race,” but also that the Vietnamese people should remain distinct and “pure.”⁸¹⁸

African American soldiers were not the first black soldiers that the Vietnamese had encountered as the France employed African soldiers throughout the First Indochina

⁸¹⁷ Nu-Anh Tran, “South Vietnamese Identity, American Intervention, and the Newspaper *Chinh Luan*, 1965-1969,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 1. 2006, 170.

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 186-194.

War (1946-54). In 1946, thirty thousand African colonial troops, mostly from Senegal, Morocco, and Algeria were stationed in Vietnam.⁸¹⁹ By 1950, the number had risen to fifty thousand.⁸²⁰ While little is known about how different sectors of Vietnamese society viewed these troops, historian Shawn McHale has shown that the Viet Minh utilized racist propaganda, which portrayed these African troops as animalistic cannibals bent on transforming Vietnamese society, to attract and unite the Vietnamese against the French war effort.⁸²¹ This propaganda may have been intended to appeal to some Vietnamese who feared that African soldiers were more likely to mistreat and kill civilians. This anxiety was strengthened by an incident in which African troops allegedly participated in the killing of some six hundred civilians in the Mekong Delta. However, the Viet Minh may have focused on Africans simply “because Africans and Moroccans were more alien and unfamiliar than Frenchmen,” making them “more convenient targets of hatred.”⁸²² It is, of course, hard to know if the Viet Minh were stoking fears in a population whom they believed already held prejudicial views towards black people or if they were trying to establish the idea that blacks should be feared and hated. Either way, McHale’s article demonstrates that at least some Vietnamese had prejudiced opinions about blacks before African Americans arrived.

⁸¹⁹ Mark Jason Gilbert, “From Tonkin to Tikrit: Communist Propaganda, the Wars in Vietnam and Modern World History,” *World History Connected*, accessed June 2012, <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/5.1/gilbert.html>.

⁸²⁰ Shawn McHale, “Understanding the Fanatic Mind? The Viet Minh and Race Hatred in the First Indochina War(1945-1954),” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 4, No.3 (Fall 2009), 122.

⁸²¹ Ibid., 98-100

⁸²² Ibid., 122.

“They looked like my little brothers”

Vietnam was not a racially homogenous society. It included a Chinese minority, Cambodians, and a number of smaller ethnic groups, most notably Montagnards, a collective term used to refer to dozens of indigenous groups who resided in the Central Highlands region of Vietnam.⁸²³ Relations between Montagnards and the RVN government were frequently tense and sometimes hostile. In 1956 Ngo Dinh Diem’s government foolishly resettled northern refugees who had fled the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on Montagnard territory. This action led to mass protests. Diem ignored U.S officials who warned that the Montagnards “might resist resettlement on their highland domains” as well as their suggestions that he “build rapport with the Montagnards, who over the centuries had been victims of political and racial discrimination by the Vietnamese.”⁸²⁴

On September 20, 1964, 3,000 Rhade Montagnards, many of them trained by American Green Berets, rebelled against the Saigon government and demanded greater autonomy and an end to discrimination. During the course of the rebellion, which threatened RVN control of Ban Me Thuot, twenty-nine Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers and 15 militiamen were killed. While U.S officials helped broker a peace agreement between the RVN government and the rebelling Montagnards, tensions continued to fester for the remainder of the war.⁸²⁵

⁸²³ David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

⁸²⁴ Edward Doyle et al., *A Collision of Cultures: The Americans in Vietnam, 1954-1973* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1984), 18.

⁸²⁵ Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1995), 51.

A 1973 U.S. Armed Forces study on relations between the Montagnards and the ethnic Vietnamese found that while the groups that made up the Montagnard subset had a variety of different languages and cultural characteristics they “have in common an ingrained hostility toward the Vietnamese.”⁸²⁶ The study largely blamed the government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) for the hostility of the Montagnards, concluding, “The Vietnamese had not only made no attempt to gain the support of the Montagnards and other minority groups but in the past had actually antagonized them.” The study also noted that the Vietnamese largely viewed the Montagnards, who were darker skinned than the Vietnamese, “as an inferior people, calling them ‘moi,’ or savages.”⁸²⁷

Some contemporary black observers were aware of ethnic Vietnamese views of this minority group. In a May 1968 article in *The Chicago Daily Defender* Donald Mosby suggested that if a person really wanted to know how the average Vietnamese viewed people of color, they just needed to look at how Montagnards were treated in Vietnam. The article accused the Vietnamese of “trying to exterminate the mountain tribesmen” because their “skin colors range in many instances from brown to deep black.”⁸²⁸ In an article in the following month Mosby described the poor treatment afforded to Montagnards, concluding, “Black soldiers have no business fighting and dying for these people, because the people hate them, just as they hate the Mountinards(sp), who are black people, too.”⁸²⁹

⁸²⁶ Verne Bowers and Francis J. Kelly, *Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), 31.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸²⁸ Donald Mosby, “Young And Old Vietnamese Wish Black GIs Would Leave Country,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 21, 1968, 5.

⁸²⁹ Donald Mosby, “Woman Reporter Tells Of Race Hate in Viet: Mrs. Williams Irked By Bias In War Area,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 5, 1968, 10.

In focusing on the plight of the Montagnards, the *Chicago Daily Defender* not only questioned how racially “progressive” the Vietnamese majority really was, it also suggested that because the Vietnamese majority treated a local dark-skinned group poorly, its members would have no sympathy for African Americans. They also questioned whether it was worth fighting for a group which had a history of discriminating against other black people. While the Vietnamese may not have been white, because they discriminated against Vietnamese “blacks” the *Defender* argued that African Americans should not be fighting on their behalf.

Even those African Americans who had a more realistic perception of the racial views of the Vietnamese relied heavily on their own experiences back home when they tried to interpret the significance of race in Vietnam. They empathized with the Vietnamese as persons of color and victims of discrimination. Because they believed that they and the Vietnamese had common experiences they concluded that the Vietnamese were sympathetic to them and to their struggle for greater equality and access. Naturally, this perception was equally strong, if not stronger, when they dealt with the Montagnards who had darker skin than the ethnic Vietnamese.

An August 1967 article in *The Christian Science Monitor* discussed the efforts of a black lieutenant to organize a group of Montagnards for an Army project. His fellow officers warned him that the Montagnards would not be interested, but he was able to enlist the assistance of a large group. When questioned as to how he was able to organize a group which had previously been uninterested, the black soldier responded, “I told them

I was the biggest Montagnard in the world and that they'd be hurting if they didn't help.”⁸³⁰

The black lieutenant's comments reveal the perception of many black soldiers that skin color linked African Americans to Montagnards. His account suggests that he not only used his skin color to appeal to the Montagnards, but also that the Montagnards responded to him because of his skin color. In the black lieutenant's view the Montagnards were willing to help because they viewed him as one of them and therefore deserving of their help. After all, the Montagnards, who had previously been unwilling to help with the Army project, did so only after a black officer directed it.

Other African American soldiers would reach similar conclusions. Speaking of his interactions with Montagnards, Arthur Barham, who served with the 173rd Airborne Division in 1967-68, recalled, “When you would encounter them they would come up to us, black soldiers, and compare skin. They would hold their skin up to yours...They embraced us as black guys because our skin color was the same...It made you smile because they could see the difference, they embraced the difference.” However, Barham recognized that many ethnic Vietnamese did not embrace Montagnards. He remembered, “The Vietnamese soldiers showed them absolutely no respect ...they were treated differently.”⁸³¹

James Gillam had little contact with ethnic Vietnamese, but his tour in the Central Highlands from late 1968 until early 1970 with the Fourth Infantry Division provided him with the opportunity to interact with Montagnards on a number of occasions. He

⁸³⁰ George Ashworth, “GI Integration meets battle test: Race held unimportant,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 23, 1967, 1.

⁸³¹ Arthur Barham, interview by author, February 19, 2013.

knew that Montagnards were looked down upon and often mistreated by the ethnic Vietnamese and especially members of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). This mistreatment bothered him, and he developed feelings of antipathy towards the ethnic Vietnamese because of their treatment of the Montagnards. To Gillam, Montagnards were not only good people, but they also resembled him. He recalled, “They looked like my little brothers, how could you not like these guys?” On one memorable occasion, Gillam happened upon a Montagnard village where he was welcomed like a family member. He remembered, “It was definitely a visual and race thing for them...I was a Montagnard homeboy until I opened my mouth.”⁸³²

Gillam’s reactions are noteworthy. He compared the Montagnards he met to his own family, concluding that some resembled him sufficiently that they could be his little brothers. Their darker skin immediately endeared them to him. He believed that they responded to him in much the same way. Their shared skin color was an attribute that united them and perhaps reflected a common experience.

Emmanuel Holloman discussed an incident in which a thirteen-year-old Montagnard girl was evacuated to a hospital in Long Binh after being shot. The girl was naturally very upset, but because she had a broken jaw she was also unable to communicate. Holloman recalled, “The first person she grabbed was me. She wouldn’t let anybody feed her but me. I sat with her all night holding her hand...I took care of her for four days.”⁸³³ Like Gillam, Holloman believed that his skin color endeared him to the young Montagnard girl.

⁸³² James Gillam, interview by author, Lubbock, Texas, March 14, 2008.

⁸³³ Holloman’s account as found Terry, *Bloods*, 84.

A 1972 Armed Forces Human Relations Council study revealed that many African American soldiers wore bracelets which were modeled after Montagnard bracelets normally reserved for honorary members. The fact that some African Americans designed their bracelets in a similar fashion suggests that they felt as though they were also honorary Montagnards or that at the very least wanted to be seen as honorary members.⁸³⁴

African Americans not only identified with Montagnards, they were also well aware that the Vietnamese ethnic majority often mistreated them. While serving in the Central Highlands region with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry division in 1967-68, Richard Ford had a few interactions with Montagnards. Ford and his fellow black soldiers considered Montagnards “brothers because they were dark” and felt they could relate to them because “the people in Vietnam didn’t have anything to do with Montagnards. It was almost like white people in the States didn’t have anything to do with blacks in the ghetto.”⁸³⁵ Ford was not the only soldier to see a parallel between the way Montagnards were treated in Vietnam and the way blacks were treated by whites in the United States. Oscar Roberts was stationed in Pleiku as an advisor to ARVN in 1968, and he reported that the “Montagnards are treated the way we used to be treated back home.”⁸³⁶

Wayne Smith recalled that “some Vietnamese, you know they had some prejudices... They were discriminating against the Montagnards, the mountain people of Vietnam, who were darker complexioned.” Just as some African Americans believed

⁸³⁴ Report, 1972, Subordinate Unit Publications, Equal Opportunity Reporting Files-MACV Publications: Box #5, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, Record Group 472, National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP), College Park, Maryland.

⁸³⁵ Richard Ford’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 40.

⁸³⁶ Thomas A. Johnson, “The U.S. Negro in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1968, 16.

ethnic Vietnamese identified with blacks, Smith claimed “the Montagnards would say to people like me ‘me same same soul brother.’”⁸³⁷ The base where Smith was stationed employed a number of Cambodians. He believed that many African Americans were intrigued by these workers as they “were dark complexioned,” but he also recognized that most of the Vietnamese disliked them. He recalled, “The Vietnamese treated them like white people in the South treated African Americans.”⁸³⁸ Just as Smith evoked American racism in discussing white mistreatment of the Vietnamese, he referenced it as well in discussing the mistreatment of Montagnards and Cambodians by the Vietnamese ethnic majority. Smith’s experiences taught him that the Vietnamese had their own prejudices which led to discrimination against those that were different.

Horace Coleman, who served as an air traffic and intercept controller with the Air Force in 1967-68, also associated with Chinese and Cambodian ethnic minorities. From these experiences, he concluded that “Vietnamese had some prejudices of their own. Vietnamese looked down on Cambodians. Vietnamese weren’t that hot about ethnic Chinese, who had been living there for who knows how long.”⁸³⁹ Similarly, a 1970 investigation conducted by Army Counterintelligence revealed that a large group of African Americans, most of whom had gone AWOL or deserted, were living with Cambodians in the area surrounding Truong Minh Ky Street. Allegedly, both groups had “a mutual understanding of one another as ‘oppressed minorities.’”⁸⁴⁰

⁸³⁷ Smith, interview by author.

⁸³⁸ Ibid.

⁸³⁹ Horace Coleman, interview by author, June 12, 2012.

⁸⁴⁰ Report, Major Pace, January 6, 1971, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Plan, Racial Unrest: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

The poor treatment afforded to the Montagnards and other ethnic minorities reveals that Vietnamese society had its own problems with racial prejudice and discrimination. While it is difficult to determine if Montagnards and other ethnic minorities faced discrimination solely because of their skin color, African Americans, operating from a perspective largely shaped by their own experiences, believed this to be the case. While most African American soldiers did not have any interactions with Montagnards, those that did more often than not viewed them as fellow blacks mistreated by an ethnic majority. They viewed the situation as similar, if not identical with, the situation they faced in the United States. Interactions with Montagnards and other ethnic minorities provided black soldiers with the knowledge that Vietnam was not a country free of racial prejudice, but it also presented them an opportunity to empathize with a group even more oppressed than the Vietnamese majority. In much the same way that many black troops thought that they had a bond with ethnic Vietnamese because of their shared experience of racial discrimination, other black soldiers believed that they had a bond, likely even a stronger one, with Montagnards.

“By the time I got there they were calling some black soldiers niggers”

Not every black soldier needed to look at the treatment afforded to the Montagnards for evidence of Vietnamese racism. Some experienced it firsthand. In August 1968 the *Cleveland Call and Post* printed a letter written by Stanley Miller, an African American sergeant serving with the Third Battalion, 60th Infantry in Vietnam. Miller’s depiction of the Vietnamese contrasted sharply with those African Americans who claimed that the Vietnamese were sympathetic. He claimed, “The Vietnamese don’t

appreciate what we are doing for them. They steal from us; they try and cheat us out of our money. They call the Negro soldier names and treat him like dirt.”⁸⁴¹

Miller was not the only black soldier to claim that Vietnamese people sometimes used derogatory names in reference to African Americans. Wayne Smith recalled, “Despite what Muhammad Ali said, you know no Vietnamese ever called me nigger. By the time I got there [1969] they were calling some black soldiers niggers.”⁸⁴² Similarly, while Joshua Page would eventually befriend the people of Tam To, when he first arrived there, he was treated very poorly by most of the people he encountered. He recalled, “They called me ‘monkey’ and other names.” It was only through the intervention of the town priest that the townspeople began to warm up to him.⁸⁴³

The black press was quite interested in the racial views of the Vietnamese, and a number of contemporary articles chronicled incidents of Vietnamese expressing racist views or mistreating black soldiers. In March 1966 *Jet* discussed the contents of a letter written by a South Vietnamese, which was originally published in the *Guam Daily News*. The letter writer argued that the problem with the American military effort in Vietnam was the sending of thousands of black soldiers to his country. He/she claimed that the United States sent “Negro soldiers all over the world to pollute the races from Germany to Vietnam.” The writer also suggested, “Our signs should not be ‘Yank go home’ but ‘Get your G__ D____ niggers out our country.’”⁸⁴⁴ The letter writer did not appear to oppose either the American war effort or the presence of hundreds of thousands of

⁸⁴¹ “Black Soldier Tells of Treatment in Vietnam,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, August 10, 1968, 6B.

⁸⁴² Smith, interview by author.

⁸⁴³ Tom Chance, “‘Mr. Mountain:’ U.S. Navyman fights his own very special war,” *Ebony*, January, 1969, 61.

⁸⁴⁴ “A Racist South Vietnamese Wants Negroes Out,” *Jet*, March 3, 1966, 5.

American soldiers in Vietnam. Rather, he/she was only opposed to the presence of African Americans.

Marion Williams, a black female Minnesota journalist, spent seven months in Vietnam in 1967-68 and reported that most of the Vietnamese people she encountered disliked African Americans. She claimed that while African Americans wanted to help and understand the Vietnamese, this was a waste of time because the Vietnamese “hate them.”⁸⁴⁵

In the spring of 1968 *Chicago Daily Defender* journalist Donald Mosby traveled to Vietnam where he “encountered anti-Negro hate that rivaled attitudes in small Southern towns back in the States.”⁸⁴⁶ Contrary to some black soldiers’ opinions that the Vietnamese favored blacks, Mosby reported that he was repeatedly insulted by Vietnamese civilians. After refusing to buy pornography from a street peddler, the salesman called Mosby a “dirty black bastard.” Mosby asked a black soldier whether the salesman was rude to him because he was a stranger, only to be told “the Vietnamese are very prejudiced toward black people.”⁸⁴⁷ The soldier, who worked in pacification in a local village told Mosby that it was routine for old people to send local children to insult African Americans. Mosby also pointed out that Confederate flags were routinely sold on the streets of Saigon. In fact, it was one of the most popular flags sold in Vietnam.⁸⁴⁸ The vendors likely did not know its connotation.

⁸⁴⁵ Donald Mosby, “Woman Reporter Tells Of Race Hate in Viet: Mrs. Williams Irked By Bias In War Area,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 5, 1968, 10.

⁸⁴⁶ Mosby, “Young And Old Vietnamese.” 5.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

Mosby also pointed to the taboo nature of black-Vietnamese relationships as evidence that the Vietnamese were far from colorblind. He observed that “while Vietnamese women walk freely with white servicemen, I never saw one with a black soldier.” He surmised that any Vietnamese woman seen with a black soldier in public would immediately be arrested under suspicion of being a prostitute.⁸⁴⁹

In another article which appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in May 1968 Mosby again claimed that the majority of Vietnamese people he encountered in Vietnam were prejudiced against African Americans. Mosby alleged that most civilians scowled at him as he walked by, stopping only to laugh at or insult him. According to Mosby, the Vietnamese “made it plain that they didn’t want me in the country.”⁸⁵⁰ Black soldiers did not fare much better as Mosby observed that “Vietnamese don’t bother to hide their dislike of Negro GIs.” Vietnamese women were particularly contemptuous of the African American presence. So much so in fact, that many prostitutes were unwilling to sleep with black soldiers.⁸⁵¹

Mosby’s allegation that the majority of Vietnamese people he encountered insulted him should be taken with a grain of salt as the offending civilians were almost certainly speaking Vietnamese, a language which Mosby did not speak. Mosby had visited only Saigon, limiting his ability to gauge accurately whether the Vietnamese in other cities and towns were equally unfriendly. Additionally, Mosby’s claim that Vietnamese women universally refused to date or be seen with black soldiers on the street

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁰ Donald Mosby, “Mosby Meets Anti-Negro Hate: What’s This? Jim Crow Found in Saigon Brothels,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 18, 1968, 16.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid.

is obviously inaccurate. As discussed in the previous chapter, at least some Vietnamese women were interested in dating and even marrying black soldiers.

However, Mosby's claim that prostitutes refused to serve black soldiers is supported to some extent by other sources. A June 1966 article in *The Los Angeles Sentinel* noted that Vietnamese prostitutes were not as welcoming to African Americans as they were to white soldiers and that some refused to take black customers.⁸⁵² Wayne Smith recalled hearing rumors that some prostitutes refused to have sex with blacks.⁸⁵³ Lamont Steptoe affirmed that some Vietnamese prostitutes refused to service black troops, but he also claimed that the opposite was true as well; some were uninterested in having white soldiers as customers.⁸⁵⁴ Arthur Barham similarly claimed that some prostitutes refused to have sex with black and white soldiers alike.⁸⁵⁵

Mosby also pointed out that the stigmatization of Amerasian children, born of black fathers and Vietnamese mothers, provided evidence about the racial views of the Vietnamese. Perhaps not surprisingly, considering the number of American troops stationed in Vietnam, thousands of Amerasian babies, the product of GI-Vietnamese relationships, were born during the conflict.⁸⁵⁶ However, according to Mosby, the Vietnamese reaction to these children depended upon the father's race. He claimed that "white American babies are highly prized, while black babies are scorned." Furthermore, it was routine for a woman's family to hire bodyguards to protect a white Amerasian child from being stolen, but if the baby was a black Amerasian, her family would force

⁸⁵² Bob Lucas, "'Jim Crow at Home,'" 2A.

⁸⁵³ Smith, interview by author.

⁸⁵⁴ Steptoe, interview by author.

⁸⁵⁵ Barham, interview by author.

⁸⁵⁶ Doyle et al., *A Collision of Cultures*, 38.

mother and baby to leave immediately.⁸⁵⁷ Marion Williams also mentioned the poor treatment afforded to black Amerasians as evidence of the racist beliefs of the Vietnamese. She recalled, “A Vietnamese girl thinks that the gods have smiled on her, if she has a white baby, but that the gods have cursed her, if she has a black baby.”⁸⁵⁸ Similarly a December 1967 article in the *Philadelphia Tribune* claimed that “a bleak future is forecast for the thousands of new Negro Asian children because of the alleged color consciousness of the Vietnamese people.”⁸⁵⁹

Other evidence supports the validity of these observations. In a November 1972 story the *Hartford Courant* estimated that about half of the Amerasian children found in Vietnamese orphanages were black. According to Wells Klein, general director of the American branch of International Social Service, a black Amerasian faced “dim prospects because of his color...because there is no black community in Vietnam, he will grow up and live in relative social isolation. He will always be the oddball.”⁸⁶⁰ African American journalist Era Bell Thompson traveled to Vietnam in 1972 for a story on black Amerasians. Thompson found that black Amerasian children were far more likely to end up in orphanages and far less likely to be adopted by Vietnamese families. Thompson determined that “Vietnamese admit privately that their people are prejudiced against dark skin” and even those Vietnamese who might be willing to adopt a black Amerasian child,

⁸⁵⁷ Mosby, “Young And Old Vietnamese,” 5.

⁸⁵⁸ Mosby, “Woman Reporter,” 10.

⁸⁵⁹ Lance Woodruff, “Many Vietnam Infants Fathered by Negro GI’s Left Abandoned,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 26, 1967, 20.

⁸⁶⁰ “Many Illegitimate Children Stay In Vietnam as GI Fathers Leave,” *Hartford Courant*, November 9, 1972, 18.

are reluctant because “it is assumed that they will be rejected when older by the society into which they were born.”⁸⁶¹

These accounts suggest that Vietnamese attitudes towards skin color and race were more varied and complex than some black soldiers believed them to be. While a number of blacks believed that the Vietnamese were more or less color blind, those who experienced Vietnamese racism first hand challenged this notion. Even for those African Americans who never experienced prejudice or discrimination first hand, the treatment offered to Montagnards and Amerasians demonstrated that the Vietnamese people were perfectly capable of “othering” people who were not like them.

As noted in Chapter Three, the degree of racial tension and violence in the military post after 1968 did not go unnoticed by military officials. While the majority of the military’s focus was on black-white tensions, the armed forces received numerous complaints from black soldiers about the Vietnamese discriminating against them between 1969 and 1972. These accounts provide further evidence that at least some Vietnamese were prejudiced against African Americans.

In December 1969 the Office of the Secretary of Defense released a report on interracial relations and equal opportunity in Vietnam. This report revealed that at least some Vietnamese were discriminating against black soldiers. The Third Marine Amphibious Force, headquartered in Da Nang, reported “scattered instances of anti-Negro feeling by Vietnam nationals.”⁸⁶² The Twelfth Tactical Fighter Wing, headquartered at Cam Ranh Bay, reported that two Vietnamese waitresses had recently

⁸⁶¹ Era Bell Thompson, “The Plight of Black Babies in South Vietnam,” *Ebony*, December 1972, 108.

⁸⁶² Report, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

been dismissed for discriminatory treatment. However reports of Vietnamese staff members' discriminating against blacks continued.⁸⁶³ In 1970 the Army received a complaint from the 525th Military Intelligence Group, which was substantiated by investigators, of Vietnamese waitresses intentionally providing poor service to black troops. Human Relations officials informed the waitresses that "if they were observed showing preferential treatment to club customers because of race" they would lose their jobs. The discriminatory service ended in response.⁸⁶⁴ In April 1972 Michael Hayes, a black soldier serving in the Fifty-Sixth Transportation Company at Long Thanh filed a similar complaint against Vietnamese workers, charging that "Vietnamese waitresses deliberately gave poor service to blacks."⁸⁶⁵

"You had Vietnamese whose minds had been turned against black soldiers"

These accounts provide evidence that some Vietnamese discriminated against African Americans. While some blacks may have viewed individual Vietnamese as inherently racist, others looked for some explanation for what they regarded as aberrant. Many African Americans believed that Vietnamese racist behavior towards African Americans could be explained in large part by the influence of white soldiers. In their minds, not only had whites brought their racist ideologies to Vietnam but also they had infected the local population with them, turning one dark skinned group against another.

⁸⁶³ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁴ Report, E.L Barnard to Commanding General, April 12, 1971, Race Relations Survey, Provost Marshall Report on Serious Incident Reports with Racial overtones: Box #3, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP. Unfortunately, this is one of the few instances in which the documents provide information as to how officials responded to accusations of Vietnamese discriminating against African Americans.

⁸⁶⁵ Report, Herald F. Stout Jr. to Roland Day, April 18, 1972, Racial Incidents, Equal Opportunity Reporting Files- MACV Publications: Box #5, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP. Unfortunately these documents do not say how the Office of the Secretary of Defense responded to these complaints.

Black complaints about the pernicious influence white soldiers had on the Vietnamese existed throughout the war.

In November 1962 when there were relatively few American soldiers in Vietnam, Ronald Lewis, an African American stationed there, wrote a letter to *Ebony*, which charged that white soldiers were spreading racist information. Lewis claimed that the Vietnamese had “been brain-washed to believe that our race is a violent, ignorant, and loud one.”⁸⁶⁶ He recalled an incident in which he saw a Vietnamese proprietor who happened to be reading a copy of *Ebony*. The Vietnamese man informed Lewis that the information in the magazine contradicted everything whites had told him about African Americans, which was that “our race were the peasants of the United States and were inclined to cut you with a razor (which we all carry) almost any time.” Whites had told the man that blacks were only capable of working menial jobs and were not intelligent enough to attend school. Lewis believed that this man’s views were not atypical and that many Vietnamese had been taught by whites to have a negative image of African Americans.⁸⁶⁷

A number of accounts support Lewis’s complaint. Ronald Manning, an African American from Elizabeth, New Jersey, served as an advisor to ARVN in 1965. He believed that in most circumstances the Vietnamese were friendly towards African Americans. Manning believed that “the people show prejudice only when they have been ‘indoctrinated’ by whites.”⁸⁶⁸ In March 1969 Roman Metcalf, a black marine from

⁸⁶⁶ “Ebony Helps Abroad,” *Ebony*, November 1962, 22.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁸ Dan Day, “Dan Day Interviews Negro GI’s in Viet Nam,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, January 9, 1965, 11B.

Chicago, wrote a letter to his mother from Vietnam claiming that racist whites “turn the Vietnamese against us.”⁸⁶⁹

Speaking of his perception of Vietnamese racial views, Willie Thomas, who served in 1969-70, concluded, “You had Vietnamese that loved black soldiers and you had Vietnamese whose minds had been turned against black soldiers.”⁸⁷⁰ Thomas claimed that white soldiers passed along rumors that “blacks were animals, you know we were monkeys, we really had tails,” and some Vietnamese were influenced.⁸⁷¹

When Lamont Steptoe first arrived in Vietnam in July 1969 a hooch maid pointed at him and said ““you same same monkey.”” Although shocked by the woman’s comments, Steptoe did not think that she came up with this offensive characterization on her own. He recalled, “I knew where she had gotten this attitude.”⁸⁷² Similarly Jake Shaky claimed that white soldiers spread racist stories to the Vietnamese about African Americans having tails.⁸⁷³ While stationed in Tuy Hoa in 1967-68, Arthur Barham was told by a prostitute that white soldiers had instructed her not to sleep with black soldiers because they had tails.⁸⁷⁴

The Vietnam War was not the first conflict in which it is alleged that these rumors were spread by white troops to native populations. Willie Thomas was horrified when he first heard these rumors but not necessarily surprised as his father had told him similar

⁸⁶⁹ Faith C. Christmas, “Sons Fighting In Vietnam: Mothers Ask GI Bias Probe,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 12, 1969, 1.

⁸⁷⁰ Willie Thomas, interview by author, September 3, 2011.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid.

⁸⁷² Steptoe, interview by author.

⁸⁷³ Jake Shaky(pseudonym) interview by author, September 9, 2011.

⁸⁷⁴ Barham, interview by author.

stories of whites spreading offensive rumors about blacks during World War II.⁸⁷⁵

Similarly, George Brummell was stationed in Korea before serving in Vietnam in 1966, and he remembered that Korean girls “would tell us the white guys always said that the black guys had tails...that we were close to monkeys.”⁸⁷⁶ During his R&R in Thailand, a number of Thai prostitutes told Ron Bradley that white soldiers told them that blacks had tails.⁸⁷⁷

In May 1968 the Navy received a number of complaints from Chief Petty Officer Barry Wright, a Chicago native and Vietnam veteran. Wright charged, that among other things, white soldiers were openly “encouraging Vietnamese civilian employees to discriminate against Negro personnel.”⁸⁷⁸ Also in May 1968 a black soldier named Willie McCarthy wrote to Senator Abraham Ribicoff, a Democrat from Connecticut, detailing his experiences with discrimination in Vietnam. McCarthy was particularly concerned with the influence of white soldiers on the racial views of the Vietnamese. He claimed that white soldiers would “tell Vietnamese people that colored people were number 10, (meaning no good) and that they were liars and thieves. This made the Vietnamese people scared to talk to Negroes for a long time until they found out different, but they still fear them some.”⁸⁷⁹ He concluded that this was not only a problem in Soc Trang,

⁸⁷⁵ Thomas, interview by author.

⁸⁷⁶ George Brummell, interview by author, October 21, 2011.

⁸⁷⁷ Bradley, interview by author.

⁸⁷⁸ Ethel Payne, “Navy Plays Down Racial Bias in Vietnam,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 25, 1968, 2.

⁸⁷⁹ Letter, Willie McCarthy to Abraham Ribicoff, May 25, 1968, Complaint Regarding Alleged Racial Discrimination in Vietnam, Submitted by Senator Abe Ribicoff on Behalf of Willie McCarthy: Folder # 5, Official Papers-Complaints: Box #5, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel DCSPER Policy Files on Discrimination in the Army, U.S. Army Heritage Collection, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Many Vietnamese interpreted the American colloquial phrase “You are number one” to mean that any statement which labeled someone as being any other number than number one was an insult, hence the term “you are number ten.”

where he was stationed, but he had heard of similar reports in Can Tho and Vinh Long and he feared it was spreading further.⁸⁸⁰

Many would have agreed with Ron Copes, who served a tour in Vietnam in 1966-67 and another in 1969-70, that while on the surface some Vietnamese may have appeared to be racist, in reality they were just following what they had been taught by white soldiers. Copes pointed out that in Vietnam there were “establishments that catered to white soldiers” and “establishments that catered to black soldiers.” While one might assume that this meant that the Vietnamese did not want blacks and whites to be together, Copes assumed that this was done at the behest of white soldiers. He remembered, “If you looked at it without seeing anything else, you would think that Vietnam, the Vietnamese people, were running a segregated situation, but it was the Americans that insisted upon it and they just complied.” Copes at least was under the impression that white soldiers pressured Vietnamese bar owners into only allowing whites into their clubs and for monetary reasons the Vietnamese obliged.⁸⁸¹ Historian John Westheider also noted that “African Americans stationed in Saigon, Na Trang, Da Nang, and some of the other large towns risked getting thrown out of entertainment establishments and bars simply for being black.”⁸⁸²

It is hard to know for certain, but military officials did not appear to intercede in these types of situations. As discussed in Chapter Three, Military Police (MP) clearly intervened when violent incidents occurred outside of Vietnamese owned bars and other

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁸¹ Copes, interview by author.

⁸⁸² James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 78.

businesses. However they appeared to take little interest in accusations of prejudice or discrimination. This lack of interest was probably more a reflection of the fact that they had little control over the behavior of these businesses than an endorsement of their policies. For example, there were some areas of Saigon, most notably Cholon and “Soul Alley,” that MPs largely avoided.⁸⁸³ In January 1971 the area where Soul Alley was located, Truong Minh Ky street, was designated off-limits to all US military personnel in response to the “high rate of incidents occurring in the area (homicides and robberies), the resistance MP patrols had been receiving in the area, and the illegal activities that were taking place in the area (prostitution and traffic in marijuana and dangerous drugs).” This closure demonstrates both that there were borderline lawless areas of Saigon and that military officials had the capability of intervening if a situation was deemed serious enough. However, there is no evidence that they intervened in situations when black soldiers were denied service. Considering that a large part of the RVN economy was based around illegal and semi-legal practices one can somewhat understand why officials took a largely hands off approach in dealing with these allegations of discrimination.⁸⁸⁴

While it is hard to know how many clubs outright banned African Americans, it apparently did happen. This was certainly the case elsewhere in the world. In *GIs and Frauleins* Maria Hohn notes that in the late 1950’s numerous bars in Kaiserslautern, Germany were off-limits to African Americans.⁸⁸⁵ When George Brummel was stationed in Kaiserslautern, Germany, in the mid-1960’s he had an experience which suggests that

⁸⁸³ Jack Anderson, “Deserters Hustle in Saigon ‘Mafia,’” *Washington Post*, November 13, 1969, F9.

⁸⁸⁴ Doyle et al., *A Collision of Cultures*, 81.

⁸⁸⁵ Maria Hohn, *GIs and Frauleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 208-211.

not all that much had changed. Upon entering a bar, Brummell and a number of other African Americans were “politely asked to leave...They said ‘well we don’t have African Americans that come into this joint...the niggers go across the tracks.’” Brummell had a similar experience while stationed in Korea, leading him to believe “you know it [racism] pretty much follows wherever you go.”⁸⁸⁶

In a September 26, 1966 letter to President Lyndon Johnson, Michael Sales accused bars and restaurants in Okinawa of routinely discriminating against African Americans. Another African American soldier named James Johnson claimed in a September 29, 1966 letter that the majority of bars and restaurants in Okinawa were segregated.⁸⁸⁷ According to Johnson an area called “4 corners...was the only area that a Negro was allowed to go...the Negro received such bad treatment in the other areas that he still must go here to be treated as a person.” Johnson held whites primarily responsible for this segregated environment claiming that “proprietors and employees are told that they are not cater to the negro less [they] lose out on the white trade. This is effective in that the percentage of white to black doesn’t balance out.”⁸⁸⁸ When Robert Louis arrived in Japan for R&R during his 1966-67 tour, he was similarly informed that some bars and restaurants did not serve black soldiers.⁸⁸⁹

⁸⁸⁶ Brummell, interview by author.

⁸⁸⁷ Letter, Michael Sales to Lyndon Johnson, September 26, 1966, Folder 10: Complaint regarding alleged discrimination by taxis cabs on Okinawa, made by Specialist 5 James Johnson, Box 8: Official Papers-Complaints, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) Policy Files on Discrimination in the Army, The United States Army College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

⁸⁸⁸ Letter, James Johnson to unknown, September 19, 1966, Folder 10: Complaint regarding alleged discrimination by taxis cabs on Okinawa, made by Specialist 5 James Johnson, Box 8: Official Papers-Complaints, DSCPER.

⁸⁸⁹ Robert Louis, interview by author, November 30, 2011.

Complaints concerning the negative influence which white soldiers were allegedly having on the Vietnamese continued far into the conflict. In a February 1971 article in the *New York Amsterdam News*, Reuben Davis, an African American veteran, was interviewed about his experiences as a scout dog handler in Vietnam. Davis recalled, “When I arrived in Vietnam I found that the Caucasians had taken their petty prejudices over there. The Vietnamese people referred to us as Mideim, which means Black Devil.” In Davis’s estimation, the Vietnamese had “been brainwashed by the white establishment” into thinking that African Americans were inferior and deserved of mistreatment.⁸⁹⁰

Even journalist Donald Mosby, who had publicized Vietnamese discrimination against blacks, Montagnards, and Amerasians, agreed that racist white soldiers had an influence on the way in which the Vietnamese viewed and treated African Americans. Mosby claimed that “White servicemen in this country help promote the racism by infecting the local population with it, whenever they can.” However, he remained convinced that the “the intensity of Vietnamese hatred of black people could not have been created in the short time that large numbers of white GIs have been in Vietnam.”⁸⁹¹

As the preceding accounts reveal, many black soldiers complained about the influence white soldiers had on the Vietnamese. To some extent these complaints were taken seriously by the Armed Forces. In a letter written to Chief of Staff, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) Major General Welborn G. Dolvin, a Brigadier General named “MacFarlane” claimed that the black belief that they were being

⁸⁹⁰ Willie L. Hamilton, “The Black Vietnam Veteran and His Problems: Fifth in a Series,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 20, 1971, 1.

⁸⁹¹ Mosby, “Young And Old Vietnamese,” 5.

“discriminated against by local girls at the instigation of white soldiers” was one of the more routinely heard black complaints and a cause of racial unrest. “MacFarlane” also asserted that the only way to prevent further racial problems was to address these and other allegations of racial discrimination directly.⁸⁹² In November 1970 the Department of the Army Race Relations Conference was held at the Headquarters, Continental Army Command at Fort Monroe, Virginia. The conference included participants from all major Army commands as well as representatives from other services. While the conference addressed a host of issues regarding racial matters in the armed forces, one of particular interest was a discussion of the most common complaints cited by minority personnel. Here the participants learned from Lieutenant James Anderson, who had recently returned from a fact finding trip to Vietnam, that one of the most frequent complaints made by black soldiers was that “U.S whites encourage foreign nationals to discriminate against black soldiers. Commanders do not require employers to comply with equal opportunity policies.”⁸⁹³ While Anderson did not state what policies these soldiers were referring to, their comments suggest that the armed forces had policies in place which instructed Vietnamese workers not to discriminate against American soldiers, regardless of race.

However, one should be careful not to attribute entirely the attitudes and actions of the Vietnamese to the influence of white soldiers. Many black soldiers did express sympathy for the Vietnamese and they wanted and likely expected reciprocation. They

⁸⁹²Briefing, Macfarlane to Welborn G. Dolvin, September 1970, Equal Opportunity and Racial Unrest, Equal Opportunity Reporting File-Survey: Box #1, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP. Unfortunately, MacFarlane’s first name is illegible.

⁸⁹³ Report, James R. Anderson, December 29, 1970, Staff Visits, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, Record Group 472, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

were disappointed when they did not get it and needed an explanation. The belief that racist whites were somehow responsible for Vietnamese racism reflected black soldiers' experiences with racism and prejudice in the United States. Whites definitely discriminated against blacks in the United States and it wasn't much of a stretch to conclude that racist whites would bring their beliefs to Vietnam. It is doubtful that whites were solely responsible for Vietnamese racism, but there is supporting evidence that some white soldiers did try to influence the Vietnamese to discriminate against African Americans.

Considerable evidence is found in official military documents which more often than not corroborate the claims made in oral testimonies and contemporary newspapers that some whites were encouraging the Vietnamese to discriminate against African Americans. In November 1969 L. Howard Bennett, the acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Rights, traveled to Vietnam as a part of a task force investigating racial tensions. Bennett's findings and the subsequent briefings he provided are revealing.

On December 4, 1969 Bennett sent a briefing to Major General Jack Wagstaff, Deputy Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Thailand (MACT) regarding racial tensions in Thailand and Vietnam warning that "the exportation of racial prejudice to Thai and Vietnamese nationals is a very serious problem and it demands close command attention."⁸⁹⁴ A few days later on December 6, Bennett wrote another letter to Admiral John S. McCain informing him of the racial situation in Vietnam. Similar to his warning to Wagstaff, he informed McCain that the "exportation of

⁸⁹⁴ Briefing, L. Howard Bennett to Jack Wagstaff, December 4, 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

American racism, prejudices, and discrimination” to Vietnam was a matter of serious concern. Bennett did not mince words as to who was responsible. He explained, “This was done by our white comrades-in arms. They will tell the Thai and the Vietnamese that the blacks are really devils of a sort—that after 6 o’clock their tails come out or if you watch carefully there is a place in their head where horns might sprout.”⁸⁹⁵ The wording of his statement is significant because it is almost identical to the allegations made by Willie Thomas, Jake Shaky, Lamont Steptoe, and others. Bennett’s insistence that some white soldiers were telling the Vietnamese that blacks were devils with horns is eerily similar to an accusation made by Reuben Davis. Unfortunately, as noted in Chapter Three, the armed forces often did not take Bennett’s suggestions for improving race relations seriously, and there is no evidence that he received a reply from either Wagstaff or McCain.

In April 1970 a report of the Joint Office of the Secretary of Defense, which was based almost entirely on Judge Bennett’s findings in Vietnam was released. The report sought to “evaluate the implementation of Department of Defense and Military Department policies and programs on equal opportunity and treatment and to analyze occurrences of, and potential for interracial tension and conflict among military personnel.” As Judge Bennett’s preliminary findings suggested, a primary source of conflict was that many African American soldiers blamed, often with some justification, white soldiers for exporting their racist views to the Vietnamese.⁸⁹⁶

⁸⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁶ Ibid.

Bennett's investigation noted a number of incidents involving white soldiers encouraging the Vietnamese to discriminate against African Americans. One report found that a white sergeant serving with the Twelfth Tactical Fighter Wing was instructing Vietnamese workers to call all black soldiers by the name "boy," a practice which quickly spread.⁸⁹⁷ Race relations were particularly fractured among members of the First Aviation Brigade stationed at Long Binh. Investigators maintained that the main cause of friction was a white sergeant who was instructing "Vietnamese girls not to wait on Negroes."⁸⁹⁸ Another report revealed that "a mess sergeant had told the Vietnamese kitchen laborers not to obey a Negro Cook." Military officials did intervene on the black cook's behalf but their solution to the problem left quite a lot to be desired; the mess sergeant was transferred to another unit but was not punished.⁸⁹⁹ Collectively these incidents caused considerable racial tension leading investigators to determine that that the enlisted men's club was "ready to explode."⁹⁰⁰

In 1970 the armed forces responded to the rise in racial tensions among black and white troops by creating a Human Relations Council to pinpoint the causes of racial tensions and address accusations of prejudice and discrimination. The Human Relations Council reports provide further evidence that some white soldiers were influencing the Vietnamese to engage in discriminatory behavior against African American soldiers. On February 13, 1971 representatives from the Long Binh Post Human Relations Council

⁸⁹⁷ Briefing, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁹ Briefing, Thomas Anderson to L. Howard Bennett, November 18, 1969, Visit of Mr. Howard Bennett, Equal Opportunity Reporting File-Survey: Box #1, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁹⁰⁰ Briefing, David I. Cooper Jr. to L. Howard Bennett, December 1969, Racial Literature, Race Relations Briefing for the Secretary of the Army: Box #4, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

met to discuss racial problems in the area. The participants focused particular attention on an accusation made by an unidentified black soldier that a Vietnamese worker had informed him that blacks were required to “drink milk and juice from one set of containers, and whites from another set” in the mess hall cafeteria. Chaplain Barbinette, who served as post chaplain, verified the black soldier’s account and urged “the council that it is a matter for immediate command action.”⁹⁰¹ The fact that the cafeteria “segregated” drinking containers, thereby replicating the policies of the segregationist South, was certainly disturbing. However, it was perhaps even more troubling that the Human Relations Council believed that it was possible that “someone in authority in the mess hall had instructed the VN (Vietnamese national) to do this.”⁹⁰² Unfortunately, this was not the only account to suggest that “someone in authority” may have encouraged the Vietnamese to adopt segregationist and discriminatory policies.

In February 1972 members of the Human Relations Council met with a group of soldiers to discuss racial tensions in the Armed Forces in Vietnam. A Lieutenant Barksdale reported that the “majority of blacks” believed that “the indigenous personnel has been threaten(sp?) with dismissal if they are too friendly with the blacks on the compound.”⁹⁰³ Similar accusations were repeated by four other soldiers present at the meeting. Human Relations Officer Mitchell assured the soldiers that the official policy of the Armed Forces was to inform every Vietnamese worker that discrimination against

⁹⁰¹ Report, Richard F. Ward to Human Relations Branch, February 14, 1971, Staff Visits, Reference Paper Files: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP.

⁹⁰² Ibid.

⁹⁰³ Report to the Department of the Army, February 13, 1972, Racial Incidents, Equal Opportunity Reporting Files-MACV Publications: Box #5, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP. It doesn’t say where in Vietnam the meeting took place.

any soldier would not be tolerated. Mitchell's statement suggests that past incidences when Vietnamese workers had acted in a discriminatory fashion had influenced the creation of a new policy. While Mitchell's statement was meant to reassure, the report suggests that some white soldiers were interfering in the implementation of the new policy. As to the rumors that whites were threatening to dismiss Vietnamese workers if they were too friendly with blacks, the report stated, "Considering the attitudes of some of the high ranking individuals who departed this compound, it is quite possible that there might be some truth to the rumor."⁹⁰⁴

This statement is especially telling as it suggests that the Human Relations Council was aware that some high ranking officers held anti-black views. Perhaps there had even been incidents caused by their behavior in the past. Equally significant, the report disclosed that high ranking soldiers may have actually encouraged or even instructed Vietnamese workers to discriminate against black soldiers, echoing the findings of the Long Binh Human Relations Council the previous year. High level encouragement of the Vietnamese to discriminate against black soldiers was not only contrary to military policy, but also contrary to Human Relations Council's efforts to end this discrimination. To this point, the report recognized that when Vietnamese workers did express anti-black sentiments, they were not always fired because the white soldiers who had put these ideas in their heads were responsible for hiring and firing them. A soldier named Williams and another named Jones discussed their experiences with one particular waitress who had a reputation for being prejudiced against African Americans. During one incident, after a black soldier accidentally dropped money, the woman

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid.

exclaimed, “black GI’s are mother----ing number ten.” She was supposed to be fired for this incident. However, according to the Human Relations Council report, “A month later the waitress is still working in the club and apparently her attitude towards blacks has not changed. No one knows why she was not fired.”⁹⁰⁵ Of course, the fact that she was not fired suggests at the very least that those in charge were not particularly interested in either punishing her or maintaining an environment free of discrimination. At worst it suggests that higher ranking soldiers agreed with the waitresses’ views and may even have influenced them.

Conclusion

Many African American soldiers held strong opinions not only about the Vietnamese but also about their racial views. They believed that Vietnamese civilians empathized with them as persons of color and as victims of racial discrimination. Some even claimed that the Vietnamese supported the African American struggle for greater rights and freedoms in the United States. According to these soldiers, the Vietnamese recognized that Vietnamese civilians and African Americans faced similar struggles. This perception was no doubt influenced by the fact that at least some Vietnamese civilians reportedly greeted black soldiers with statements such as “me and you same same.”

The perception that African Americans and the Vietnamese shared a common condition and faced similar struggles was influenced by the racial situation in the United States. Back home, the racial dividing line was between black and white. As blacks saw it, the Vietnamese were another non-white group mistreated by whites in a fashion similar to the way many African Americans saw themselves as being mistreated by

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid.

whites. It made sense to think that a degree of unity and empathy would result from this shared experience.

Of course, the black perception that the Vietnamese were largely empathetic towards blacks or supportive of the civil rights movement was not entirely accurate. Considering the lack of available source material, it is difficult to know for certain how Vietnamese civilians actually viewed the presence of thousands of black troops in their country. More than likely, there were a variety of reactions to African Americans. What is certain is that the ethnic Vietnamese were capable of discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity. The Vietnamese ethnic majority had a long history of discrimination against minorities who were different. The recognition that the Vietnamese mistreated the Montagnards and other ethnic minorities not only revealed to some African Americans that the Vietnamese had their own problems with tolerance, acceptance, and equality, but it also changed the way some blacks saw the Vietnamese. They no longer viewed them solely as victims of racial discrimination. Instead, they now saw them as perpetrators of racial discrimination.

Some black soldiers did not need to look at the Montagnards for evidence of Vietnamese racism. They experienced Vietnamese racism firsthand. This discriminatory treatment challenged the belief that blacks and Vietnamese shared a bond forged out of their common experiences and skin color. It may also have challenged that notion that the Vietnamese deserved black empathy and support.

Yet it was difficult for many black soldiers to view the Vietnamese as capable of discrimination against African Americans. Frequently, when black soldiers encountered

Vietnamese racism, they looked for an external explanation. More often than not, when a black soldier experienced racist treatment from a Vietnamese, he interpreted it as being inspired or heavily influenced by white soldiers. Many believed that some white soldiers brought their racist ideas to Vietnam and passed them on to the Vietnamese. This was in many ways consistent with other perceptions held by many African Americans. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three many African Americans believed with some justification that racist whites continued to discriminate against them in Vietnam. As discussed in Chapter Four, they also believed that many whites mistreated Vietnamese civilians in a manner similar to the way racist whites mistreated blacks for generations in the United States. It seemed plausible that racist whites would try to impose their racist views on the Vietnamese.

One should question whether the influence of whites adequately accounts for Vietnamese racism, but armed forces' investigations support the charge that some whites encouraged the Vietnamese to discriminate against and mistreat black troops. The actions of these soldiers were contrary to official policy, but there is significant evidence that the armed forces were aware of white efforts to encourage discrimination against blacks. For the most part, the armed forces made no effort to deal with this situation.

For many African Americans the realization that whites taught the Vietnamese racist beliefs was both disturbing and offensive. For one thing, these racist ideas threatened to destroy the bond which black soldiers believed existed between them and the Vietnamese. The investigations conducted by L. Howard Bennett and the Human Relations Council suggest that the discovery of white responsibility exacerbated black-

white tensions. Perhaps most troubling, investigators seemed to conclude that some higher ranking military officials tolerated and possibly even encouraged the Vietnamese to discriminate against or otherwise mistreat African Americans. This increased the distrust and suspicion of black soldiers towards the armed forces.

Of course, at least some Vietnamese civilians discriminated against African Americans without any white influence. There were certainly racist Vietnamese who had no sympathy for African Americans. Vietnamese civilians did not collectively embrace the vision propagated by some black soldiers of a world in which skin color and shared experiences with poverty and racism created close bonds among diverse peoples. Thus, African Americans were entering unknown terrain when they assigned racial attitudes to Vietnamese civilians. African Americans were bound to be disappointed by the reality of Vietnamese racial views. Vietnamese civilians likely held a diversity of opinions about a group with whom they had no previous experience.

Chapter 6: “You couldn’t rely on them” or “We won’t shoot you, but we’ll shoot the white guy”: African American views of their Vietnamese Allies and Enemies

American soldiers were not in Vietnam to interact with civilians. They were there to fight a war in support of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) against the People’s Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front (NLF), better known as the Viet Cong. Many black soldiers formed strong opinions about both their ally the ARVN and their enemy the PAVN and the NLF.

Vietnam veterans, American military strategists, and historians have largely depicted ARVN soldiers as incompetent, corrupt, and unreliable.⁹⁰⁶ For the most part African Americans shared these assessments of the ARVN and its abilities. Speaking of his experiences with ARVN soldiers, Wes Geary, who served with First Infantry Division in 1966-67, recalled “those guys, I swear if there was gonna be an operation and the Viet Cong were gonna hit us, those guys would find a way to be on leave, on pass or something... so how could you trust ‘em?”⁹⁰⁷

In contrast most black soldiers had a high opinion of the Vietnamese communist enemy and their skills on the battlefield. Many white soldiers also viewed PAVN and NLF forces as worthy adversaries, but there were sharp differences between their views and those of black soldiers. Many African Americans believed that enemy soldiers were sympathetic to blacks.

A number of rumors circulated among black troops that communist forces would not shoot or harm African Americans unless forced to do so. Anthony Martin, who served

⁹⁰⁶ Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea & Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 144-45.

⁹⁰⁷ Wes Geary, interview by author, Dearborn, Michigan, August 7, 2009.

in 1966-67 with the Third Marine division in Con Thien Province, recalled hearing “tales that the Viet Cong wouldn’t raise their weapons against black Americans.”⁹⁰⁸ He also heard a rumor that if the Viet Cong captured a group of American soldiers they would kill the white soldiers and let the African American soldiers go.⁹⁰⁹ Many African Americans heard these rumors, and some even believed them to be true. A few even claimed that the Vietnamese enemy had spared their lives. The message that these rumors sought to convey was that PAVN and NLF forces did not view African American soldiers as their enemy. Rather, they had considerable sympathy and would spare them if they could.

The perception that Vietnamese communists meant African Americans no harm was promoted by the Vietnamese. Using leaflets and radio broadcasts, they expressed sympathy for the civil rights movement, urged black troops to stop fighting, and encouraged them to go home and fight for greater equality. As Wallace Terry noted, Vietnam was not only a place where “black and white became brothers against a common enemy” it “was a place where communist propaganda urged you to go home instead of fighting another dark skinned people.”⁹¹⁰ There is no evidence that this propaganda convinced any black soldiers to “go home,” but it likely left some black soldiers with the impression that the PAVN and the Viet Cong sympathized with them. Just as many African Americans believed that Vietnamese civilians empathized with blacks and their struggle against racial prejudice and discrimination some blacks believed that the Vietnamese enemy was equally empathetic.

⁹⁰⁸ Anthony Martin, interview by author, September 12, 2011.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁹¹⁰ “The Bloods of ‘Nam’” *Frontline*, produced, directed and photographed by Wayne Ewing (Alexandria, VA: PBS, 1986), Videocassette (VHS).

“It got to the point where you couldn’t rely on them”: The ARVN

Many American soldiers arrived in Vietnam with the expectation that they would be fighting alongside ARVN forces against the PAVN and the NLF. However, frequently the average soldier concluded that American forces were doing all the fighting while the South Vietnamese avoided conflict and sat lazily in the rear. In the opinion of many ARVN forces were universally “ill-equipped, inadequately trained, and poorly led,” and also cowardly. This perception only became further magnified when ARVN troops fought and things went badly. As Peter Kindsvatter notes, it sometimes only “took one instance of ARVN cowardice to turn grunts against them.”⁹¹¹

Of course, the depiction of South Vietnamese forces as universally incompetent or unwilling to fight is simplistic. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers served in the ARVN, as well as with South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PF) and undoubtedly some were highly motivated and effective soldiers. Around 250,000 South Vietnamese government forces were killed during the war, demonstrating that many Vietnamese did fight and die in defense of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).⁹¹²

One should keep in mind that most American soldiers had very limited interactions with ARVN units. Therefore, assessments of ARVN soldiers were sometimes based on stereotypes or prevailing assessments, rather than first-hand knowledge. Many soldiers were unaware that South Vietnamese forces were often just following the orders of American strategists to provide area security while U.S. forces conducted field

⁹¹¹ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 145.

⁹¹² Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 16.

operations.⁹¹³ Historian Marilyn Young has also pointed out that ARVN and NLF units occasionally signed localized cease-fires which may explain why some ARVN units appeared hesitant to fight.⁹¹⁴

Likely unaware of what the ARVN was doing, many American soldiers viewed them at best as ineffective or unreliable and at worst as an impediment to victory. Oral testimonies reveal that this perception was not limited to any one group or race. Like white soldiers, many black soldiers agreed that the ARVN was hopelessly incompetent. Albert French described the ARVN as disorganized and unprofessional. In his estimation the ARVN “always looked funny; they were very small people but had been given American helmets, which fell down over their faces...They looked like little toy soldiers with big guns.”⁹¹⁵

Other black soldiers claimed that ARVN troops were simply not dependable in battle. Willie Thomas, who served in the Da Nang area in 1969-70, spoke for many soldiers, black and white, when he stated that he was “never impressed with the Vietnamese desire to fight.”⁹¹⁶ Bob Sanders, who served in 1968-69 with the 173rd Airborne, portrayed the ARVN in a particularly unflattering light, claiming, “We never did see the regular South Vietnamese army in the field. They would be guarding the bridges or be hidden away in some compound somewhere...We were fighting for them and they were scared to fight for themselves. They used to pick up and run.”⁹¹⁷ Terry

⁹¹³ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 145.

⁹¹⁴ Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 148.

⁹¹⁵ Albert French, *Patches of Fire: A Story of War and Redemption* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 113.

⁹¹⁶ Willie Thomas, interview by author, September 3, 2011.

⁹¹⁷ Stanley Goff and Robert Sanders with Clark Smith, *Brothers Black Soldiers in the Nam* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1982), 150.

Whitmore, who served with the First Marine Division in 1967-68, occasionally went on patrol with ARVN units and he claimed “Patrol with ARVN was usually just diddley-bopping along through the jungle...ARVN’s were not too keen on combat. So if they thought that there would be some shooting, they’d be gone.”⁹¹⁸

Ron Bradley, who served in Can Tho 1967-68, also viewed the ARVN as unreliable and unwilling to fight. He recalled, “When we would have certain actions and they were supposed to cover our flanks or they were supposed to be there with us and things got heavy, they disappeared or they went home or they went to dinner...It got to the point where you couldn’t rely on them.”⁹¹⁹ Melvin Adams, who served in 1966-67 and 1971-72, felt that most ARVN soldiers were not overly interested in fighting the enemy and took a lackadaisical approach to the war. Adams faced cultural challenges when assessing the ARVN. On one occasion an ARVN commander he worked with tried to call off a mission because he received a poor astrology report, which Adams assessed as a lack of commitment.⁹²⁰

Similarly, Sinclair Swan, who served with the First Infantry Division in 1966-67, thought that the average ARVN soldier was poorly trained, poorly led, and lacked the necessary motivation and discipline needed to win the war. He also believed that some soldiers purposely made noise during combat missions to scare off the enemy and prevent any sort of battle from occurring.⁹²¹ Lamont Steptoe complained that during a joint operation in 1969-70, ARVN forces allowed him and his dog to walk off in a random

⁹¹⁸Terry Whitmore, *Memphis, Nam, Sweden: The Story of a Black Deserter* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), 55.

⁹¹⁹ Ron Bradley, interview by author, October 23, 2011.

⁹²⁰ Melvin Adams, interview by author, March 14, 2012

⁹²¹ Sinclair Swan, interview by Author, August 11, 2011.

direction without following. This careless action not only placed Steptoe in a precarious position but also suggested that the ARVN was not really interested in finding the enemy.⁹²²

Samuel Vance also portrayed ARVN soldiers as incompetent and unable or unwilling to engage the NLF effectively. However, he took his disdain a step further than Sanders and Whitmore, claiming that the American military would be able to defeat the PAVN and the NLF if all of the soldiers in ARVN were killed.⁹²³ Vance was also very critical of the government of the RVN, believing that they were corrupt and uninterested in the welfare of their own people.⁹²⁴ Vance was not the only one to connect the corruption of the RVN government with the seeming ineptitude of the ARVN. Horace Coleman, who served in the Mekong Delta in 1967-68, met a Vietnamese bartender, who after being drafted into the ARVN was approached by his commanding officer with an offer which would permit him to avoid military service. The bartender agreed to cede his military pay to the officer in exchange for not having to serve. Coleman believed this transaction symbolized much of what was wrong with the ARVN war effort.⁹²⁵

David Parks portrayed ARVN soldiers as good fighters, but also as totally alienated from the Vietnamese population. In his opinion they thought little of human life and didn't hesitate to kill civilians.⁹²⁶ Parks was not the only African American soldier to make this observation. James Gillam, who served with the Fourth Infantry Division from

⁹²² Lamont Steptoe, interview by author, June 25, 2012.

⁹²³ Samuel Vance, *The Courageous and Proud* (New York: W. Norton & Company, 1979), 73.

⁹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹²⁵ Horace Coleman, interview by author, June 12, 2012. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), 287. Herring estimates that in some units the rate of ghost soldiers was as high as 20 percent.

⁹²⁶ David Parks, *GI Diary* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1984), 83.

late 1969 until early 1970, agreed that ARVN troops were by and large corrupt and inefficient, but he also agreed that they could be very brutal. Searching an elderly woman's basket, Gillam's squad found hundreds of loose AK-47 rounds beneath some rotten fish. However, Gillam and his fellow soldiers decided to let the woman go "because we all knew she would never survive interrogation by the ARVN."⁹²⁷ According to Gillam the callousness of some ARVN troops went beyond the mistreatment of prisoners. As mentioned in Chapter Five, Gillam greatly admired the Montagnards who lived in the region he patrolled. However, many ARVN soldiers treated the Montagnards as subhuman, so much in fact that when "they were short a body count...the Vietnamese came through and killed them all."⁹²⁸

Many African American soldiers had an overall negative impression of ARVN soldiers, but others thought that their quality varied. James Lewis, who served with the Army Corps of Engineers in Phu Quy in 1968-69, agreed that some ARVN forces were terrible, but others were excellent and equivalent to American forces. Lewis believed that the Vietnamese scouts attached to his unit "were some of the best soldiers I have ever known."⁹²⁹ While Sinclair Swan thought little of the average ARVN soldier, he believed that some of the elite ranger units were effective.⁹³⁰ Similarly, Ron Bradley claimed that the RVN military police and localized militia forces were dedicated and dependable.⁹³¹ Robert Holcomb, who served with the Fourth Infantry Division in Pleiku and An Khe in

⁹²⁷ James Gillam, *Life and Death In The Central Highlands: An American Sergeant in the Vietnam War 1968-1970* (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press), 83.

⁹²⁸ James T. Gillam, interview by author, Lubbock, Texas, March 14, 2008.

⁹²⁹ James Lewis, interview by author, March 20, 2012.

⁹³⁰ Swan, interview by author.

⁹³¹ Bradley, interview by author.

1970, became close friends with a Vietnamese scout who was assigned to his unit. In sharp contrast to the depictions that others made of Vietnamese soldiers, Holcomb's friend was dependable and fearless.⁹³²

A number of soldiers who worked more closely with ARVN troops had a more positive impression. Louis Perkins served two tours in Vietnam and during his second tour in 1969-70 he was an advisor to the ARVN. Speaking of his overall impression, Perkins asserted, "Some of them were very professional, some of them were real great guys and then there were those that were there to rip off anybody they could." Perkins believed that most of the men he worked with "were genuine good people" and he was especially "proud of the fact that my counterpart was a pretty straight guy...he appeared to have his troops first in his mind, taking care of them."⁹³³

Ronald Copes also served two tours in Vietnam and during his second tour in 1969-70 he worked in Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) as an advisor to a district chief. This opportunity allowed him to interact with both the district chief and the local RF/PF. He assessed the district chief as likely corrupt, but he also concluded that the RF/PF were efficient and reliable. Furthermore, this assignment gave him a greater appreciation for the Vietnamese who fought against the PAVN and the NLF. He recollected, "I felt better about my two tours based on the second tour. If it had just been the first tour, I think I would have had a negative impression of the Vietnamese that was unjustified."⁹³⁴

⁹³² Robert Holcomb's as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 208.

⁹³³ Louis Perkins, interview by author, December 17, 2011.

⁹³⁴ Ron Copes, interview by author, November 17, 2011.

Thomas Brannon, who served in 1966-67 with the First Cavalry Division, described his interactions with ARVN soldiers similarly to the way other African Americans portrayed their relations with Vietnamese civilians. Brannon recalled an incident in which his cavalry unit helped a stranded ARVN Ranger Battalion on Highway 13, northeast of Saigon. Brannon believed that the rangers were impressed and even proud of the fact that an African American was commanding white troops. He recalled, “I could just look in their eyes...you know it was like a black guy seeing a black guy and you ain’t seen him for a while, you can look each other in the eye and say ‘Man, I am glad to see you.’” Whenever he worked with ARVN troops, he felt this same sense of kinship. Brannon’s account provides some insight into how some RVN members viewed African Americans. According to Brannon the ARVN rangers viewed him as one of their own because he was black.⁹³⁵ Unfortunately, there is little information on how ARVN soldiers viewed African American soldiers.

Reflecting on his service in Vietnam, Wayne Smith, who served with the Ninth Infantry Division in 1968-69, concluded that the average ARVN soldier was unfairly judged. It was “conventional thinking that they [ARVN] cannot be relied on in battle; that they would abandon you or would simply not fight and if they did fight they were not effective fighters.” However, in retrospect, Smith recognized that hundreds of thousands of ARVN soldiers had in fact fought and died during the war. While not every ARVN soldier was brave in battle or even effective, some certainly were.⁹³⁶

⁹³⁵ Thomas Brannon, interview by author, December 6, 2011.

⁹³⁶ Wayne Smith, interview by author, October 25, 2011.

Similarly, while Horace Coleman witnessed evidence of ARVN corruption he also encountered ARVN soldiers who had lost nearly everything as a result of the war. In his poem “War Stories” he memorialized “the ARVN who lost his arm to the PAVN, his wife to a free fire zone, and his kid to disease.”⁹³⁷ As “War Stories” makes clear, many ARVN soldiers made huge sacrifices as part of their efforts to defeat the Viet Cong and the PAVN.

However, it is also true that ARVN’s inability to defeat the communist insurgency on its own was responsible for the introduction of American forces. This failure to defeat the NLF gave the ARVN a reputation for weakness and failure. Many blacks likely agreed with Willie Thomas that African Americans never would have been sent to Vietnam in the first place had ARVN forces been able to defeat the Viet Cong and the PAVN on their own.⁹³⁸ Likewise, Wes Geary recalled “I really personally just didn’t trust South Vietnamese. I developed a kind of...well I was angry with ‘em because I didn’t think that they was trying hard enough you know.”⁹³⁹ James Gillam similarly theorized, “I didn’t like the South Vietnamese because I figured they should have taken care of their own business.”⁹⁴⁰ Thus, the ARVN’s inability to take “care of their own business,” a fact which directly led to the introduction of American troops, partly explains why black soldiers tended to have a much more negative view of the ARVN than of Vietnamese civilians.

⁹³⁷ Horace Coleman, *In the Grass* (Woodbridge, CT: Viet Nam Generation & Burning Cities Press, 1995), 30.

⁹³⁸ Thomas, interview by author.

⁹³⁹ Geary, interview by author.

⁹⁴⁰ Gillam, interview by author.

“The best soldier in the world was the Vietnamese soldier”: The Viet Cong and the PAVN

While many soldiers questioned ARVN’s commitment, they never questioned the Viet Cong and PAVN’s desire to fight. In 1966 General A.S. Collins, Commander of the Fourth Infantry Division, summed up the feelings of many soldiers when he stated, “I wish the southern members of the clan would display the fighting qualities of their northern brethren.”⁹⁴¹ Most soldiers, regardless of race, viewed the Vietnamese enemy at the very least with grudging respect. Yet, as the following accounts reveal, black soldiers viewed the enemy somewhat differently than their white peers. Black accounts tended to concentrate on the underdog status of the enemy and how they managed to survive and even succeed in the face of overwhelming American fire-power. Survival in the face of adversity was something African Americans recognized and admired.

In a 1984 *Frontline* PBS episode titled “Bloods in Nam,” Charles Strong, who served in 1969-70 in Chu Lai, discussed an incident involving his unit and a single PAVN soldier. His portrayal accurately represents the way many black troops saw the Vietnamese enemy. Strong along with thirty-five of his fellow soldiers spent two hours trying to kill a lone PAVN soldier, eventually cornering him in a hole. Through an interpreter they offered the soldier a chance to surrender, but when he refused, they dropped explosives in the hole, an action which also failed to kill him. Strong recalled, “He would not give up and this is the day that I really will remember in my life that if a man have a belief, a real belief, he should be willing to die for it. I was proud of that North Vietnamese soldier because he gave me a living example of what a man should

⁹⁴¹ Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 199-200.

be.”⁹⁴² Thus, while many white soldiers likely respected the fighting abilities of the enemy, it is unlikely that many would have claimed they were “proud” of the enemy’s resiliency.

Thomas Brannon claimed that the Viet Cong forces he faced were “the best light infantry in the world.”⁹⁴³ Similarly, Anthony Martin asserted, “Sometimes a statement like this gets me in trouble with many of my peers, but in my opinion the best soldier in the world was the Vietnamese soldier.”⁹⁴⁴ Martin was so impressed by the enemy’s commitment and its ability to withstand the American onslaught of weaponry that he questioned his own dedication. He recalled, “We had tanks, we had ships, we had bombers, we had every known kind of weapon known to man...shooting down on them and they kept coming. And I often ask myself faced with the same fire-power would I be just as dedicated?”⁹⁴⁵ Sinclair Swan also pointed that the Viet Cong remained effective despite constant attacks from American ground forces, aircraft, and artillery.⁹⁴⁶

A number of black soldiers focused on the enemy’s determination and commitment. Dusty Rhodes fought against both PAVN and NLF forces and he saw little distinction between the two, as both were well trained, organized, disciplined, and led. Like Martin, he also noted their dedication to fighting was second to none.⁹⁴⁷ Ron Copes described the Viet Cong as “extremely determined with a strong belief in what

⁹⁴²“The Bloods of ‘Nam’” *Frontline*, produced, directed and photographed by Wayne Ewing (Alexandria, VA: PBS, 1986), Videocassette (VHS).

⁹⁴³ Brannon, interview by author.

⁹⁴⁴ Martin, interview by author.

⁹⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁶ Swan, interview by author.

⁹⁴⁷ Cephus “Dusty” Rhodes, interview by author, January 19, 2012.

they were doing.”⁹⁴⁸ Similarly, Willie Thomas’s impressions of the NLF were that “they were a dedicated force, they believed in what they were fighting for...They wanted to unite their country and they were willing to sacrifice, fight, and die to unite their country.”⁹⁴⁹

Agreeing with this characterization, Archie Biggers, who served near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1968-69, stated that “the enemy would do anything to win. You had to respect that. They believed in a cause. They had the support of the people.”⁹⁵⁰ Robert Watters went even further than Biggers characterizing the NLF as almost invincible. He stated that they

didn’t care about dying. I mean, you would hit them with a 60 caliber right there in the fucking chest, and those sons of bitches keep coming. And they fall dead right on you though...I mean they were as strong mentally as they were strong physically, you know. I mean, oh, it’s just like...you just shot down, man, you just kept shooting them, kept shooting them, and they kept coming.⁹⁵¹

Watters portrayed the Viet Cong and the PAVN as almost superhuman, but other blacks offered more sensible assessments. Some even appeared to understand the Viet Cong and the PAVN’s reasons for fighting. Dusty Rhodes argued that ultimately the Vietnam War was a civil war and that “we drew the line, they didn’t draw the line” as to who was an authentic representative of South Vietnam.⁹⁵² Speaking of the communist forces in Vietnam, James Lewis asserted, “I don’t know of any Vietnamese that come

⁹⁴⁸ Copes, interview by author.

⁹⁴⁹ Thomas, interview by author.

⁹⁵⁰ Archie Biggers account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 109.

⁹⁵¹ Robert M. Watters, interview by George C. Herring and Terry L. Birdwhistell, May 16, 1985, University of Kentucky Libraries Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project, King Library, Lexington, Ky, 11.

⁹⁵² Rhodes, interview by author.

over here and slap my face or run over my yard...I just didn't see any real basis for fighting the so-called North Vietnamese...In hindsight I still don't see it."⁹⁵³

Anthony Martin maintained that the Vietnamese communist forces' "dedication to their freedom was no different than our dedication to freedom during our own Civil War."⁹⁵⁴ Lamont Steptoe, who served with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division in Cu Chi in 1969-70, had a profound respect for the Viet Cong because of their willingness "to defend their country against foreign invaders." After seeing how a number of the men in his unit treated both Vietnamese civilians and captured Viet Cong, Steptoe "began to identify more with the Viet Cong than the United States military." He resolved,

I told myself I am not going to feel any animosity towards them if I get wounded or if they take my life because I made the choice to come here...When I left the military I left more as a guerilla than I did as an American soldier because I just felt so many parallels between what they were doing and what was happening to black Americans.⁹⁵⁵

Whatever sympathy or identification African Americans felt for the enemy they had the task of fighting them. They also served in units with soldiers whose views of the enemy were slightly different. In war soldiers tend to dehumanize their opponents. Psychologist Jonathan Shay notes that Vietnamese communist forces were commonly referred to as "monkeys, insects, vermin," terms which were also used to describe the Japanese during World War II. Additionally, the average American soldier was taught that the enemy was "deranged," "barbaric," "treacherous," and "bent on world

⁹⁵³ Lewis, interview by author.

⁹⁵⁴ Martin, interview by author.

⁹⁵⁵ Steptoe, interview by author.

conquest.”⁹⁵⁶ Anthony Martin recalled being indoctrinated to think that the PAVN were equal to the Nazis.⁹⁵⁷

In much the same way that the general dehumanizing of the Vietnamese contributed to the mistreatment of civilians, it also contributed to the mistreatment of enemy prisoners and desecration of their dead. Some American soldiers collected the ears, teeth, or fingers of dead Vietnamese soldiers as trophies, but it is impossible to assess how often it occurred.⁹⁵⁸ After a brief fire-fight, David Parks’s unit came across a dead NLF soldier. To his disgust, a sergeant in his unit cut off the finger of the dead man.⁹⁵⁹ David Tuck, who served with the Thirty-Third Infantry in 1966, claimed that officers issued free beer “to American soldiers who return to camp with the largest number of dead enemies ears.”⁹⁶⁰ Harold Bryant recalled that “white guys would sometimes take the dogtag chain and fill that up with ears...then when we get back, they would nail em’ up on the walls to our hootch, you know, as a trophy.”⁹⁶¹ According to Bryant the desecration of Vietnamese dead became a point of contention among black and white soldiers in his unit. Bryant thought keeping ears as a trophy was “stupid and spiritually, I was lookin’ at it as damaging a dead body. After a while, I told them, ‘Hey, man, that’s sick. Don’t be around me with the ears hangin’ on you.’”⁹⁶²

⁹⁵⁶ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 105.

⁹⁵⁷ Martin, interview by author.

⁹⁵⁸ Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013).

⁹⁵⁹ Parks, *GI Diary*, 85.

⁹⁶⁰ “Tuck Brothers Speak Out Against The Vietnam War,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, December 2, 1967, 16A.

⁹⁶¹ Harold Bryant’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 24.

⁹⁶² Ibid.

Several soldiers in Wayne Smith's unit removed ears and other body parts from dead Vietnamese soldiers, a practice which Smith thought was "horrible" and "wrong." One white soldier, nicknamed "Jungle Jordan," was a "brutal son of a bitch" who frequently cut the ears off dead soldiers, wearing them as trophies.⁹⁶³ A commander in Lamont Steptoe's unit encouraged "soldiers to become barbarians" by promising that anyone who brought back a pair of ears would receive three days off to go to Saigon. Steptoe was disgusted, but he could do little to prevent these acts.⁹⁶⁴

Unfortunately, some members of Steptoe's unit were equally brutal in their treatment of Vietnamese prisoners. Steptoe discussed an incident in which two Viet Cong soldiers were caught hiding in a village. While American soldiers were dragging the Vietnamese out of their huts, one grabbed the rafters. Rather than simply pull him out, Steptoe's sergeant cut his hands off with a machete.⁹⁶⁵ During another incident, Steptoe was asked to use his dog to torture a few Vietnamese prisoners to gain information. Steptoe refused the request, telling his fellow soldiers that he could not live with himself knowing that he had tortured a prisoner.⁹⁶⁶ Ron Bradley denied a similar request to torture a Vietnamese prisoner.⁹⁶⁷

"You get to live another day"

Black soldiers' beliefs that NLF and PAVN soldiers' favored them over whites reinforced their respect for their opponents. A November 1965 article in *Ebony* declared, "In Vietnam, a Negro GI can walk through downtown Saigon with virtual immunity, or

⁹⁶³ Smith, interview by author.

⁹⁶⁴ Steptoe, interview by author.

⁹⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁷ Bradley, interview by author.

he can go to the suburbs where Viet Cong assure him, ‘There’ll be no bombs or gunfights because you are our friends.’”⁹⁶⁸ The article even claimed that “few grenades were thrown at dark skinned Americans” and “often times when attacking convoys, VC’s shoot only at white soldiers.” According to the article, these incidents were sufficiently commonplace that some officers suggested to white soldiers that they blacken their faces with makeup to fool the Viet Cong.⁹⁶⁹

The rumor that the Viet Cong and the PAVN would not shoot black soldiers unless forced to enjoyed wide circulation among African Americans. The co-existence of this rumor with the one discussed in Chapter Four that the American government and military were sending blacks to Vietnam to kill them is striking. In the minds of some black soldiers, at the same time that their government was trying to kill them, the enemy hesitated to injure or kill them.

The armed forces were aware of these sorts of rumors. In January 1971 the Army General Staff received a report from Army Counterintelligence regarding an investigation (September 1970-January 1971) of recent incidents of racial unrest in Vietnam. While the investigation’s main goal was to “detect and neutralize any organized effort to create racial unrest within the United States Army in Vietnam,” it also noted that “a rumor still persists in the field units that the Viet Cong will not ambush black soldiers, but only wish to kill whites.”⁹⁷⁰ Additionally, Army Counterintelligence interviewed a number of African Americans who claimed that “blacks in the field have been told that they will be

⁹⁶⁸ Simeon Booker, “Negroes in Vietnam: ‘We too, Are Americans,’” *Ebony*, November 1965, 89.

⁹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁹⁷⁰ Report, Major Pace, November 20, 1970, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Plan, Racial Unrest: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP), College Park, Maryland.

warned by the Viet Cong of an impending ambush.” Investigators highlighted an incident in which a black warrant officer claimed in a speech to a group of 40-50 black soldiers that he had “high-ranking contacts within the Viet Cong, and he had been guaranteed that the VC only wanted to kill the whites and not the blacks.” While Army Counterintelligence was quick to point out that there was no validity to these rumors, “the subject is being discussed by black troops throughout all of Vietnam.”⁹⁷¹

This report should have been troubling for a number of reasons. First the rumors were sufficiently prevalent that they had gained the attention of Army intelligence. Equally significant, the use of the phrase “a rumor still persists” suggests that this rumor had a degree of longevity. Investigators believed that these rumors were widespread and that black soldiers had been discussing them for some time.

Many black soldiers recalled hearing from other blacks that the Viet Cong and the PAVN would not shoot African Americans. Eddie Greene heard that Viet Cong and PAVN forces “wouldn’t target them for sniper attacks as regularly as they would the whites.”⁹⁷² According to the version of the rumor Greene heard the Viet Cong were actually sympathetic towards African Americans. He recalled, “The scuttlebutt was that they knew the situation that African Americans were in in America. That we did not have true equal rights here in America...We are not there on our own accord. We are there because really we are still slaves.”⁹⁷³ Like South Vietnamese civilians the enemy empathized with the black plight in America.

⁹⁷¹ Ibid.

⁹⁷² Eddie Greene, interview by author, March 12, 2012.

⁹⁷³ Ibid.

Lamont Steptoe “heard tales that you know the North Vietnamese would capture black soldiers and give them political education and then release them because Ho Chi Minh, he liked black people.”⁹⁷⁴ The PAVN were supposedly only interested in educating African Americans and not killing them. Thomas Brannon served in a cavalry unit, but he recalled hearing from friends in infantry units that “often times the Viet Cong would let a black point man go through. Not shoot him.”⁹⁷⁵ Wayne Smith heard a variation of this rumor which was essentially that as long as black soldiers didn’t shoot at Viet Cong, they wouldn’t shoot back.⁹⁷⁶ Similarly, James Gillam heard that as long as black soldiers didn’t appear aggressive, PAVN forces wouldn’t kill them. He remembered, “It was talked about you know somebody would say ‘well if you get in it tight and you’re walking out by yourself on point and if you think the PAVN are out there, if you just take your rifle and sling it barrel down, you’ll be okay.’”⁹⁷⁷

A number of African Americans believed that there was some truth to these rumors. Ron Bradley thought that if a squad was “predominantly black they didn’t shoot at us and they had hoped we didn’t shoot at them.”⁹⁷⁸ Samuel Vance heard that “the Viet Cong wouldn’t kill or harm a Negro unless a unit was ambushed or attacked and the Negro was a part of it.”⁹⁷⁹ Vance alleged that a Viet Cong soldier would not kill an African American soldier unless he was left no other option. Black soldiers were not only safe from NLF soldiers in the jungle but also in the city. Vance remarked that “there are

⁹⁷⁴ Steptoe, interview by author.

⁹⁷⁵ Brannon, interview by author.

⁹⁷⁶ Smith, interview by author.

⁹⁷⁷ Gillam, interview by author.

⁹⁷⁸ Bradley, interview by author.

⁹⁷⁹ Vance, *The Courageous*, 132-133.

places in Saigon where the Negroes can roam freely and stay out all of the night, and nothing ever happens to them. If a white man dared to travel anywhere alone, he'd be doomed."⁹⁸⁰

In May 1968 *Newsday* interviewed an anonymous black soldier who claimed that he had recently learned of an incident in which NLF forces captured seven soldiers, six whites and one black. According to the soldier "they killed all six whites and they let this one blood (Negro) go." The soldier also claimed that intelligence interviewed the surviving black soldier for days in an attempt to ascertain why the enemy didn't kill him, "but this cat ain't telling them nothing."⁹⁸¹

Don Browne, who served in Saigon and Tuy Hoa in 1967-68, also argued that the "Viet Cong would shoot at a white guy, then let the black guy behind go through, then shoot at the next white guy."⁹⁸² Brown believed this rumor, but he argued that NLF soldiers did this to win black support, thereby increasing tensions within the United States Army, not to express racial solidarity.⁹⁸³ Robert Holcomb maintained that both black and white soldiers in his unit believed the rumor. It became so widespread that "white guys would stay close to the black guys in the field because they thought the VC and PAVN didn't shoot at blacks as much as whites."⁹⁸⁴

None of these soldiers alleged that they ever witnessed an NLF soldier actually refuse to shoot at black soldiers, but others did claim that they had been spared or knew somebody who had been spared. One of Mel Adams's fellow black soldiers was

⁹⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁸¹ Paul Hathaway, "Negro in Viet: Not That Far From the Ghetto," *Newsday*, May 15, 1968, 36.

⁹⁸² Don Browne's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 167.

⁹⁸³ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁴ Holcomb's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 212.

responsible for delivering mail into a dangerous area. Much to the soldier's shock, his vehicle was never fired upon. Adams wasn't sure why the enemy seemed uninterested in his friend, but he thought that it was at least possible that the Vietnamese weren't shooting at him because he was black. Adams's suspicions seemed to be confirmed when his friend brought a white soldier with him on his route and the Viet Cong "put two rounds through the windshield."⁹⁸⁵ Adams knew another African American who was involved in the Battle of Dak Seang in April 1970. This man claimed that after his special forces unit was overrun, the PAVN began to kill off the wounded soldiers. However, when a PAVN soldier approached him, he simply "pointed his gun away and said 'You get to live another day.'"⁹⁸⁶

Terry Whitmore recalled an incident in which an NLF soldier refused to shoot him. Attempting to save an injured white soldier, Whitmore claimed that he "ran right by Charlie. Right by him! And he just watched me. Didn't shoot, didn't move, nothing. He just watched me run by." What is particularly astonishing in Whitmore's account is that once he rescued the white soldier, the NLF soldier shot him, but refused to shoot Whitmore.⁹⁸⁷

Keith Freeman believed that Vietnamese soldiers always made a concentrated effort to avoid killing black soldiers. Even when African Americans were delegated to the point man position, NLF soldiers would not kill them. He also claimed that a number of his friends had been held at gunpoint by the enemy only to be released. Freeman described an incident when he sneaked into a village and was captured. Instead of killing

⁹⁸⁵ Adams, interview by author.

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁷ Whitmore, *Memphis, Nam, Sweden*, 71.

him, a PAVN soldier said, “Come out soul brother. You’re the same as me, I’m the same as you.”⁹⁸⁸ Thomas Benton reported a similar story. When Benton was visiting a local brothel, an NLF soldier walked in. Benton was unarmed at the time and he feared that the soldier would kill him. Instead the man sat down to eat with Benton, repeating the phrase “you black you same same, like me, have same problems why you here, you got war at home.”⁹⁸⁹

In February 1971 the *New York Amsterdam News* interviewed Richard Devore, a black airman, about his experiences in Vietnam. Devore, who was stationed at Bien Hoa Air Force Base in 1969, claimed that “the VC passed up brothers” and were only interested in killing whites. He recalled an incident in which he was walking through a dark alley in Saigon when he encountered an armed Viet Cong soldier. The soldier “pulled a hand grenade on me. I pulled out my 38 (revolver) but he told me ‘this is not for you brother. It’s for Charlie (whites).’”⁹⁹⁰ Freeman, Benton, and Devore’s accounts are revealing. The enemy not only released them, he expressed sympathy and explained explicitly that they were spared because they were black. According to these accounts, the Viet Cong and PAVN’s war was not with African Americans.

Ron Bradley was involved in two separate incidents in which he believed his race helped him to survive. Early in his tour, he was in the field when out of the corner of his eye he saw a Viet Cong soldier pointing a rifle at him. The soldier could have easily

⁹⁸⁸ Interview with Keith Freeman as found in Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986), 104.

⁹⁸⁹ Interview with Thomas Benton as found in Wright, *Thoughts*, 67-68.

⁹⁹⁰ Willie L. Hamilton, “The Black Vietnam Veteran and His Problems: Fourth in a Series,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 13, 1971, 32.

killed him, he “didn’t shoot” and Bradley killed him instead. Why the soldier didn’t shoot was a question that stuck with Bradley for a long time. He remembered, “That’s one of the things I deal with and will have to deal with for the rest of my life...I always wondered why to this day he didn’t shoot.”⁹⁹¹ In another incident, Bradley and a group of soldiers were driving to meet South Korean soldiers to practice Taekwondo when they became lost. Trying to turn around they drove into a clearing only to come upon a group of Viet Cong soldiers. While there were white and black soldiers in the back of the truck, Bradley was in the front with an African American driver. He assumed that he was about to be killed, but to his surprise and relief the Viet Cong allowed the truck to turn around without incident. He believed that the Viet Cong allowed them to leave because he and the driver were black. He theorized that at least some Viet Cong “were sympathetic to us because to them we were going through the same thing, the only difference was we were being used as tools against them.”⁹⁹²

James Lewis recalled an incident in which the Viet Cong shot a white soldier standing next to him when they could have easily shot him instead. This was mystifying because he was a captain and the white soldier was a private. He wondered about their reasoning, “Why would they have taken a private out? You know a run of the mill soldier, when they could have had the commander.” Lewis also saw evidence that black soldiers in the Army Corps of Engineers were less likely to be hit by sniper fire than

⁹⁹¹ Bradley, interview by author.

⁹⁹² Ibid.

whites. These experiences led him to conclude that there may have been some truth to the rumors.⁹⁹³

“I am not going to believe they’re not going to shoot me”

The accounts of enemy forbearance are certainly intriguing, but the 5,570 African Americans killed during the Vietnam War demonstrate that the PAVN and the NLF were more than willing to kill black soldiers.⁹⁹⁴ Melvin Adams had a few friends who claimed they were spared by the Viet Cong, but he thought that the Viet Cong’s commitment to spare black soldiers was suspect. He felt that they just “wanted to make the black soldiers think different from the white soldiers...we won’t shoot you, but we’ll shoot the white guy.”⁹⁹⁵ Years later, he pointed out that given the number of black soldiers killed in Vietnam, one could have just as easily developed a rumor that the enemy was actively targeting black soldiers.⁹⁹⁶

Adams was not the only African American soldier to question the validity of these rumors. In November 1965 *Ebony* reported that black soldiers universally rejected the Viet Cong’s “claims of brotherhood” as a politically motivated attempt to demoralize black troops and separate them from their white peers.⁹⁹⁷ An anonymous black marine who was interviewed observed that anyone who expected “these cats to shoot the white guy next to you when he can kill you, you’re crazy.”⁹⁹⁸

⁹⁹³ Lewis, interview by author.

⁹⁹⁴ William E. Alt and Betty L. Alt, *Black Soldiers, White Wars: Black Warriors from Antiquity to the Present* (Wesport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 110.

⁹⁹⁵ Adams, interview by author.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁷ Booker, “Negroes in Vietnam,” 89.

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid., 96.

While some African American soldiers in Wayne Smith's unit believed the rumor, he completely rejected it, characterizing it as no more true than the rumor which claimed that Vietnamese women hid razor blades in their vaginas.⁹⁹⁹ Clyde Jackson recalled hearing that the enemy wouldn't shoot African Americans, but he rejected this idea, theorizing, "I am not going to believe they're not going to shoot me especially because it's what they're out to do whether your black or white."¹⁰⁰⁰ Of course, Jackson's conclusion is valid as it made absolutely no sense from a military perspective for the Viet Cong or the PAVN to shoot at whites and not shoot African Americans.

Adams, Smith, and Jackson were not alone in viewing these rumors as false. Anthony Martin heard rumors about the Viet Cong sparing African Americans, but he didn't believe they were true. Like Jackson, he questioned the rationality of such a directive, stating, "I don't know of any Viet Cong who was going to be so selective as to say 'I'm gonna kill this white guy that's shooting at me, I am not gonna shoot the black guy.'"¹⁰⁰¹ Equally significant, Martin asserted that at least as far as his own experiences serving with the Third Marine Division were concerned "you really couldn't even see who you were shooting at" enough to determine what the race of the enemy was.¹⁰⁰² This is an excellent point. Combat was often too chaotic for a soldier to follow any sort of racially based directive had one ever existed in the first place.

Martin also pointed out that the rumor likely appeared when soldiers tried to interpret what they saw and experienced in battle. A universal question in any battle is

⁹⁹⁹ Smith, interview by author.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Clyde Jackson, interview by author, January 8, 2012.

¹⁰⁰¹ Martin, interview by author.

¹⁰⁰² Ibid.

why one soldier is killed and another isn't. He explained that "if a unit came under attack and one black guy survived" the dominant narrative became that the enemy spared the black soldier.¹⁰⁰³ In reality, the soldier was probably just lucky. Even most soldiers who claimed to have been spared by the PAVN or the Viet Cong couldn't possibly have known the exact reason why they weren't injured or killed. There are, of course, numerous possible explanations why any individual soldier wasn't shot at any given time. It is possible that the enemy soldier was actually shooting at him and missed or that the soldier he encountered had run out of ammunition. It is also true that the enemy soldier may not have seen the American soldier in the first place.

Jim Houston recalled an incident during his tour with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry in 1966, in which a group of Viet Cong soldiers walked right by him while he was hiding on a pathway. Houston did not believe that the soldiers refrained from shooting at him because he was black, but that "they just didn't see me."¹⁰⁰⁴ He credited the fact that he was a "dark skin black man" with saving him, not because the Viet Cong favored blacks but because he was harder to see in the dark.¹⁰⁰⁵ Houston was not the only one to make this sort of connection. Robert Louis Jr., who served in 1966-67, remembered that "it seemed like they weren't shooting at us, but they couldn't see us."¹⁰⁰⁶ As a result of the extreme heat, black and white soldiers in his unit often took their shirts off and wore just their flak jackets. Louis thought that black soldiers remained somewhat camouflaged by their darker skin, while white soldiers stuck out more. As a result of this contrast, a

¹⁰⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Jim Houston, interview by author, December 1, 2011.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Robert Louis Jr., interview by author, November 30, 2011.

number of white soldiers were shot in the chest. Once the commanders realized what was happening, they ordered everyone to wear their equipment. Speaking of the Vietnamese enemy, Louis concluded, “They did not differentiate, it was what they could see.”¹⁰⁰⁷

African American soldiers in James Gillam’s unit frequently talked about the idea that the Viet Cong wouldn’t shoot African Americans, but he dismissed it entirely. He recalled thinking that anyone who seriously believed that a Viet Cong soldier would hesitate to kill a soldier simply because of his race was not only crazy but reckless. After all, even if such a policy did exist, the risks of relying on it far outweighed the benefits. Speaking of a hypothetical encounter with a Viet Cong soldier, Gillam reasoned, “What if this guy didn’t get the word? You know what if he can’t see enough of me to see I am a black man? He just sees a little bit of a black rifle, a little bit of a green uniform, and I have my rifle on a sling barrel turned down. I am dead.”¹⁰⁰⁸ The variation of the rumor he heard was that as long as black soldiers didn’t raise their gun towards the enemy, they wouldn’t be shot at, but Gillam maintained, “no black man I ever saw in the field did that” as the risks were too high.¹⁰⁰⁹

Gillam’s comments illustrate not only the potential risks in fully embracing these rumors, but also how difficult it would be to carry out such a policy. The circumstances had to be almost ideal for the PAVN and the Viet Cong to refrain from shooting at African Americans. For one thing, black soldiers had to be visible enough to be differentiated from their white peers or they faced the same possibility of injury or death. Black soldiers would have to stand upright in an open position. They would have to take

¹⁰⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Gillam, interview by author.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ibid.

a non-aggressive position themselves, something few soldiers would have done considering the risks involved. To ensure the maximum possibility that the alleged policy could be carried out a black soldier would have to risk death.

Why did these rumors became so widespread and why did some African Americans believe them to be true? To some extent the rumors proliferated because they were almost impossible to prove or disprove. Nobody knew what enemy soldiers thought or would do. Historian Herman Graham III argues that because of white mistreatment in the United States, African American soldiers liked to think that their “blackness” gave them an advantage over white soldiers in Vietnam. These rumors gave “black soldiers a sense of symbolic power because they forced white GIs--who believed that their white skin might have been making them targets of the enemies’ weapons-to experience the anxiety of race.”¹⁰¹⁰ There is definitely an element of truth to this argument, but the belief that the PAVN and the Viet Cong favored blacks was also part of a larger conviction of many African Americans that the Vietnamese in general sympathized with them. It made some sense to conclude that just as civilians, many of whom were of unknown affiliation, favored African Americans, so too did the enemy.

“Your genuine struggle is on your native land. GO HOME NOW AND ALIVE”

Opponents of the Saigon government did their best to convince black soldiers that they empathized with them and did not want them to die. Throughout the war communist leaders targeted black soldiers with propaganda in the form of leaflets and radio broadcasts. Generally speaking, these propaganda efforts broadcast what every African

¹⁰¹⁰ Graham, *Herman Graham III, The Brothers’ Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 118.

American already knew: African Americans did not enjoy equality. Therefore, why would black soldiers fight for a country which continued to discriminate against them? For the Vietnamese communists there was only one answer. Black soldiers should leave Vietnam, go home, and fight the “real war” against the racist white establishment in America. While there is no evidence that these propaganda efforts influenced any black soldiers to desert, they likely convinced some that their Vietnamese opponents supported them.

Fortunately, a few of these leaflets have survived. In most cases these leaflets noted the mistreatment of African Americans back home, encouraged black troops to desert and fight for greater equality, and made it clear that the Vietnamese did not want blacks to die in Vietnam. One leaflet begins by evoking the mistreatment of black people in Alabama stating, “I wish I wore[sic] an Alabama trooper. That is what I would truly like to be. I wish I were an Alabama trooper Cause then I could kill niggers legally.”¹⁰¹¹ This particular leaflet not only provided a general description of the unequal treatment faced by African Americans at home, it also mentioned a specific state, Alabama, which was closely linked not only to segregation but racial violence against African Americans. This focus on Alabama suggests that the authors had at least a marginal knowledge of the racial situation in the United States. They obviously understood that the choice of Alabama would grab the attention of black soldiers in a way that mentioning a northern or mid-western state would not.

¹⁰¹¹ Herbert Freidman, “National Liberation Front(NLF) Anti-American Leaflets of the Vietnam War,” *Psywarrior*, accessed April 2013, <http://www.psywarrior.com/VCLefletsProp.html> This is an excellent website which provides numerous primary documents concerning psychological warfare. Unfortunately, the leaflets are not dated.

The leaflet also reminded black soldiers that “the racists in the States are the very same as those who want Negroes to die in Vietnam.” While racist whites wanted to kill blacks in the U.S. or send them to Vietnam to die, African American soldiers had options. The leaflet concludes that they should “demand to be sent home now and alive [sic]” so they can fight “the Negroes real struggle.”¹⁰¹² By phrasing their arguments in this fashion the authors express sympathy for blacks. They did not want black soldiers to be killed in Vietnam but to go “home and alive.” In doing so, they evoked a perspective which included the rumor that the Viet Cong would not shoot black troops.

Another leaflet similarly noted the mistreatment of African Americans in the United States. It included a picture of a white police officer arresting an African American man and read “Your real enemies are those who call you ‘Niggers’. Your genuine struggle is on your native land. GO HOME NOW AND ALIVE.”¹⁰¹³

Some leaflets claimed that African American soldiers’ presence in Vietnam was the result of discriminatory practices. One NLF leaflet incorrectly claimed that while blacks made up 11 percent of the U.S population, they represented 30 percent of soldiers serving in Vietnam, and 40 percent of all combat deaths. The leaflet suggested that the only way for blacks to “stay out of the 40 percent column” was to “Go home!”¹⁰¹⁴ The NLF’s reference to the percentage of blacks in Vietnam as well as the percentage of blacks killed in combat is important because, as discussed in Chapter Three, blacks were overrepresented in combat units in the first few years of the war which led to disproportionate numbers being killed. This imbalance remained a point of contention for

¹⁰¹² Ibid.

¹⁰¹³ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁴ Ibid.

the duration of the war. The leaflet directly mentioned these imbalances, suggesting that the NLF was aware of the controversies surrounding black service and was seeking to exploit them. The phrasing of the leaflet also left the impression that the NLF cared more about the lives of African Americans than the American government.

Another leaflet alleged that African Americans were being mistreated in the United States and in Vietnam. It proclaimed, “In the States, you are called niggers...Your enemies are those who are carrying out harsh exploitation and extremely barbarous racial discrimination against American Blacks.”¹⁰¹⁵ Things were not much better in Vietnam where blacks were forced to “go first,” “withdraw last,” “stay in the outer ring,” and “do the hardest and most dangerous jobs.” These statements touched a sensitive nerve as African American soldiers often perceived that white officers gave them the hardest and most dangerous jobs. The leaflet also claimed that “casualty rates of black GIs are much higher than whites!”¹⁰¹⁶ The NLF was clearly trying to exploit the fears of many African American that they were being used as cannon fodder.

Vietnamese propaganda focused mainly on the racism and discrimination faced by blacks in the United States. White soldiers in Vietnam were seldom mentioned. The goal of this propaganda did not appear to be to encourage any sort of tensions between black and white troops. This leaflet was the only one which noted that African Americans experienced discrimination at the hands of whites in Vietnam.

This particular leaflet also encouraged black soldiers to refuse to fight. The leaflet instructed blacks to “refuse to obey all combat orders! Sit on the Fence! Refuse to

¹⁰¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁶ Ibid.

interfere in the internal affairs of your Vietnamese brothers! Refuse to perpetuate crimes against them!” It further advised that when under attack black soldiers should “lay down your weapons, let yourselves be captured: you will be taken alive and will eventually be allowed to return home.”¹⁰¹⁷ The use of the word “brother” is interesting because it was likely intended to send a clear message to African Americans that the NLF felt no hostility toward blacks. Their common dark skin made them family. The assurance that blacks could safely surrender fit well with the widespread rumor that the Viet Cong had no interest in killing blacks. The Vietnamese enemy wished African Americans no harm.

At least one other leaflet claimed that Vietnamese and African Americans were in many ways very similar. After noting that twenty million African Americans in the United States were “ABUSED, OPPRESSED, EXPLOITED, MANHANDLED, MURDERED BY RACIST AUTHORITIES,” it reminded black soldiers that their “Vietnamese brothers” had similar enemies in the form of “racist authorities Johnson, Dean Rusk, Mac Namamara [sic], Westmoreland.”¹⁰¹⁸ According to the leaflet the best way for black soldiers to help the Vietnamese was to “resolutely oppose to your being sent to the battlefield.”¹⁰¹⁹

Contemporary newspapers occasionally took notice of these appeals. In March 1967 the *Chicago Tribune* reported that soldiers commonly found Viet Cong pamphlets in American base camps. With phrasing almost identical to the previously mentioned leaflets, these leaflets directly addressed black soldiers stating, “twenty million fellow countrymen of yours in the U.S are being abused, oppressed, exploited, manhandled,

¹⁰¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁹ Ibid.

murdered by racist authorities.”¹⁰²⁰ This particular pamphlet reminded black troops of the discrimination, including violence, which African Americans experienced for much of the nation’s history. In January 1968 *Newsday* reported that NLF leaflets were found near the base camp of the First Battalion of the Seventh Marine Regiment, nine miles southwest of Da Nang Air Base. One, which was found attached to a log floating down the river, was directed at African American soldiers. The leaflet, almost identical to the one which appeared in *Chicago Tribune* the year before, stated, “Colored American servicemen twenty million fellow countrymen of yours in the U.S.A. are being abused, oppressed, exploited, manhandled, murdered by racist authorities. You don’t forgot (sic) the bloody Alabama cases, don’t you.”¹⁰²¹ The reference to the “bloody Alabama cases” illustrates that the authors had at least a nominal knowledge of the racial incidents which had received widespread publicity.

The leaflet also claimed that the same people responsible for the mistreatment of African Americans in the U.S. were deceiving them and forcing them against their will “to slaughter the South Vietnamese people who are struggling for peace, independence, freedom, democracy, national reunification, for equality, and friendship between the peoples all over the world.” African Americans and the Vietnamese had common goals, faced similar problems, and shared an enemy. The leaflet provided options for African Americans. They could refuse to be sent to the front lines. If that didn’t work and they were sent into battle, the leaflet instructed them to “let yourselves be captured by the Liberation armed forces: Don’t resist. Throw your weapons far away and lie still; Hand

¹⁰²⁰ “Viet Nam War Also Waged With Words,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 5, 1967, 14.

¹⁰²¹ “Cong Ask Negroes to Desert,” *Newsday*, January 6, 1968, 27.

your weapons over to the Liberation combatants, quickly follow them out to safer areas...you will be well-treated and the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front will arrange your repatriation.”¹⁰²²

This particular leaflet is significant as it argues that blacks and Vietnamese were both victims of white mistreatment. Whites were using blacks to fight a war against a group of people, the Vietnamese, who only wanted their freedom just as African Americans wanted to be free. Vietnamese communists had no desire to injure or kill members of a group that wanted freedom. They also had no interest in holding African Americans as prisoners. The leaflet promised that they would be repatriated. This offer was only made to black soldiers. The leaflet mentioned an African American soldier named Claude McClure, captured by the Viet Cong in November 23, 1963, as an example of what any black soldier who surrendered could expect. However, McClure was not repatriated until November 27, 1965 more than two years after he was captured.¹⁰²³

In May 1968 another *Newsday* article discussed an incident in which a group of soldiers found leaflets which questioned why African Americans were fighting in Vietnam and not at home. The leaflet queried, “Black man, why are you fighting here? We don’t want to fight you. Your war is against the white man back home.”¹⁰²⁴

A number of African American soldiers recalled seeing similar leaflets. After raiding a Viet Cong base camp, Wes Geary’s unit found a bunch of flyers which stated,

¹⁰²² Ibid.

¹⁰²³ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁴ Hathaway, “Negro in Viet.”

“Colored infantryman lay down your arms don’t fight for this racist LBJ.”¹⁰²⁵ Robert Sanders also came across leaflets which claimed that blacks had no business fighting on behalf of a country where racism was endemic. One such leaflet stated, “They call us Gooks here and they call you niggers over there. You’re the same as us. Get out, it’s not your fight.”¹⁰²⁶ As discussed in Chapter Four many African Americans were bothered by the use of racial slurs towards the Vietnamese as it reminded them of how white racists spoke about them. By claiming that blacks and Vietnamese were similarly victimized by these slurs, this particular leaflet spoke to African Americans in a language they understood and evoked a perspective they likely agreed with. The use of the phrase “you’re the same as us” also spoke to those African American soldiers who believed that they could relate to the Vietnamese and that in turn the Vietnamese people were sympathetic.

Louis McQueen, a black marine from Cincinnati who served in 1966-67, recalled seeing similar leaflets. He stated, “They would say, ‘Why are you over here killing us and they (white Americans) are killing you at home?’ They dropped leaflets saying that.”¹⁰²⁷

Other soldiers recalled seeing leaflets with similar messages. Wayne Smith remembered finding leaflets on base and in the bush which stated, “Soul Brother, No Vietnamese ever called you nigger.”¹⁰²⁸ This simple phrase not only asserted that the communist Vietnamese were not the enemy it also reminded African Americans that whites in the United States were responsible for their mistreatment. On more than one

¹⁰²⁵ Geary, interview by author.

¹⁰²⁶ Goff and Sanders, *Brothers*, 148-149.

¹⁰²⁷ “Consensus: Vietnam A Large Waste of Black Lives and Time,” *Jet*, May 22, 1975, 53.

¹⁰²⁸ Smith, interview by author.

occasion Ron Bradley found leaflets which stated that Vietnamese and black people were both victims of white mistreatment. These leaflets encouraged African Americans to desert so as to not help racist whites mistreat the Vietnamese just as they had mistreated African Americans for generations¹⁰²⁹ Willie Thomas found leaflets at the fire base where he was stationed which claimed that African Americans and Vietnamese were more similar than different. The leaflets asserted, “We are closer to you as people than whites.” They also reminded African Americans of their inferior status at home, questioning why blacks were willing to fight for the United States when they “can’t even walk down the street” in their own country.¹⁰³⁰

“You can hear the appeal from the Negroes in your native land”

Leaflets were not the only channel the Vietnamese used to appeal to African Americans. While serving with the 101st Airborne Division in Ashau Valley in 1970, Robert Holcolmb came across a sign which contained a message similar to that found in leaflets.¹⁰³¹ UPI journalist Dana Stone took a picture of what looks like a wooden sign with the message “U.S Army Men! You are committing the same ignominious crimes in South Vietnam that the KKK is perpetuating against your family at home.”¹⁰³²

The most common means channel of communication, other than leaflets, was the radio. Radio Hanoi could be heard in most areas of Vietnam, and many American soldiers listened to its English language shows because it played American music banned by Armed Forces Radio. Particularly entertaining were the daily “news” reports, many

¹⁰²⁹ Bradley, interview by author.

¹⁰³⁰ Thomas, interview by author.

¹⁰³¹ Holcomb’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 212.

¹⁰³² Graham, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 117.

delivered by a soft-spoken Vietnamese woman known as Hanoi Hannah. These broadcasts were aimed at all American soldiers, but Hannah and her compatriots frequently singled out African Americans for attention.¹⁰³³ These broadcasts had a similar tone and perspective as the leaflets distributed by the Vietnamese communists.

As early as November 1965 *Ebony* discovered Radio Hanoi and its efforts to appeal to black soldiers. It reported that the Radio Hanoi praised African Americans for their efforts during the civil rights movement but also questioned why African Americans were fighting in Vietnam and not in the United States, urging them to return home and “win the real battle.”¹⁰³⁴ The strategy employed by Radio Hanoi appears to have been multifaceted. Radio Hanoi wanted to convey the message that the station was sympathetic to the black struggle for equal rights in the United States. Furthermore, these broadcasts questioned whether the civil rights movement and the more general advancement of blacks were aided by the presence of thousands of African American soldiers in Vietnam. Radio Hanoi asked African American soldiers a very simple question with no easy answer: wouldn’t the civil rights movement be better served if black soldiers were back home fighting for civil rights and political equality?

Occasionally, Radio Hanoi focused on the experiences of African American soldiers in Vietnam. For example, during a March 30, 1968 broadcast Hanoi Hannah discussed the trial of Billy Smith, an African American soldier charged with killing his superior officer, who was white, with a fragmentation grenade on the Bien Hoa Army base. Hannah announced that Smith was arrested not because of any evidence, but

¹⁰³³ Don North, “The Search for Hanoi Hannah,” *Psywarrior*, last modified 1991, <http://www.psywarrior.com/hannah.html>

¹⁰³⁴ Booker, “Negroes in Vietnam,” 89.

because he was “black, poor and against the war and the army and refusing to be a victim of racism.”¹⁰³⁵ Many of its appeals were generalized accounts of the racial situation in the United States, but this broadcast demonstrates that Radio Hanoi at least occasionally used very specific incidents to reinforce its position that African Americans experienced discrimination.

However, for the most part Hanoi Hannah and her compatriots focused their attention on the mistreatment of African Americans in the United States. They claimed that racism was widespread and that the government’s attempts to combat prejudice and discrimination had been woefully inadequate. Because blacks had few if any rights, Radio Hanoi argued that African Americans had no responsibility to fight for the United States government and would be better advised to stay in America and fight for equality.

Sometimes the messages Radio Hanoi directed at African Americans were pointed and graphic. Richard Ford, who served in Vietnam from June 1967 to July 1968, remembered a particular broadcast in which Hanoi Hannah stated, “Soul brothers, go home. Whitey raping your mothers and your daughters, burning down your homes. What you over here for? This is not your war.”¹⁰³⁶ The suggestion that whites were raping family members must have struck a sensitive nerve. It was fairly typical for Radio Hanoi to note the inequalities faced by blacks and even the violence but the broadcast that Ford allegedly heard moved to a new level. It is always possible that Ford’s account is an exaggerated version of what was actually broadcast. It is hard to know for certain, as few

¹⁰³⁵ North, “The Search for Hanoi Hannah.”

¹⁰³⁶ Richard Ford’s account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 39.

recordings from the period remain and as a result the little we know about Radio Hanoi comes from contemporary newspaper articles and oral history accounts.

Occasionally, Hanoi Hannah and her fellow reporters provided black soldiers with information that wasn't available from other sources. Mike Roberts, an African American soldier from Detroit, Michigan, first heard about the Detroit riots on Armed Forces Radio. The station provided few details and no real information concerning the probable causes of the rioting. In contrast, when he changed the channel to Radio Hanoi, Hannah discussed the riots in great detail down to the National Guard unit that was called in to quell the riots. This incident taught Roberts that the Armed Forces Radio "knew more than they broadcasted" as it seemed unlikely that Hannah would have information that the military didn't.¹⁰³⁷ Similarly, Arthur Barham remembered that Hanoi Hannah reported on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in far greater detail than Armed Forces Radio. Barham was understandably shocked that an enemy radio station was more concerned with providing information to black soldiers about King's assassination than the Armed Forces station.¹⁰³⁸

Radio Hanoi did more than simply report on the mistreatment of African Americans. It "employed" African Americans in its effort to convince black soldiers to stop fighting. In June 1966 African American Korean War defector Clarence C. Adams appeared on Radio Hanoi. While Adams was probably not the best choice to encourage black soldiers to return to the United States and fight against racism and prejudice, as he had fled to China rather than return home, his arguments were similar to other appeals

¹⁰³⁷ North, "The Search for Hanoi Hannah."

¹⁰³⁸ Arthur C. Barham, interview by author, February 19, 2013.

found on Radio Hanoi.¹⁰³⁹ Adams proclaimed, "You are supposedly fighting for the freedom of the Vietnamese, but what kind of freedom do you have at home, sitting in the back of the bus, being barred from restaurants, stores and certain neighborhoods, and being denied the right to vote. ... Go home and fight for equality in America."¹⁰⁴⁰

In August 1967 the *Washington Post* reported, "North Vietnam has been beaming almost daily broadcasts in English to Negro GIs in South Vietnam urging them to stop fighting." The broadcasts not only featured distorted or inaccurate reports of incidents of racial violence in the United States but also included antiwar messages from such black activists as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. Radio Hanoi claimed that at least some African Americans believed that black soldiers should have been fighting a war in the United States and not in Vietnam. The voices and opinions of leaders like Carmichael and Brown lent a level of legitimacy as Radio Hanoi was honestly able to claim, "You can hear the appeal from the Negroes in your native land—Come home, come home."¹⁰⁴¹

The *Post* article noted that Radio Hanoi employed an African American announcer identified only as Jackson Turner.¹⁰⁴² Whether Jackson Turner actually existed or Radio Hanoi created him, the Vietnamese communists clearly felt it important to have a black representative on the airwaves. Turner was also likely meant to convey to black soldiers that they too could go over to the other side.

¹⁰³⁹ "Korean Encourages Negroes to 'Stop Fighting,'" *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 13, 1966, A2.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Michael Lollar, "The Long Road Home: Memphian turned back on racist America after Korean POW camp, found freedom in Red China," *The Commercial Appeal*, September 16, 2007.

¹⁰⁴¹ "Hanoi Propaganda Tuned to Negro GIs," *Washington Post*, August 31, 1967, A-14. I found no other record of Jackson Turner and he was more than likely a creation of Radio Hanoi.

¹⁰⁴² *Ibid.*

Two years later, in August 1969 the *Baltimore Sun* reported that Radio Hanoi was broadcasting messages directed to black soldiers. These appeals described “the Communist fight in South Vietnam as another front of the American Negro’s struggle against white oppression.” Radio Hanoi not only tied the enemy cause in Vietnam to the African American struggle back home, they also broadcast the words of James A. Johnson, a black antiwar advocate and member of the Fort Hood Three, who refused to go to Vietnam in 1969. While Johnson was a real person, the *Baltimore Sun* was skeptical as to whether he was actually speaking on the radio. Nonetheless, “Johnson” described the war in bluntly racial terms, alleging that participation only served the interests “of a few greedy white racists” at the expense of black soldiers who “are already dying at a disproportionately high rate to whites in Vietnam.” He added that blacks had little reason to serve in Vietnam as “the only battlefield for black people is America, from Harlem to Watts.”¹⁰⁴³

Radio Hanoi’s efforts to feature black antiwar activists made sense. African American soldiers were more likely to listen to black antiwar activists than unknown Vietnamese broadcasters. Back in the United States African American antiwar activists expressed opinions that were almost identical to those discussed during regular Radio Hanoi broadcasts. In November 1970 after returning from a two-week trip to North Vietnam, Reverend Phillip Lawson, speaking on an American radio station, instructed black soldiers, “Do not kill your Vietnamese brothers.” He argued that the North Vietnamese were not hostile to African Americans and in fact were interested and even supportive of the black civil rights movement. He went on to say, “Some criticize me for

¹⁰⁴³ “Radio Hanoi Has Message Especially For Negro GI’s,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 16, 1969, A2.

combining the Black American and Vietnamese struggles, but I see the oppression of Black people on the American scene as logically extending itself on the international scene.”¹⁰⁴⁴

Lawson was not the only African American to refer to the Vietnamese as brothers or to challenge black participation in the war. After all it was Muhammad Ali, who famously declared that African Americans should not fight their “Asian brothers” because “they never lynched you, never called you nigger, never put dogs on you, never shot your leaders,” a message which similarly reminded blacks of their mistreatment, while also asserting that the real fight was at home.¹⁰⁴⁵

There is no evidence that black antiwar activists and Radio Hanoi had any influence on one another. In reality the statements of the Black Panther Party and similar groups were generally more extreme and ideological than Radio Hanoi. In a March 22, 1970 article published in the *Black Panther*, Eldridge Cleaver ordered black soldiers to “kill General Abrams and his staff, all his officers. Sabotage supplies and equipment or turn them over to the Vietnamese people and tell them you want to join the Black Panther Party to fight for the freedom and liberation of your own people.”¹⁰⁴⁶

Cleaver was not the only one to suggest that black soldiers kill their fellow Americans and join the enemy. The government of the People’s Republic of China made similar appeals during the war. In January 1966 the *Washington Post* claimed that the

¹⁰⁴⁴ “Minster Sees Link In Black, Vietcong Struggles,” *Jet*, November 12, 1970, 12.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Graham, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 73.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Report, Major Pace, November 20, 1970, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Plan, Racial Unrest: Box #2, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, U.S. Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP. Cleaver also appeared on Radio Hanoi where he read a somewhat less incendiary version of these statements.

Chinese government had issued propaganda which sought to define the Vietnam War as a “‘race war’ in which bad white men are shooting good colored North Vietnamese.”¹⁰⁴⁷

The following year, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* noted that China had begun distributing pamphlets through the U.S. Postal Service which urged “negro soldiers to kill their white colleagues in Vietnam.” These pamphlets provided “pointers on how to sabotage urban facilities, sewer lines, electric power stations, and highways.” By killing large numbers of white soldiers blacks would ensure that “these racists will not be able to return home and intensify the brutalization and extermination of black people.”¹⁰⁴⁸

The Vietnamese, the Black Panther Party, and China all appealed to black soldiers, but their messages were clearly different and did not necessarily complement one another.¹⁰⁴⁹ All argued that the “real war” for blacks was in the United States. Cleaver and the Chinese were far more extreme and unrealistic. Vietnamese propaganda asked blacks to stop fighting, but it never asked them to join the Viet Cong, kill their fellow soldiers, or sabotage the American war effort. It asked them to disengage in a foreign conflict and reengage in a domestic cause, not further involve themselves in the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese argued that African Americans should serve their own interests by leaving the country altogether, whereas Cleaver and the Chinese unrealistically urged them to switch sides.

¹⁰⁴⁷ William S. White, “A Monstrous Campaign: Peking Labels Vietnam ‘Race War,’” *Washington Post*, January 10, 1966, A17.

¹⁰⁴⁸ “Racial Violence Aim: Post Office Distributes Peking ‘Hate’ Pamphlet,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, September 2, 1967, 16.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Paul Ward, “Soviet Radio Urges Negro to Desert: English Broadcast is Aimed At U.S. Forces in Vietnam War,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 3, 1967, 2. This article shows that the Soviet Union also broadcast appeals to black soldiers in Vietnam. However, there is no evidence that Soviet officials influenced the Vietnamese effort and in fact this article claims that the Soviet Union was following Hanoi’s lead.

Both the leaflets and radio broadcasts attempted to influence black soldiers to leave the battlefield. A 1970-71 Army Counterintelligence report claimed that Radio Hanoi encouraged “black soldiers to rally to the VC/NVA forces. Black soldiers were told by Radio Hanoi, once again, that they need not fear for they would be greeted with open arms by the enemy of Vietnam.”¹⁰⁵⁰ The use of the phrase “once again” suggests that this was not the first time that Radio Hanoi had informed black soldiers that they would not face hostility if they deserted. This report confirms that the armed forces were aware of Radio Hanoi’s appeals to black soldiers. At the same time it does not reveal what, if any, reaction the military had to these appeals. It appears as if the armed forces did not take either the leaflets or radio broadcasts particularly seriously, most likely because neither appeared to be successful in persuading blacks to desert.

Of course, some black soldiers did go AWOL or desert. As of 1969 African Americans accounted for roughly 20 percent of all desertions.¹⁰⁵¹ In many cases these soldiers ended up at “Soul Alley,” a two-hundred yard back street located one mile from the U.S. military headquarters in Saigon. A December 1970 *Time* article claimed that “between 300 and 500 black AWOLS and deserters” resided in Soul Alley at any given time.¹⁰⁵² There is no convincing evidence that Vietnamese propaganda led these soldiers to desert.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Report, Major Pace, November 20, 1970, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Plan, Racial Unrest: Box #2, U.S Forces in South East Asia, 1950-1975, NACP. PAVN forces were routinely referred to as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).

¹⁰⁵¹ Jack Anderson, “Deserters Hustle in Saigon ‘Mafia,’” *Washington Post*, November 13, 1969, F9.

¹⁰⁵² “South Viet Nam: Soul Alley,” *Time*, Monday, December 14, 1970. In most cases, these soldiers had no intention of staying in Vietnam for any great length of time, but trying to leave would have exposed them to arrest, court-martial and other punishments, and as a result they created a temporary community for black deserters in Soul Alley.

There were occasional reports of black soldiers defecting to the Viet Cong. Ron Bradley, who served in Can Tho as a part of the Ninth Aviation Division in 1967-68, heard rumors about three black soldiers who had defected to the Viet Cong.¹⁰⁵³ According to the *Boston Globe*, the military's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) compiled a report on a black soldier, known by the code name "pepper," who had allegedly deserted to join the PAVN.¹⁰⁵⁴ There were also persistent rumors that a black soldier named Nolan McKinley, who went AWOL in 1967, had actually joined the Viet Cong. Even if all these soldiers defected to the enemy—and there is not sufficient evidence that any black soldier defected—four or five soldiers would not constitute a large number.

The leaflets and radio broadcasts failed to convince black soldiers to desert or defect, but they may have had an effect on the morale of black troops. At the very least these messages were a reminder of the prejudice, discrimination, and even violence faced by many African Americans in the United States. These propaganda efforts also left many African Americans with the impression that the enemy was sympathetic and concerned about their welfare. Vietnamese propaganda did not provide African Americans with any revelatory information as it simply echoed what black soldiers already knew—racial discrimination remained pervasive in the United States. Many black soldiers agreed with an anonymous black soldier who read a leaflet left by the Viet

¹⁰⁵³ Ron Bradley, interview by author.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Joseph Volz, "Did two GIs aid Hanoi,?" *Boston Globe*, February 6, 1979, 7.

Cong which argued that blacks should be fighting in the U.S. and not Vietnam and responded with, “Man, you’re right.”¹⁰⁵⁵

Black Prisoners of War, Amerasians, and the Montagnards

These appeals were a propaganda effort and not a genuine expression of sympathy and identification. The leaflets and broadcasts criticized racism in America, but there is evidence that the PAVN and the NLF were not entirely free of racial prejudice. Historian Shawn McHale has noted that during the First Indochina War the Viet Minh used racist fear-mongering to try to unite Vietnamese civilians against the French colonial forces. In December 1951 Viet Minh soldiers circulated a tract which claimed that the French were “turning Vietnamese soldiers into black soldiers. The French are bringing one hundred youths to the Cape, to the electric ovens, transforming them into blacks.”¹⁰⁵⁶ Another tract from January 1952 claimed that French forces were “seizing people and cooking them black, distending their lips and twisting their hair—it’s truly savage.”¹⁰⁵⁷ It is clear that Vietnamese communist officials during this period were quite willing to appeal to offensive racial characterizations if they thought it would translate into greater support for their movement. In 1965 a black infantryman named Cole Whaley found leaflets in an abandoned Viet Cong base which stated, “Negro troops are inferior, won’t fight, and have no sustaining power,” suggesting that the Viet Cong may have denigrated black soldiers during the Vietnam War to bolster morale and support.¹⁰⁵⁸

¹⁰⁵⁵ Hathaway, “Negro in Viet.”

¹⁰⁵⁶ Shawn McHale, “Understanding the Fanatic Mind? The Viet Minh and Race Hatred in the First Indochina War(1945-1954),” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 4, No.3 (Fall 2009), 98. It is unclear what Cape they are referring to.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Booker, “Negroes in Vietnam,” 92.

The treatment afforded to black prisoners of war further suggests that the PAVN and the Viet Cong's appeals to black soldiers were simple acts of propaganda and did not reflect any deep sympathy to blacks. James E. Jackson Jr., a Green Beret medic from Talcott, West Virginia, spent 18 months in a Viet Cong prison. Initially, the Viet Cong told Jackson that as an African American he would be afforded special privileges, but when he "saw the miserable shape the other Negro prisoners were in" and his captors began pestering him to denounce the war, he realized that they were only interested in using black prisoners for propaganda purposes. He recalled, "One thing that was constantly slapped in my face was the race situation in the United States....They told me that Negroes were getting machine gunned in the streets of America and that Newark and all those places had blown up."¹⁰⁵⁹ If anything Jackson's race made him a target for harassment as there was an expectation that he would want to speak out publicly against the United States. When he refused, he only confused and angered his captors.¹⁰⁶⁰

Norman McDaniel of Fayetteville, North Carolina, was a prisoner of war from 1966-73, much of it in the notorious "Hanoi Hilton." He was repeatedly tortured and when he complained, citing the Geneva Convention, his torturers laughed in his face and said "You're not qualified to be treated as a prisoner of war. You're a criminal, black American criminal." McDaniel stated that they would often taunt him and other black soldiers, referring to them as "the blackest of the black criminals."¹⁰⁶¹

¹⁰⁵⁹ James E. Jackson Jr., "As a Viet Cong Prisoner: Ordeal at hands of guerrillas," *Ebony*, August 1968, 116.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶¹ Norman McDaniel's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 134.

Fred Cherry of Suffolk, Virginia, spent 1965-73 in the same prison as McDaniel, and his race also did not benefit him. If anything it just brought extra harassment. Injured when his plane went down in North Vietnam, camp officials refused to provide him with bandages. When he eventually became so sick that they were forced to operate on his leg, they refused to give him any anesthetic.¹⁰⁶² As was the case with Jackson and McDaniel, Cherry's captors obsessed about his skin color, even giving him the nickname Xu, the Vietnamese word for copper coin, in reference to his color.¹⁰⁶³ At one point they even placed him in a cell with a white southerner under the expectation that the two would fight.¹⁰⁶⁴ They frequently tried to "educate" Cherry about the black experience in America with the expectation that he would denounce the United States. When he didn't, they tortured him viciously. A guard once walked into a cell with a picture of Wilt Chamberlain and exclaimed, "He looks just like a monkey. Where does he ever find a woman who can satisfy him?"¹⁰⁶⁵ As these three accounts suggest, the Vietnamese were only sympathetic to African Americans who behaved like the stereotype created by their propaganda.¹⁰⁶⁶

Finally, one can look at the continued mistreatment of Amerasians and Montagnards long after reunification as evidence that Vietnamese communists were not free of racial prejudice. Based on interviews with individual Amerasians in Vietnam

¹⁰⁶² Fred Cherry's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 281. Cherry was the forty-third American captured in North Vietnam, but the first African American.

¹⁰⁶³ James S. Hirsch, *Two Souls Indivisible* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 172.

¹⁰⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 168-172.

¹⁰⁶⁶ James A. Daly *Black Prisoner of War: A Conscientious Objector's Vietnam Memoir*. Daly was captured by the NLF and imprisoned in Hanoi Hilton. He believed that he was treated better by the Vietnamese because he was black. However, his treatment was likely more a result of his willingness to sign numerous documents critical of the American government than because he was black.

psychiatrist Robert S. McKelvey concluded that black Amerasians experienced greater prejudice, harassment, and discrimination than white Amerasians.¹⁰⁶⁷ White Amerasians were taunted as well, but the taunts focused on the nationality of their fathers, while the taunts that black Amerasians faced referred to the color of their skin.¹⁰⁶⁸

Ethnic minorities in Vietnam did not fare much better after reunification. Human Rights Watch found that the Vietnamese government discriminated against Montagnards in “all aspects of their lives—not only access to land, but education, medical care, government services, and even allocation of trading stalls in the market.”¹⁰⁶⁹ Lap Siu, a Jarai Montagnard, reported that long after the Vietnam War ended, Vietnamese authorities continued to mistreat and denigrate the Jarai people. Often this mistreatment was justified in racial terms. Siu claimed that well into the 1990’s Vietnamese authorities not only openly referred to Jarai as savages, but they “would call us dirty people, dark skinned people...look like mud.”¹⁰⁷⁰

Conclusion

American soldiers arrived in Vietnam to support the ARVN in its efforts to defeat the PAVN and the NLF. Like their white counterparts, many, but certainly not all, black soldiers held a negative opinion of the ARVN, believing them to be unreliable and incompetent. To some degree the ARVN’s failure to defeat the PAVN and the NLF prior to the arrival of U.S. combat troops confirmed this judgment. At the same time some

¹⁰⁶⁷ Robert S. McKelvey, *The Dust of Life: America’s Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 47.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Repression of Montagnards: Conflicts Over Land and Religion in Vietnam’s Central Highlands* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002).

¹⁰⁷⁰ Lap Siu, interview with the author, Lubbock, Texas, March 15, 2008.

African American soldiers sympathized with the ARVN and at least in a few cases they spoke of ARVN soldiers in similar terms to the way blacks in general spoke of Vietnamese civilians. It would be valuable to analyze the views held by ARVN soldiers or even the RVN government towards blacks, but there is almost no information available.

In contrast, African American soldiers almost universally respected PAVN and NLF forces. They admired their fighting abilities, but they also appreciated the fact that they persisted and never surrendered even in the face of overwhelming American military prowess. It is true that many white soldiers also respected the communists' fighting abilities, but black accounts tended to concentrate on the enemy's status as underdogs and their refusal to give up. The image that they created of their Vietnamese opponents resonated strongly with their own historical experience in the United States.

Many blacks believed that the sympathy and respect they had for their Vietnamese opponents was more than reciprocated. A series of rumors circulated widely that PAVN and Viet Cong soldiers would not shoot African Americans. These rumors suggested that communist forces favored blacks over whites just as South Vietnamese civilians did. These rumors were also compatible with the general belief among African Americans that the Vietnamese, both RVN civilians and enemy combatants, sympathized with the African American struggle against racial prejudice and discrimination. African Americans continued to interpret their experiences in Vietnam through a lens shaped by their experiences with American racism, and they believed that their Vietnamese opponents viewed them from a similar perspective.

These rumors are all the more striking in their significance when we compare them the rumors described in Chapter Two. These rumors alleged that the American government was using the Vietnam War as an opportunity to kill off African Americans and destroy the civil rights movement. According to these rumors a racist national government was trying to kill blacks in Vietnam and destroy any chance for their advancement in American life. In contrast the PAVN and the NLF were trying to save them so that they could continue to fight for their civil and political rights at home.

The North Vietnamese and their supporters in the south promoted the perception among black soldiers that they did not want to kill them. Throughout the conflict, the Vietnamese communists reached out to African Americans through leaflets and radio broadcasts. They based their appeals on the discrimination that blacks faced back in the United States. They expressed sympathy for African Americans and tried to convince them that they should be fighting for their civil and political rights in the United States and not in Vietnam where they were serving the interests of the same white racists who oppressed them back home. The Vietnamese seemed to understand that most African American soldiers were deeply concerned with the racial situation at home. Few, if any, African Americans deserted as a result of these appeals, which was the aim of the enemy propaganda, but they undoubtedly confirmed for black soldiers that the PAVN and the NLF were sympathetic to blacks and hostile to whites.

In much the same way that black-white interactions in Vietnam were quite complex, so too were black interactions with and perceptions of Vietnamese combatants. They had come to Vietnam to support the ARVN, but many black soldiers quickly gained

a much more negative view of their abilities than those of the enemy that they fought. Many came to believe that the PAVN and the NLF empathized with the African American struggle for greater civil and political rights. The reality was that Vietnamese communists were not as invested or as interested in racial equality as their appeals suggested. Leaflets and radio broadcasts were political tools meant to dampen the morale of black troops and possibly persuade them to stop fighting and desert. As their treatment of black prisoners of war, Amerasians, and Montagnards suggests the Vietnamese communists were not above mistreatment of and discrimination against ethnic minorities. Of course, most African Americans were unaware at the time of these inconsistencies. Many continued to believe that the Vietnamese enemy empathized with them and their plight.

Conclusion

The African American experience in during the Vietnam War is significant in a number of respects. The Vietnam War was the first war in which black and white American soldiers served together in non-segregated units. The development of a racially integrated fighting force occurred in the midst of the civil rights movement efforts to achieve political and social equality for blacks. The civil rights movement would achieve its greatest successes, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, just as the United States was gearing up for greater intervention in Vietnam, thereby necessitating the deployment of hundreds of thousands of young Americans to South Vietnam. The racial integration of the American armed forces is not always recognized as an achievement of the civil rights movement but perhaps it should be. The walls of discrimination were coming down in the military just as they were on the home front. Similar obstacles had to be overcome, similar difficulties and tensions arose, and similar victories and defeats were achieved.

For African Americans serving in the armed forces in the Vietnam War the domestic scene loomed large. Even though they had left the United States, their previous experiences with racial prejudice and discrimination continued to have an influence over their wartime experiences, their interpretation of events, and their interactions with both whites and the Vietnamese. For most black soldiers the racial environment in which they had grown up and the developments in the civil rights movement in the 1960's and early 1970's set the standard by which they interpreted their experiences in the Vietnam War.

Historians of the 1960's have emphasized the divisions of that era among the civilian population particularly those caused by disagreement over the American role in the Vietnam War. Relatively little has been written about relations between blacks and whites in the armed forces. Black soldiers found both unity and division in Vietnam.

Blacks experienced a degree of racial harmony and friendship in combat, but they also confronted considerable prejudice and discrimination. In combat many African Americans developed sufficiently close friendships with whites that they came to view the front lines of Vietnam as a de-racialized space. Their experiences in civilian life had established a standard which contrasted greatly with the friendships with whites they made in combat. The friendships with white soldiers would continue to have significance long after their time together in Vietnam ended. Speaking of his friendship with Joe, a white soldier killed in Vietnam, Charles Strong recalled, "I've carried this with me from that day until now. I will never ever forget Joe. Although Joe's family might forget him, his wife and his child might forget him, but I will never ever forget Joe."¹⁰⁷¹ These wartime friendships were all the more important because they were so different from what they had known in civilian life.

These relationships formed in large part because soldiers were heavily dependent upon one another in combat. This shared dependence trumped any racial issues that "normally" would have surfaced. Soldiers in combat were also far removed from the home front where by the late 1960's even in the civil rights movement there was growing racial separation, tension, and even violence. Black soldiers would sometimes compare

¹⁰⁷¹ "The Bloods of 'Nam'" *Frontline*, produced, directed and photographed by Wayne Ewing (Alexandria, VA: PBS, 1986), Videocassette (VHS).

race relations in Vietnam to relations in the United States, often concluding that they were better in Vietnam.

Despite these close relationships with whites while in combat African Americans frequently complained that military officials discriminated against them when assigning duties, recommending promotions, and meting punishments. Their growing suspicion and disillusionment led some to conclude that the military/government was attempting to eliminate large numbers of black soldiers. This “genocide” of black males would eventually reduce the black civilian population and block efforts at black advancement back home.

Parallel to the worsening racial situation back in the United States, there was growing tension and violence between black and white soldiers in Vietnam. My focus on incidents of racial violence in the armed forces in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s is a significant contribution to the study of the Vietnam War. I have provided the most thorough account of the violence that engulfed the armed forces between 1969 and 1971. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in April 1968 became the catalyst for rising tensions and eventually violence. Between 1969 and 1971 hundreds, if not thousands, of incidents of racial violence were reported on or around American military bases in Vietnam, Europe, Asia, and the United States. These violent incidents were in part the result of the armed forces’ failure to address adequately African American complaints of racial discrimination. As well, military officials compounded the problem by focusing all of their attention on African American soldiers and ignoring the responsibility of racist

whites for outbreaks of racial violence. In doing so they failed to address black concerns about racial discrimination, thus alienating black soldiers even more.

I have also analyzed African American perceptions of and interactions with Vietnamese civilians and combatants, a subject which has had little if any scholarly attention. My examination provides an understanding of the different ways in which black soldiers related to the Vietnamese, another non-white group, with whom they had no previous contact. These interactions were sometimes their first substantial contact with a “race” other than blacks or whites. Most African Americans viewed the Vietnamese from a perspective heavily influenced by their own experiences with racial discrimination in the United States. Blacks saw the Vietnamese as victims of poverty and racial discrimination, and most identified closely with them. They believed that just as racist whites were responsible for the mistreatment of African Americans in the United States, so too white soldiers were largely responsible for the conditions faced by Vietnamese civilians. Some black soldiers believed that Vietnamese civilians viewed them in much the same way—as victims of white racism. African Americans thought that non-white status, color of skin, and an inferior social and economic position united blacks and Vietnamese even though there were many differences between the two groups. They believed the Vietnamese viewed them in the same light.

Some African Americans believed that the People’s Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) were also sympathetic. This belief was revealed by rumors circulating among black troops that soldiers of the PAVN and the NLF wouldn’t shoot African Americans unless forced to. Likely aware of these rumors,

the Vietnamese enemy appealed to African Americans with pamphlets and radio broadcasts. These appeals almost always focused on the dismal black experience in the United States, reminding black soldiers of the racism and prejudice they had previously encountered and of the empathy that the enemy felt for them. I am the first historian to examine both African American perceptions of their Vietnamese opponents as well as the PAVN and the NLF's efforts to attain black sympathy.

Many blacks who served in combat experienced an interval during which race seemed to fade in importance. However, as related in Chapters Two and Three, outside of combat many black soldiers witnessed the racism and discrimination which were typical of the environment in which they had grown up. Their experiences in the rear lines provided a portent of what was to be the experiences of many when they became veterans and returned to the United States.

Some African Americans were confronted by racism and prejudice almost as soon as they returned. On September 13, 1967 David Parks flew home to New York via San Francisco. At the airport, a white clerk gave Parks a dirty look and "pitched my ticket at me like I was dirt." Parks was happy to return from Vietnam, but this incident caused him to remember, "I'm a Negro and I'm back home where color makes a difference...I was feeling good on that plane from Namsville. Thought I'd left all my problems behind."¹⁰⁷²

Parks was not alone. Many blacks returned to find that discrimination and prejudice continued to permeate American society, and their status as veterans made no difference. On March 24, 1968 Floyd McKissick, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), was at Kennedy International Airport in New York City when

¹⁰⁷² David Parks, *GI Diary* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1984), 123.

he noticed a group of black soldiers who had recently returned from Vietnam. The soldiers were trying to get taxis home, but “one white cab driver after another refused service.” A white police officer refused to intervene, and the black soldiers were left without a way home. In McKissick’s opinion this incident was just one of many which proved that “black veterans of Vietnam are frequently subjected to the same racist insults when in the uniform of their country, as at any other time.”¹⁰⁷³

In June 1970 James Gillam’s tour of duty in Vietnam ended, and he headed back home to Cleveland. During a stopover in Chicago Gillam wanted to celebrate, and he went out drinking downtown. After the bars closed he tried to get a cab back to the airport. He was unsuccessful and had to pay a prostitute to hail a cab for him. The significance of this event was not lost on as he recalled that “they wouldn’t stop for a black man even in uniform. I was pissed.”¹⁰⁷⁴ Gillam may have risked his life in Vietnam, but in America his service could not get him a cab. Race clearly trumped his status as a veteran.

When Lamont Steptoe returned to Pittsburgh in 1970, it didn’t take long to confirm that little had changed in his hometown. He recalled, “I was standing on a street car stop waiting for a street car to take me to my mother’s house and a car load of white men called me a nigger and I hadn’t been home thirty seconds.”¹⁰⁷⁵ A high level of racism still existed on the home front. Military service provided these soldiers with little to no protection from racial prejudice.

¹⁰⁷³ Floyd McKissick, “Black Vets and White Racism,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 27, 1968, 15.

¹⁰⁷⁴ James T. Gillam, interview with the author, March 14, 2008.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Lamont Steptoe, interview by author, June 25, 2012.

In general African Americans found it difficult to readjust to the America they returned to after service in Vietnam. A 1990 Veterans Administration (VA) study *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation: Report of Findings From the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study* concluded that black veterans experienced more severe readjustment problems than their white counterparts.¹⁰⁷⁶ A 2008 study “War-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Black, Hispanic, and Majority White Vietnam Veterans: The Roles of Exposure and Vulnerability,” concluded that African American veterans were almost twice as likely to have had a previous incident of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) than whites. As well, black veterans were much more likely than whites to suffer from PTSD for a prolonged period of time.¹⁰⁷⁷ Another study found that eleven percent of black Vietnam veterans sought help from VA mental health services compared to seven percent of whites.¹⁰⁷⁸

For many veterans adjustment to civilian life was further complicated by the difficulty they had finding jobs. In 1977 the Veterans Administration commissioned a general study of Vietnam veterans’ experiences with readjustment titled *Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative Adjustment of Veterans and Their Peers*. The study, which was later submitted to the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, reached a number of disturbing conclusions. African American Vietnam veterans were more than five times as likely to be unemployed than white veterans. Black veterans had

¹⁰⁷⁶ Richard Kulka et al. *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation: Report of Findings From the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1990), 140.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Bruce Dohrenwend et al., “War-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Black, Hispanic, and Majority White Vietnam Veterans: The Roles of Exposure and Vulnerability,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 21, No. 2, (April 2008), 133-141.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Kulka et al, *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation*, 225.

an unemployment rate of 22 percent compared to 4 percent for white veterans. The unemployment rate was especially high for African American Vietnam veterans who were twenty-nine years of age or younger in 1977. Nearly 30 percent of black veterans in this age category were unemployed compared to 4 percent of white veterans.¹⁰⁷⁹ As discussed in Chapter Two, a disproportionate percentage of African American soldiers received dishonorable discharges, and this likely contributed to these high rates of unemployment.

Subsequent studies on veteran unemployment reveal that black unemployment continued to be an issue. A 2008 Division of Labor study “Are Male Veterans at Greater Risk for Non-employment than Nonveterans” compared rates of unemployment among veterans of different races over a fifteen-year period. The study reported that in 1989, 16.5 percent of African American Vietnam veterans were not employed compared to 7.8 percent of white Vietnam veterans. By 1999 African American veterans had an unemployment rate of 23.3 percent, while 12.3 percent of whites were not employed. In 2003 black veterans remained much more likely to be unemployed than whites. The study concluded that 27.5 percent of black veterans were not employed compared to 13.7 of whites. It is hardly surprising that a higher percentage of African American veterans were unemployed than white veterans, as African Americans without military service had a higher level of unemployment in the civilian world as well. However, the difference

¹⁰⁷⁹ Arthur Egendorf, et al. *Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative of Vietnam Veterans and Their Peers*. prepared for the Veterans’ Administration (pursuant to Public Law 95-202, the GI Improvement Act of 1977) ; submitted to the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), 200.

between unemployment rates for black and white veterans was even larger than it was in the non-veteran population.¹⁰⁸⁰

The *Legacies* study also came to a troubling determination when it compared unemployment rates of black veterans to those of the non-veteran African American population. It found that African American Vietnam veterans were much more likely to be unemployed than African Americans who had not served in Vietnam. While the unemployment rate for African American Vietnam veterans was 22 percent, it was only 15 percent for non-veterans. This is significant as the *Legacies* study found that the exact opposite was true among whites, where the unemployment for white Vietnam veterans was lower than that of the non-veteran population.¹⁰⁸¹ A 1990 study conducted by the *Monthly Labor Review* noted that black veterans and non-veterans had equal rates of unemployment.¹⁰⁸² Of course, some African Americans stayed in the military after their service in Vietnam ended, ensuring at the very least that they continued to be gainfully employed. For example, Ron Copes, Wes Geary, and James Lewis each stayed in the military for years after their service ended. Each man believed that staying in the military provided them with a level of employment stability they might not have had in civilian life.¹⁰⁸³ Since more than two-thirds of those who served in Vietnam were either draftees or draft motivated volunteers, whom one can assume never intended to serve in the

¹⁰⁸⁰ Greg A. Greenberg and Robert A. Rosenheck, "Are Male Veterans at Greater Risk for Nonemployment than Nonveterans," *Monthly Labor Review* (December 2007), 27.

¹⁰⁸¹ Egendorf, et al. *Legacies of Vietnam*, 199-200.

¹⁰⁸² Sharon R. Cohany, "Employment and Unemployment among Vietnam-era Veterans," *Monthly Labor Review*, (April 1990), 25.

¹⁰⁸³ Ronald Copes, interview by author, November 17, 2011, Wes Geary, interview by author, Dearborn, Michigan, August 7, 2009, James Lewis, interview by author, March 20, 2012.

military in any capacity in the first place, the wide majority of African American veterans did not continue in the military once their initial commitment ended.¹⁰⁸⁴

When African Americans returned to the United States, they often found that their military service and the civil rights movement had not changed much: racial prejudice and discrimination were still the norm. Many felt like Rudolph Bridges, of Muskogee, Oklahoma, who observed, “Lots of black guys went to the Nam and came back thinking somehow it was gonna be different here in the States. Then they found nothing had changed.”¹⁰⁸⁵

African Americans didn’t even have to return to the United States alive to face discrimination. On May 7, 1966 Jimmy Williams, an African American Green Beret, was killed by a hand grenade in Vietnam. After his body was shipped home to Metumpka, Alabama, his family was shocked to learn that he “was neither a hero to his town’s officials nor could he find a satisfactory final resting place in his hometown” as all of the local cemeteries were segregated, and no plots were left in the black sections.¹⁰⁸⁶ In March 1969 Bill Terry, an African American soldier, was killed in Vietnam, and the all-white Elmwood Cemetery in Birmingham, Alabama similarly refused to sell his family a burial plot. As a result Terry was initially buried at the all-black Shadow Lawn Cemetery. However, the Supreme Court ordered the opening of all privately owned cemeteries to blacks on December 15, 1969, and Terry was reburied at Elmwood Cemetery.¹⁰⁸⁷

¹⁰⁸⁴ Appy, *Working Class War*, 28.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Interview with Rudolph Bridges as found in Stanley W. Beesley, *Vietnam: The Heartland Remembers* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 15.

¹⁰⁸⁶ “Alabama Family Say Town Refuses to Bury Viet Hero,” *Jet*, June 9, 1966, 4.

¹⁰⁸⁷ J.M. McFadden, “U.S. Court in Alabama Bans Segregated Cemeteries,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 1969, A3.

When Pondextuer Eugene Williams of Fort Pierce, Florida, was killed in the summer of 1970, Mary Campbell, his mother, contacted the Hillcrest Memorial Gardens because they advertised free plots for fallen soldiers. Mrs. Campbell was outraged to find that her son could not be buried in the Hillcrest Memorial Gardens because they had a policy stating “that no bodies except those of the white or Caucasian race be interred in said lots.”¹⁰⁸⁸ At Williams’s funeral, a close friend named Willie Edwards eulogized his fallen friend, describing him as a “man without a country...because he doesn’t have six feet of U.S. ground. The Justice he fought for he will not get.”¹⁰⁸⁹ However, Mrs. Campbell was determined that her son would be buried at Hillcrest Memorial Gardens, and she filed suit in the U.S. District Court, which ruled in her favor.¹⁰⁹⁰

African American veterans wanted to construct or reconstruct a “normal” life back in the United States. However, they quickly learned that segregation and discrimination remained very strong. Incidents of racial prejudice occurred in parts of the United States generally considered to be more “liberal.” In April 1967 Jesse Woodbridge, a recently returned black Vietnam veteran, purchased a home in a previously all-white neighborhood in southwest Philadelphia. Three days after moving into the house with his wife and four children, a group of angry whites shouted “Hey you people, hey you niggers, go back home” before throwing two bricks through their window. Two days later five bricks were thrown through the family’s window.¹⁰⁹¹

¹⁰⁸⁸ Robert A. Taylor, “In the Interests of Justice: The Burial of Pondextuer Eugene Williams,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* (2004), 275.

¹⁰⁸⁹ “Cemetery with JFK Monument,” *Jet*, September 10, 1970, 5.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Taylor, “In the Interests of Justice,” 275.

¹⁰⁹¹ Les Fuller and Chet Coleman, “Whites Harass Vet and Family; Home Attacked,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 25, 1967, 1-2.

In August 1968 Charles Bolton, a recently returned African American veteran, moved into a new house in a predominantly white neighborhood in Chicago. A few days after moving in, he awoke to find “a Nazi swastika smeared in red paint” on the living room window and “obscenities, such as ‘You die! You Black’” written on the back wall and garage.¹⁰⁹²

Three years after his service in Vietnam ended Anthony Martin became a police officer with the Illinois State Police in the early 1970’s. Martin was one of the first African Americans to serve with the state police, but he was not exactly welcomed by many of the white police officers on the force. He recalled, “I mean here you are, three years earlier you had served your country in Vietnam, and now you are fighting just to keep a job. You’re fighting to get recognized as equal among peers doing the same type of work.” One white captain even told Martin explicitly ““we’re gonna get rid of you niggers.””¹⁰⁹³

When Lee Ewing returned in 1968, he spent five and one-half months in a hospital in Jeffersonville, Indiana for gunshot wounds he had received in battle. After his release Ewing ordered a sandwich at a local restaurant. The owner told Ewing that he could order the sandwich, but he could not eat it in the store. Ewing was incensed because he realized that “you can go and kill for this country and damn near die for this country, but you can’t sit down and eat a sandwich? And I will never forget it.”¹⁰⁹⁴

¹⁰⁹² “Vietnam Vet Faces Racism After Moving In New Home,” *Jet*, August 22, 1968, 24.

¹⁰⁹³ Anthony Martin, interview by author, September 12, 2011.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Lee Sleemons Ewing, interview by Pat McClain. Veterans History Project, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 13.

Returning veterans were much more likely to experience discrimination in the South where segregationists continued to resist the laws that had opened up public facilities. In 1968 shortly after returning from a year-long tour in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne Division, Louis Callendar decided to visit a friend in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. On the way he stopped at a roadside café but was told, “We don’t serve niggers.” Callendar recalled, “I was wearing my uniform decorated with combat medals all during this time. That incident really shook me and also woke me up.”¹⁰⁹⁵ Rudolph Bridges of Muskogee, Oklahoma, went to a restaurant upon landing in Dallas, Texas. Bridges wore his uniform and medals to the restaurant but was crushed to find that the waitresses refused to serve him because he was black. Describing the incident Bridges stated, “It really hurt me. Tears came into my eyes. I had been looking for something that wasn’t there.” Bridges was looking for acceptance and even praise for his service in Vietnam. Instead he found the same discrimination that he had experienced before the war.¹⁰⁹⁶

When Roosevelt Gore returned from Vietnam in February 1968, he was disappointed to find that racial customs had not changed. He recalled “not much had changed for blacks...during the two years I was gone, and so far as I could see, it didn’t show much inclination to change.”¹⁰⁹⁷ Gore was stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, and one night he and two white friends went to a club for enlisted men. He was met at the door by a Vietnamese woman, who had married a white soldier, who stated, “Niggers can’t come

¹⁰⁹⁵ Ponchita Pierce and Peter Bailey, “The Returning Vet: Despite re-adjustment Programs, black ex-GIs face rough road back home,” *Ebony*, August 1968, 147.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Interview with Rudolph Bridges as found in Beesley, *Vietnam: The Heartland Remembers*, 15.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Interview with Roosevelt Gore as found in James R. Wilson, *Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 107-108.

in here.” For Gore this was the ultimate betrayal as he had fought to protect the South Vietnamese and was now being rejected both by the military and by the Vietnamese.¹⁰⁹⁸

A few years later Gore and two army friends, one white and one black, went to a bar in Gore’s hometown of Mullins, South Carolina, his hometown. When they arrived, the owner tried to block them from entering. When they pushed their way through, the owner took all the balls off the pool table and stated, “Niggers ain’t allowed to stay here.” When Gore and his friends refused to leave, the owner called the police and the men were arrested. The police chief tried to strike a deal with Doug Lewis, Gore’s white friend, telling him that they would let him go if he blamed Gore and Gilbert Woodberry, his other black friend. Lewis refused, and all three were charged with inciting a riot.¹⁰⁹⁹

Others were treated poorly even by their military colleagues when they returned. When Thomas Brannon returned from Vietnam in 1967, he was stationed at Fort Knox, Kentucky. He had received a Bronze Star in Vietnam, an award which was disparaged by a white Mississippian on base who sneered, “Did you earn that Bronze Star or they just give it to you?” According to Brannon, “He felt he had license to do that... just the fact that he’s white and I am black.”¹¹⁰⁰ As mentioned in Chapter Three, when Anthony Martin returned from Vietnam in 1967 he was stationed at Yorktown Naval Weapons Station in Virginia. Martin was under the impression that he was to be promoted to sergeant upon arrival, but the white captain bluntly informed him that “the South was

¹⁰⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Ibid., 108-109.

¹¹⁰⁰ Thomas Brannon, interview by author, December 6, 2011.

not ready to have niggers telling white men what to do' ...and he tore my warrant up in front of my face.”¹¹⁰¹

In October 1972 a few weeks after he retired from the Marine Corps as a sergeant major, Edgar Huff and a few friends were sitting on his front porch in Hubert, North Carolina, when a car with four white marines drove up to his house. The men in the car began throwing white phosphorus grenades at his house. While Huff and his family scrambled for safety, a white friend managed to get the car's license plate numbers. Huff reported the incident to the Marine Corps, and the men were transferred or discharged. Huff was outraged by the lenient punishment the men received, and he confronted their commanding officer. The officer had talked to the four Marines, and he told Huff that the men attacked his house because “they didn't understand how a nigger could be living this way, sitting out there eating on a nice lawn, under the American Flag I fly every day.”¹¹⁰²

Prevailing racial customs sometimes took a toll on the friendships blacks and whites had made during their military service. Some whites were unwilling to violate established norms of black-white relationships. George Brummell and Jim Houston befriended a white soldier from southern Ohio named Hinkel when they served together for a year in Hawaii. After their service in Vietnam was over, Brummell and Houston ended up living in the Cleveland area, and they decided to call Hinkel. Brummell recalled, “He said that ‘we put the military stuff behind us, the friendship in the military...Now I am married, I got a wife and I want nothing to do with you

¹¹⁰¹ Martin, interview by author.

¹¹⁰² Edgar A. Huff's account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 152-153.

niggers.””¹¹⁰³ Brummell and Houston were both shocked and disappointed. Houston remembered, “We spent a whole year together, got to be good friends like hometown buddies... But when I called him after I got back to the states it was really a totally different story.””¹¹⁰⁴

However, Brummell and Houston’s experience may not be representative. These three soldiers did not serve in combat together. As noted in Chapter One many black and white soldiers remained friends long after their service in Vietnam ended. A 1992 study in the *Social Science Quarterly* notes that “there is at least some survey evidence that interracial contact within the military reduces support for racial separatism among black and white soldiers.””¹¹⁰⁵ Some African Americans believed that while they continued to face prejudice and discrimination in the United States they did have permanent allies among some of the white soldiers they had served with. Anthony Martin believed, “it was the white guys that stood next to us in war, that bonded in friendship in a time of war, that eventually went on to become senators, and alderman, and commissioners and politicians who remembered those relationships in war ... It was that war that brought us together and those people are now the leaders today.””¹¹⁰⁶ Speaking of Vietnam veterans, Ron Bradley stated, “We don’t see color, we see brotherhood. So that to me would be the strongest contribution. That blacks and whites through unity through working together have become more unified and more respected as a people.””¹¹⁰⁷

¹¹⁰³ George Brummell, interview by author, October 21, 2011.

¹¹⁰⁴ Jim Houston, interview by author, December 1, 2011.

¹¹⁰⁵ Christopher G. Ellison, “Military Background, Racial Orientations, and Political Participation among Black Adult Males,” *Social Science Quarterly*, June 1992, 363.

¹¹⁰⁶ Martin, interview by author.

¹¹⁰⁷ Ron Bradley, interview by author, October 23, 2011.

Years after his service in Vietnam had ended, Tom Rogan travelled with three fellow white Vietnam veterans to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. for Veterans Day commemorations. They met up with Ron Copes and Thomas Brannon, two fellow veterans. Because Brannon was Rogan's closest friend, the three white soldiers had already heard a lot about their friendship and time together in Vietnam. Rogan had never mentioned that Brannon was black because "it never occurred to me it just didn't."¹¹⁰⁸ Rogan and Brannon's friendship had clearly overcome the barrier of racism. Rogan recalled an incident involving Brannon which had special significance for him. Rogan called Brannon's home, and his young daughter answered. When she realized who it was, she said, "You're Tom Rogan you saved my daddy's life thank you."¹¹⁰⁹

Some soldiers like Rogan and Brannon never forgot these friendships. While racism continued to pervade American society, these interracial friendships meant that African Americans were not as isolated as earlier generations of blacks had been when they confronted racial prejudice. On both occasions in which Roosevelt Gore was refused admission to a bar because of his race, his fellow white soldiers supported him and were willing to be arrested. On one occasion, Doug Lewis, his friend, was given the opportunity to avoid jail if he blamed Gore for the trouble at the bar. Lewis refused, and he ended up not only spending time in jail but also losing his job as a result.¹¹¹⁰ When Edgar Huff's house was attacked by the four Marines, a white soldier and friend helped

¹¹⁰⁸ Tom Rogan, interview by author, December 14, 2012.

¹¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹¹⁰ Gore's account as found in Wilson, *Landing Zones*, 108-109.

identify the men. When their commanding officer refused to punish them sufficiently, Huff sought the help of another white friend.¹¹¹¹

The domestic civil rights movement reflected the desire of its black and white participants to change the status quo. It encouraged other blacks to believe that racism and the prejudice it created could be diminished. These ideas were not confined to civilians. Many African American Vietnam veterans returned to the United States unwilling to accept the prejudice and discrimination which had characterized the society they had grown up in. Their service to their country led them to believe they deserved better. When Jessie Woodbridge's family home was vandalized by racists, he remained resolute, "I'm prepared to stay: we are ready to fight and all those people who don't like it can go back to Mississippi."¹¹¹² Roderick T. Jerrett, another black veteran, reflected the same sentiments when he observed, "I think when a black soldier gets out of the army, he's not likely to be complacent about racism and discrimination. He'll make demands and be very emphatic about it."¹¹¹³ Racism continued to be a significant barrier for African Americans, but black veterans had gained if nothing else from their experiences in the Vietnam War an unwillingness to accept the racial prejudice and discrimination that had been the norm in the country they left to fight in a foreign war.

¹¹¹¹ Huff's account as found in Terry, *Bloods*, 152-153.

¹¹¹² Fuller and Coleman, "Whites Harass Vet and Family," 2.

¹¹¹³ Mary Merrifield, "Viet Nam Veterans: Back on Campus and Ready for Change," *Chicago Tribune*, March 24, 1968, S3.

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