Beset On All Sides:

The Experiences of African American Soldiers During the Vietnam War

By Walter Brouwer

The Vietnam War defined an era and has been a focus of American culture for decades. It has been the premise for many movies, like Full Metal Jacket (1987), Apocalypse Now (1979), and Hamburger Hill (1987) which all chronicle the struggle between American soldiers and the Viet Cong. During this period though, another battle was being fought: a battle between Black and White soldiers. Vietnam was the largest deployment of a then "fully desegregated" United States military, with the last vestiges of segregation being dismantled in 1954.[1] While the United States military was fully desegregated on paper, the culture itself was much slower to change. Racial relations continued to be incredibly complex as old racist ideals clashed, not only with an ever-increasing number of Black soldiers, but also with the ideals pushed forward by the Civil Rights movement and Black power movements within American society at large. This paper will look at the racial conflict taking place within the US military and how race relations played out depending on where they took place, with specific attention to how Black soldiers experienced their service on the front lines, behind the front lines, and at home when returning back to the United States.

In 1964, Vietnam saw the official deployment of combat troops by the United States. The conflict had been brewing in the region since the 1954 Geneva Accords split Vietnam between the North and South.[2] After the agreed-upon elections in 1956 failed to reunify the country, the Viet Cong, supported by North Vietnam, began its insurgency campaign against the South. This

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[1] Walt Napier, "A Short History of Integration in the US Armed Forces," Military, Air Force, July 1, 2021, https://www.af.mil/News/Commentaries/Display/Article/2676311/a-short-history-of-integration-in-the-us-armed-forces/.

[2] Ramesh Thakur, *Peacekeeping in Vietnam: Canada, India, Poland, and the International Commission* (Edmonton, Alta., Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1984), http://www.gbv.de/dms/bowker/toc/9780888640376.pdf.

saw increased escalation which resulted in the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 which was used as the *casus belli* by the United States to intervene militarily.[3] At the same time, the Civil Rights movement was in full swing in the United States. Black Americans had begun to protest and resist racist policies and practices both as civilians and as soldiers. However, while change began to happen on a political level in the military, on a personal level, there was much left to be desired.

The frontline of racial struggles in Vietnam was just as complex and was in just as much flux as the frontline was between North and South Vietnam. Experiences of Black soldiers could differ greatly depending on where exactly they had been deployed. In 1967, Frank McGee, a reporter for NBC, spent a month with the 101st Airborne division recording the experiences of Black soldiers, resulting in the creation of the documentary "Same Mud, Same Blood".[4] The documentary presents testimonials of how racial differences did not exist in the frontline. Platoon Sergeant Louis B. Larry, a Black soldier featured in the documentary said, "There's no racial barrier of any sort here,".[5] This speaks volumes about the state of race relations on the frontline. It is notable that Plt. Sgt. Larry was in charge of a platoon that contained both White, and racialized soldiers. According to the statements made by his commanding officers and those who served under him, he was a well liked and capable leader.[6] A White soldier by the name of Arkansas[7] comments on how no one had called Plt. Sgt. Larry any slurs and that no one had an

[3] Thakur, *Peacekeeping in Vietnam: Canada, India, Poland, and the International Commission.*
[4] Gerald F. Goodwin, "Opinion | Black and White in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2017, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/18/opinion/racism-vietnam-war.html.
[5] Goodwin, "Opinion | Black and White in Vietnam,".
[6] Frank Mcgee, *Same Mud, Same Blood*, Film, Documentary (NBC Universal Television, 1967).
[7] Assuming this a nickname

issue taking orders from him, even though he is part of "the negro race".[8] The conclusion of that statement is important as it highlights the time period in which these events occurred.

While there may have been little to no tension on the frontlines, to the point where it was no issue for a White person to take orders from a Black person, race had not been removed from the situation. These soldiers still came out of a highly racialized society; the hardship of the front line, however, appears to have been a great equalizer in this case. Plt. Sgt. Larry makes remarks on how casualties were no longer being reported differently by race.[9] Frontline reality and horror had removed the colour barrier; everyone bled red after a bullet wound, but that did not undo decades of being raised in a racialized society. Highlighting this is one of the comments made by Plt. Sgt. Larry's superiors, acknowledging that while White people were willing to follow his orders, it did not necessarily mean they all respected him as an equal but rather acknowledged his field experience and just wanted to get out of there alive.[10] This idea is partially reflected in Mcgee's own words "In his famous 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial he said he had a dream that one day the sons of former slaves and sons of slave owners would sit at the same table. That dream came true in only one place, the front lines of Vietnam.".[11] It really did only come true on the frontlines, but even that reality had its limits. While soldiers on the ground were united, whether truly equal or merely for the sake of survival, Black marines serving on ships that were patrolling the coastal regions experienced a very different reality.

[8] Mcgee, *Same Mud, Same Blood.*
[9] Mcgee.
[10] Mcgee.
[11] Goodwin, "Opinion | Black and White in Vietnam".

Black soldiers stationed on ships were subject to a very different reality than those who were stationed on the frontline.[12] Much like their counterparts who were trudging through the mud, Black and White soldiers worked in close proximity with each other due to the confined nature of working on a ship. However, there was no constant threat of suffering and death as there was on the 'muddy frontlines' so there was nothing for them to unite over, and no reason for White soldiers to put their prejudices aside. This is best exemplified by the story of Private First-Class Alexander Jenkins Jr, a Black marine who served on the USS Sumpter.

Onboard, Jenkins' was in charge of selecting and playing music over the onboard radio station.[13] His White counterparts had very little issue with him playing White music, but when he started playing music from Black artists he began facing increasing levels of harassment.[14] Trouble first started through surprise inspections, being given inedible food by the mess hall staff, and "capricious punishments" for minor things and even just for nothing.[15] These actions by White marines caused racial tensions to further increase until they eventually reached a boiling point at which fights broke out between Black and White soldiers aboard the ship.[16] The events as they have played out on the USS Sumpter so far reveals just how fragile racial relations still were in the US military. While from the top, the official policy dictated an equal environment, that equality only existed in theory at best. This is especially highlighted in the events following the fights that broke out. According to Pfc. Jenkins Jr, when he was involved in a melee, after being accosted by a group of White marines, he stated that he did not fight back

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[12] This is not to say other racialized groups didn't experience prejudice or racism, the focus of this paper is specifically on Black service members.
[13] John Ismay, "The Untold Story of the Black Marines Charged With Mutiny at Sea," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2020, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/magazine/Black-marines-mutiny.html.
[14] Ismay, "The Untold Story of the Black Marines Charged With Mutiny at Sea".
[15] Ismay.
[16] Ismay.

but he was still the one arrested for it and that the White soldiers who started the incident were let off scot-free.[17] Eventually, he and two other Black marines were charged with mutiny over this incident. The lawyer that was supposed to defend them never showed up as Marine officials had told him all charges were dropped.[18] Over the course of months, the three fought battles in military court denying the charges of mutiny, and as the case continued, officials felt more and more pressure to close it. It was eventually resolved by the army dropping all charges in return for unfavourable discharges.[19]

The stark contrast between the experiences of Plt. Sgt. Larry, and Pfc. Jenkins Jr shows just how different experiences could be for Black soldiers serving in Vietnam. One was a leader and generally well respected by both his superiors and subordinates alike, the other a private forcibly discharged for protesting the racist treatment he and his fellows received at the hands of their White superiors and equally ranked. The story of Pfc. Jenkins Jr. though is sadly not the exception to the rule, as with the removal of the great equalizer that is the threat of death, racism prevailed.

Stationed in the bases behind the frontlines were thousands of soldiers Black and White alike. These camps were often the center of racial tensions as it kept them in close proximity. Disproportionate punishments in the bases could be just as common as they were on the USS Sumpter, if anything, the events of the USS Sumpter could be equated to a miniaturized concentration of what happened within military bases in Vietnam. In order to combat unfair non-judicial punishments, many Black soldiers would request a military trial in order to clear their

[17] Ismay.
[18] Ismay.
[19] Ismay.

names and as a form of protest.[20] This too however did not always go well, as pretrial boards were often, if not always, made of White officers; but mostly because, more often than not, many Black soldiers would be placed in pre-trial confinement before charges would be even made.[21] Wrongful confinement was clearly an enormous issue as Black soldiers were jailed without charge. For actual charges such as going away without leave (AWOL) and other minor offenses, Black soldiers were disproportionately charged as well: 40% of Black soldiers charged ended up being imprisoned whereas for the same offense only 15% of White soldiers would be imprisoned.[22] The military system itself was still fundamentally racist. To reiterate,while official policy was desegregation, people's attitudes were not changing as rapidly.

Daily interactions between Black and White soldiers behind the frontlines experienced an increase in tensions after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. More militant Black soldiers began using derogatory words towards Whites, and even self-imposed segregation, as a form of protest, became more common.[23] This was however most likely in response to the overwhelming abuse Black soldiers faced at the hands of bigoted White soldiers. It was not only more common for Black soldiers to be referred to as "boy, spook, spear chucker, or n…r", one Black soldier recalled how he had heard more racial slurs in Vietnam than he had in Mississippi. White soldiers often attempted to undermine relations between Black soldiers and the Vietnamese locals as well.[24]

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[20] James Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 57.
[21] Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms*.
[22] Westheider.
[23] Westheider, 82.
[24] Westheider, 83.

They often did this by spreading rumours through communities, one noted example was that White soldiers would tell bar girls in Saigon that Black soldiers were "animals" and had "tails".[25] Expressions of racism in civilian areas occurred through vandalism as well. Bathrooms in bars frequented by soldiers often had racist writings on their walls, and White soldiers would also often refuse jeep rides to Black soldiers making them walk back to base on foot.[26] What further added friction at military bases behind the frontlines were the displays of racial pride on both sides. One of the most notable displays of racial pride by Black soldiers was through the form of the "dap":an elaborate handshake that represented solidarity between Black soldiers. White soldier reactions to these were mixed with some not minding, others being highly offended by them, and a third group that tended to only be offended when an elaborate time-consuming "dap" was holding up the cafeteria food line.[27] Longer more complex daps were often done in retaliation against being punished for doing one.[28] Dapping was something that was not technically against regulation, a policy that banned dapping while a soldier was on duty was not introduced until 1969, and even then it did little to stop Black soldiers from performing them.[29] There was a strict double standard for racial symbolism for those deployed, many symbols of White power and White pride were often ignored by officers, Blacks soldiers often protested the use of symbols of racism like the confederate flag, while symbols of Black power were forcibly removed by White NCOs and officers alike. The protests of Black soldiers met with some success as in 1969 the pentagon banned the display of rebel flags.[30] This however only further

[25] Westheider.
[26] Westheider.
[27] David Cortwright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War," *Vietnam Generation* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 1990), https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol2/iss1/5.
[28] Cortwright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War".
[29] Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms*, 84.
[30] Westheider.

proves how changes in policy did not change the ideals of people themselves as White officers and NCOs did little to nothing to enforce this policy. Further discrimination is clearly present in how Black activists in the army were treated versus White power groups.

Pfc. Jenkins Jr's troubles arose from him playing music by Black artists as a show of solidarity, which, as mentioned above, resulted in him and his friends fighting a lengthy court case to clear their names. White power groups were mostly left alone to do as they saw fit, in Cam Ranh Bay two White soldiers burned a cross in front of a mostly Black barracks.[31] Another group of White soldiers burned a cross in front of a Black soldier's tent in 1970, which, according to James Westheider, such actions occurred with the "tacit approval of command.".[32] In bases across Vietnam there are many such stories, for Black soldiers returning home to the states, or stationed there did not have a much better experience even though they were closer to the centers of progress.

The struggle Black soldiers faced at home during the Vietnam war was much the same as those in Vietnam itself. Recruits and Black soldiers still in training were often on the receiving end of much abuse. In 1969, a rally was held at the Air Force Academy at which the confederate flag was flown, and a cross was burned.[33] Violent forms of resistance were often perpetrated by Black soldiers who had been incarcerated. As they were already incarcerated they had much less inhibition regarding violent resistance to racial prejudices. On July 23, 1968, Black soldiers took control of the stockade in Fort Brag to protest the beating of a Black inmate; Camp Lejeune experienced a similar riot in 1969..[34] According to Westheider "Lejeune is really the first major

[31] Westheider, 85.
[32] Westheider.
[33] Westheider.
[34] Cortwright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War," 54.

racial gang fight in the military,".[35] In response, the Pentagon tried to make subtle changes, like making Black hair care products available in stores on bases, a poor attempt to reduce tensions.[36] Travis Air Force base in California saw a 3 day riot in 1971, Black soldiers, and some White soldiers, rioted in protest of the "rampant discrimination against Black airmen, and a general crisis in morale resulting from the increasing unpopularity of the war.".[37] In response to this, the Pentagon had set up several race-relation boards and other formal channels for Black soldiers to formally lodge complaints; these also had very little effect.[38] Returning Black soldiers would also continue to face further institutional oppression after they were discharged from military service. Many discharged Black soldiers ran into issues when returning home, and hoped to take advantage of their G.I benefits in order to attend college or university, the bill however did very little to make that possible for Black soldiers, a large majority of which came from poorer families.[39] Median income of Black families remained disproportionately low as well when compared to the income of White families.[40] The G.I bill would see several amendments that would increase the funding granted to Vietnam veterans but it remained chronically ineffective at helping Black soldiers get an education. When everything was said and done, a survey found that only 36% of Black Vietnam veterans made use of their educational benefits, whereas 60% of White soldiers made use of theirs.[41]

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[35] Jay Price, "In 1969, The Military Thought It Had Eliminated Racism In Its Ranks. Then Troops Began Rioting," The American Homefront Project, July 19, 2019, https://americanhomefront.wunc.org/2019-07-19/in-1969-the-military-thought-it-had-eliminated-racism-in-its-ranks-then-troops-began-rioting.

[36] Price, "In 1969, The Military Thought It Had Eliminated Racism In Its Ranks. Then Troops Began Rioting".

[37] Cortwright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War," 58.

[38] Cortwright.

[39] Mark Boulton, "How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 58 (2007): 57–60, 57.

[40] Boulton, "How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans".

[41] Boulton.

The Black Power movement and the Civil Rights movement had moved mountains through protesting, causing important legislative changes in both civilian and military policy. But while these changes were made, true policy and societal change was still far from reality, and arguably still has not changed enough with many systemic issues still present. The failures of the G.I bill truly highlighted that the racism Black soldiers experienced went beyond the overt forms of oppression imposed on them in the military. Healthcare was also a massive issue for Black Vietnam veterans who suffered disproportionately more of PTSD then their White counterparts with a rate of one out of every five soldiers (Hispanic soldiers being the only group with a higher rate of one in four).[42] Hospitals and doctors were, and still are, far more likely to refuse medical treatment to Black veterans. They were also more often seen as unstable and were more likely forced into psychological confinement, and to be prescribed antipsychotics.[43]

While significant progress was being made on civil rights during the Vietnam war, it is abundantly clear that Black soldiers found equality only on the frontlines. As soon as the threat of imminent death was removed, most Black soldiers found themselves subject to the racist prejudices of their White peers and superiors. The story of Plt. Sgt. Larry is sadly an exception rather than the rule when compared to the experience of thousands of other Black soldiers. Changes in policy were not enough to combat the systemic racism that was present in military culture, and with most of the senior leadership not being interested in change, it meant that it was slow to occur. While Vietnam may be the first conflict where the US army fought with a fully integrated army, that integration was theoretical at best. On the frontline, Black soldiers were in positions of power, but that did not mean race was a removed factor, as Arkansas's comment

[42] James Burk and Evelyn Espinoza, "Race Relations Within the US Military," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 401–22, 413.
[43] Burk and Espinoza, "Race Relations Within the US Military".

shows. Similarly, on the bases behind the frontlines and back home, the formal desegregation of the military did nothing to change the attitudes many Whites held toward Black soldiers - desegregation was never meant to end racial inequality.

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