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## Higher Command: An Examination of African American Leadership in the Vietnam Era

Amanda Abulawi

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HIGHER COMMAND: AN EXAMINATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
LEADERSHIP IN THE VIETNAM ERA

by

Amanda Abulawi

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
and the School of Humanities  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Since the founding of the United States African Americans have sacrificed their lives to uphold the nation's democratic ideals, all while being denied equal access to voting, education, employment, and housing rights at home. Military service appealed to many African Americans who hoped it would lead to social and economic advancement for themselves and their race. Despite African American military participation throughout the nation's history these soldiers were treated as outsiders through segregated units and often relegated to non-combative duties, until the Vietnam War. This was the first major conflict in which African Americans had been deployed in large numbers in non-segregated units and placed in combat roles. Black soldiers' role in war transformed during the Vietnam era and helped give rise to black military leadership. Out of the 389,344 members of the officer corps only two percent of them were African American. Though the percentage is small, this increase was significant. This study seeks to provide a better understanding as to how this two percent of black leadership navigated the Vietnam War. In addition to officers, the study will also examine the experiences of higher-ranking noncommissioned soldiers who obtained one the ranks of sergeant or above. Previous studies of African American leadership primarily focused on leaders within the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements with little attention being given to black military leadership. Therefore, another element of this thesis is to examine the influence of the Black Power Movement on African American soldiers and their leadership. This thesis seeks to demonstrate how African American leadership during the Vietnam era transformed black leadership and the American military.

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## CHAPTER I- INTRODUCTION

The complexity of the Vietnam War has been analyzed by historians from a myriad of different perspectives with studies ranging from the politics of the time to military actions. While studies on leadership are also included in the historiography of the Vietnam era, specific studies regarding African American leadership have been limited. An analysis of black leadership combined with the African American soldier experience will depict a duality within the Vietnam War. The chronology of the study will primarily cover from 1965 until 1972, when the United States military presence was the strongest in Vietnam. This timeframe was analyzed the most because it contained the years in which African Americans were heavily drafted and had the highest casualty rates. The dual nature African American military service in the Vietnam era consisted of the patriotic desire to defend the United States from perceived foreign aggressors, coupled with the systemic racism African Americans were forced to endure at home and abroad. Testimonies from African American soldiers indicated that they noticed the contradiction between the United States involvement in Vietnam and the treatment of blacks in America (including the military). The study of the African American experience is deepened when analyzing the role of black leadership during the war because these men found themselves in unique positions of power. Their testimonies help understand how African American soldiers navigated leadership roles in a society that often excluded them from positions of power.

The first step in this study will be to understand the American soldier experience during the Vietnam War. The idea of this section is to treat this analysis almost as a

control group for when the study begins to focus more narrowly on the African American experience. Certain elements of a soldier's wartime experience were similar, regardless of race or ethnicity. After an analysis of oral histories from black and white soldiers a certain pattern emerges that all soldiers had similar motivations and war experiences while serving. For instance, military service offered the opportunity of economic and educational advancement to both underprivileged black and white soldiers. Another motivational factor that crossed racial lines was the idea of patriotic duty to protect the country. With many soldiers being raised around veterans of the Second World War and influenced by masculine figures like John Wayne the ideas of patriotism and masculinity compelled some soldiers regardless of race into service. The patriotism that motivated soldiers does not last the duration of the war, and that is an important transition many Vietnam era soldiers went through during their service. Understanding soldier motivation is not only an important element in understanding the soldier experience but also it further demonstrated the contradictions of the war cause. As the war progressed, soldiers stopped believing in the war cause and began to question the United States involvement in the war.

Another key element in this section of the study is what life was like for the average Vietnam War soldier. This can be approached from several different angles because the soldier experience is so subjective. Therefore, the goal is to understand some of the hardships soldiers encountered on and off the battlefield. Understanding the conditions soldiers endured is important because it shows the different ways all soldiers had to learn to survive in Vietnam. Soldier survival in Vietnam sometimes meant they had to face an enemy they could not shoot, like battling various weather conditions, the



terrain, and booby traps. Soldiers expressed their frustration at these elements in letters, and oral history testimonies. A brief analysis of combat in Vietnam is also essential in understanding the soldier experience.. All of these aspects of soldiering in Vietnam, from motivation to geographic conditions, to the nature of battle, served as unifying factors to soldiers of all races and ethnicities; it was up to other factors to divide them.

Once the overall soldier experience is established, the next step is to understand the African American experience. The goal here is to not only understand how the black soldier experience was different from white soldiers but also to analyze the causes of that difference. In the United States African Americans were deemed second class citizens, and black Vietnam soldiers hoped that military service would provide them the upward mobility that they were denied as civilians. However, this is a reflection of American society as well. The fact that many African American soldiers viewed military service as a refuge from the inequalities they faced in American society indicates how their purposes for joining the military differed from white soldiers. One way of approaching the black soldier experience is by exploring the double consciousness that W.E.B Du Bois discussed in his 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folks*. The concept of double consciousness described the two different worlds blacks in America were forced to live in throughout the twentieth century. Du Bois wrote, “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”<sup>1</sup> African Americans in the United States have always been treated as

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1903), 3.

outsiders in a country that espoused the ideals of liberty and equality. The world black Americans lived in was one that routinely forced them to forego personal identity to achieve any chance of success in white dominated America. African American soldiers in the Vietnam era were no exception when they chose to embrace black cultural identity, they were considered militant. However, to conform to military standards entirely and compromise their own black self-consciousness would mean they could be considered military professionals. Drawing upon Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness," I will show how black Vietnam soldiers could either highlight their Americanness or their blackness but the two were rarely allowed to exist openly.

The Black Power Movement was a major cultural influence on black soldiers in Vietnam. While African Americans were fighting overseas the Black Power Movement gained momentum in the United States. While most soldiers did not begin as Black Power activists, those who were unhappy with how they were treated in the service, were drawn to its principles. Soldier's oral histories and letters written to the *Black Panther Newspaper* indicated that even though soldiers were in a completely different country, African Americans were not outside the influence of the Black Power Movement.

The final element of the black soldier experience is understanding how racial tensions in the military shaped their view of the war. African American soldiers soon learned that no matter what their intentions for joining the military were, they were always going to be treated as an other by their own country. This led many of them to question why they were fighting in a foreign war when they were not being treated as equals themselves. The narrative of the black Vietnam soldier experience demonstrated the complexity of what it meant to be an African American and a citizen of the United

States. Project 100,000 is discussed as part of the African American experience because many of the soldiers who were recruited through the program were placed on the front lines in infantry units. This led to a high mortality rate among African American soldiers causing the black soldier experience to be even deadlier. The use of Project 100,000 also highlights how the United States government exploited a broken socioeconomic system. Census records indicated that most African American families lived below the poverty line and in urban areas, and Project 100,000 was disguised as a social welfare program to add troops to the war effort. The racial discrimination black soldiers experienced shaped their wartime experience and at the same time it fostered a radical generation of soldiers who embraced black culture and identity through adversity.

The final chapter of this study will be an analysis of African American leadership and how their Vietnam experience may have been different from enlisted soldiers. Since there were so few African American officers within the Officer Corps, the study was expanded to include soldiers who still had leadership duties though they were not commissioned officers. First, it is important to define leadership in the Vietnam Era. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s black leadership emerged on and off the battlefield. Some analysis on the rise of black leaders from the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements indicate how black leaders began to challenge white leadership in the country. Being a leader did not always mean the individual was a high ranking or high-profile individual. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is often considered the face of the Civil Rights Movement; he was regarded as a high-profile leader. However, there were other leaders who were working behind the scenes fighting for civil rights just as hard. For instance, Ella Baker and Diane Nash established the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee which advocated for voting rights throughout the movement. They were in the background of the movement making gains, they did not lead from the front, but they were still leaders. This is important when looking at noncommissioned officers because although they were not officers, they were still instrumental in the efficiency of the military during Vietnam. Those men had positions of authority that should be studied because many officers depended on their sergeant to fulfill their orders. While analyzing African American leadership, the concept of bridge leadership coined by Belinda Robnett in *How Long? How Long?* will be used. Robnett defined “bridge leaders” within the Civil Rights Movement as, grassroots workers and organizers “who utilized frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation to foster ties between the social movement and the community; and between prefigurative strategies (aimed at individual change, identity and consciousness) and political strategies (aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and other societal institutions).”<sup>2</sup> These leaders connected the community to the formal leadership within the movement, and black noncommissioned officers occupied a similar space during the Vietnam War. Bridge leadership was used to show how black women used their positions within the community as advocates for change despite not having the formal leadership roles like Dr. King. I have adopted Robnett’s bridge leadership concept to depict how black noncommissioned officers not only served in significant leadership roles but also altered race relations during the Vietnam Era. This approach was particularly important when looking at black noncommissioned officers in the Vietnam War because they were

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<sup>2</sup> Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

the primary communication between soldiers and officers. African American sergeants were in unique positions of authority because the officers depended on them to know what was happening within the unit and to execute combat plans. Even though Robnett's concept was created within the context of civil rights activism, black noncommissioned officers displayed many of the same characteristics of bridge leaders. Those soldiers managed to obtain a form of authority that was denied to black men in civilian life.

The next step is to analyze the formal leadership position of the officer experience and how black officers executed the mantle of leadership and why their positions were so unique. Unlike previous conflicts black soldiers were no longer largely in service positions and instead earned positions of authority that were previously denied to them. Even more so, they were responsible for the execution of missions where they were responsible for the lives of soldiers of all races. I also explore discriminatory practices in the officer promotion system which kept more black officers from advancing. The role of the historically black colleges (HBCUs) was also an important part of the black officer experience, that served as a point of advancement and contention for those men. Finally, this thesis will also explore the rejection that some black officers faced from black communities. When combined, those elements highlight the double consciousness and contradictions of the Vietnam era for black officers. Despite those challenges, African American officers subtly shifted the power dynamics between whites and blacks in the military.

This study depended heavily on oral histories, letters, and newspapers found at various repositories. Some of the archival repositories include the National Archives in Washington D.C, the Texas Tech Vietnam Archive, The Library of Congress, and The

University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage Center. Oral histories have also been used from previously published works such as Wallace Terry's *Bloods Black Veterans of the Vietnam War*, James R. Wilson's *Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam*, and Xiaobing Li's *Voices from the Vietnam War: Stories from American, Asian, and Russian Veterans*. The *Black Panther Newspaper* is used to connect black Vietnam soldiers to the Black Power Movement through letters soldiers sent the publication. In addition, texts like John Morton Blum's *Was for Victory*, and Andrew Huebner's *The Warrior Image* give some insight as to how the World War II generation influenced soldiers from the Vietnam generation. When combined these two sources give some insight as to why soldiers were eager to support the fight against communism. Hal Moore and Joseph Galloway's *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young: Ia Drang- The Battle that Changed the War in Vietnam* is used to understand how battle impacted soldiers and leadership. Studies on urban history like *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* and *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* are used to understand why African Americans from urban areas would seek upward mobility through military service. A stronger understanding of the African American experience comes from works by James Westheider and Herman Graham III. Last, the works used for an analysis of leadership come from Isaac Hampton II, Ron Milam, and Belinda Robnett. There are also several sources related to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements used to understand the historical context of both movements, including its leadership.

The complexity of the Vietnam War era has produced a complex array of scholarship that provides clarity as to why Vietnam was so controversial. The

historiography concerning the Vietnam War has largely focused on the political actions of leaders such as Lyndon Johnson, William Westmoreland, and Richard Nixon. Some of the more notable works include H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty*, Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake*, and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen's *Hanoi's War*. This top-down approach examined why the United States participated in the war and whether those reasons were valid enough for American involvement. Much of the work written about the Vietnam War focuses on the war's political complexity. However, some works have included the soldier experience. For instance, Hal Moore and Joe Galloway's *We Were Soldiers* is a riveting first-hand account of the Battle of Ia Drang Valley. *The Boys of 67'* by Andrew Wiest followed the men of Charlie Company through the Mekong Delta and beyond. Some works were published in the late 1980s and 1990s regarding the African American experience in Vietnam, but the bulk did not emerge until the early 2000s.

The historiography of African American soldiers discussed the soldier's overall experience in Vietnam, but it does not address African American leadership. One of the first works to provide insight into the experience of African American soldiers was Wallace Terry's *Bloods*, published in 1984. Terry's book is not a synthesis about African American soldiers; instead, it is a collection of twenty oral histories of black soldiers. *Bloods* contains oral histories from soldiers of varying ranks, enlisted men to officers. Terry's work also contains information about the racial tensions the soldiers experienced, and what life was like after the war. Terry's foundational work is cited by many subsequent sources further describing the African American soldier experience. Published in 1990, James R. Wilson's *Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam* is also a compilation of oral histories from American Vietnam soldiers serving

in Vietnam. *Landing Zones* is not exclusively dedicated to African American soldiers; however, it does contain several oral histories from southern black soldiers.

One of the early works to focus on African Americans in the Vietnam War was James Westheider's *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War*, published in 1997. In this book, Westheider examines how the armed forces created the racial issues that emerged during the Vietnam War. This is one of the first works to highlight the systemic racism African Americans endured while in the military. It also discussed how black soldiers dealt with racism from other soldiers. Westheider built off this work in his 2007 book *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms*. Here, Westheider continued to examine the African American soldier's experience while also analyzing the concurrent events in the United States. Like Wallace Terry, James Westheider's work became a highly cited source in most of the historiography published in the early 2000s regarding African American soldiers in Vietnam. Another source in this historiography is Herman Graham III's *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood and the Military Experience*. Published in 2003, Graham's book incorporates how the Black Power Movement influenced black soldiers, while also including the interracial tensions between black and white soldiers.

Ron Milam's *Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War* and Isaac Hampton II's *The Black Officer Corps: A History of Black Military Advancement from Integration Through Vietnam* add other perspectives to the historiography of Vietnam soldiers. Ron Milam's work focuses on the training and experiences of junior officers in the Vietnam War. While the primary focus is not on African American soldiers, *Not A Gentleman's War* does address African American



junior officers and offers insight into their experiences, which was lacking in the historiography previously. Building on Ron Milam's work with Vietnam officers, Isaac Hampton III's *The Black Officer Corps* takes the study of officers even further by focusing on black officers. Hampton's work is the only work within the historiography of African American Vietnam era soldiers to focus on African American officers while also chronicling the history of black officers throughout the history of the United States armed forces.

Emphasis on officers, in general, is lacking in the historiography of the Vietnam War, and even less work has been done to understand black officers, making Hampton's work an important addition to the field.

Any work dedicated to African American soldiers in the Vietnam War is a more recent development when compared to the other works published about the Vietnam Era. Wallace Terry and James Westheider were the first scholars to broach the subject but even their work was limited to the overall black soldier experience. Westheider focuses on how African American soldiers transitioned from being supportive of the war in Vietnam to becoming alienated from military service after 1968. Even so, their works are cited throughout much of the scholarship already discussed. More research needs to be done on black officers of the Vietnam War to have a complete picture of the African American experience during the war. My thesis work will contribute by building on the work started by Isaac Hampton III. It will add to the historiography of African American soldiers in Vietnam by examining the emergence of African American leadership during the Vietnam Era. My research will also depict how the black soldier experience in Vietnam altered race relations within the military by creating a dialogue about the

problems of racial discrimination within the American military. More importantly, the study expands the study of black leadership by integrating the role of black noncommissioned officers and how they occupied a form of leadership that was not entirely confined by race. In doing this, my study integrates the spheres of civil rights and military histories through the study of African American leadership.

## CHAPTER II– SOLDIERS IN VIETNAM

The American soldier in Vietnam did not fight the same type of war many of their fathers fought in the Second World War. The Vietnam War was more complex both militarily and politically. However, most soldiers would not come to this realization until they arrived in Vietnam and experienced the war firsthand. Most Americans could not find Vietnam on a map much less have a full understanding as to the political situation that had been developing there since before the end of the Second World War. Still, when the United States decided to increase its military presence in Vietnam soldiers were eager to help defeat the threat of Communism. At the same time some soldiers viewed military service as an opportunity for social advancement. While the patriotic desire eventually faded as the war progressed, black and white soldiers had complex motivations for accepting life in the military.

The Vietnam War is often regarded as an unpopular war that United States never should have been involved in. The images that typically arise in association with the war usually involve Vietnam after the Tet Offensive in 1968 and the largest anti-war demonstrations. However, when analyzing soldiers' patriotic motivation, it becomes evident that the war was not always unpopular, and most Americans supported military intervention in Vietnam at the beginning of the United States military escalation in the war. In a 1965 Gallup poll, 61 percent of Americans did not think sending troops to Vietnam was a mistake.<sup>3</sup> The soldier's perspective reveals some of the reasons the war transitioned into an unpopular war even for American troops. The source of the Vietnam soldier's national pride stemmed from the generation that came before them. Soldiers in

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<sup>3</sup> Lydia Saad, "Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam", Gallup. May 24, 2016.

the Vietnam era had either been raised by or around a generation who experienced the Second World War, and this generation was indoctrinated with wartime propaganda that it was every American's duty to support wartime efforts. John Morton Blum's *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* analyzes American culture and politics on the home front during World War II. One aspect of American culture that Blum touched on was how the media transformed homely soldiers into the heroes of American society.<sup>4</sup> Post-World War II popular culture was also a strong influence on young American men. Andrew Huebner's *The Warrior Image* dissected the media portrayals of soldiers in war from World War II until the Vietnam War. One of the other conclusions Huebner reached was the impact of John Wayne in the post-war years, because his image reinforced the idea of the heroic and patriotic American soldier.<sup>5</sup> These images would prove to be impactful for the Vietnam generation who grew up with the idea that they wanted to prove themselves in battle like the John Wayne image from their childhood. The John Wayne mentality was present throughout the oral histories of black and white Vietnam soldiers. For example, a white soldier J. Houston Matthews claimed he was intrigued by Vietnam when the war started to make headlines in the United States. "I was intrigued by what I thought was the glamour of war, John Wayne and all that sort of thing, when Vietnam was coming along in the mid-sixties."<sup>6</sup> Another example of the John Wayne influence can be observed from African American soldier Reginald

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<sup>4</sup> John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1976), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> James Wilson, *Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 101.

Edward's testimony. Edwards remarked about how he grew up with John Wayne and how his movies were on every night before he decided to join the Marine Corps.<sup>7</sup> The mythologized image of John Wayne permeated the daily lives of the Vietnam generation and men wanted to emulate what they were viewing on television. African American Major General Wallace C. Arnold, commissioned in 1960, recalled that watching the convoys of Second World War soldiers returning home left such a favorable enough impression on him that he wanted to join the military as a young boy.<sup>8</sup> Soldiers were keen to defend democracy after witnessing the impact of the World War II generation.

The men who would later fight in the Vietnam War were raised in a culture that emphasize that when the nation called for soldiers it was their duty to oblige. In John Keegan and Richard Holmes' *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle* the authors discuss why men would be willing to enlist in the military. "Even in an age with few illusions about war, enlistment may seem a young man's natural response to his country's call, or perhaps presents the opportunity of escaping from a routine and humdrum from existence to a new world of genuine issues and real values."<sup>9</sup> White soldier Richard Ensminger expressed similar feelings about his military service. "I believe in God and country. When I went to Vietnam, I believed it was my duty to go over there and fight for my country."<sup>10</sup> African American officers were no exceptions when it came to the defense of American ideals. African American First Lieutenant Archie Biggers expressed this

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<sup>7</sup> Wallace Terry, *Bloods Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History* (New York: Presidio Press, 1984), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace C. Arnold to Joe Galloway. Wallace C. Arnold Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. September 22, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> John Keegan and Richard Holmes, *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc. 1986), 260.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson. *Landing Zones*, 28.

sentiment in his interview. “Lets face it. We are part of America. Even though there have been some injustices made, there is no reason for us not to be a part of the American system. I don’t feel that because my grandfather or grandmother was a slave that I should not lift arms up to support those things that are stated in the Constitution of the United States.”<sup>11</sup>

The commitment to protect the world against communism was also strong among both black and white soldiers. Black hospital corpsman Luther Benton III did not have to accept his draft notice because of his only son status, but one of the reasons he accepted was to prevent the spread of communism.<sup>12</sup> White officer Richard Surface who went to Vietnam in 1970 recalled before he left college he believed in the fight against communism. Surface recalled discussing Vietnam with his family and says, “And of course we pretty much were in agreement that it was necessary to dissuade the spread of communism through that part of the world. I grew up during the Cold War and communism always has been and I guess still is somehow in my mind the primary threat to freedom in the world.”<sup>13</sup> Another example was with black Captain Joseph Anderson, Jr, who also felt the need to contain Communism. Anderson said, “I was very aggressive about my role and responsibilities as an Army officer serving in Vietnam. I was there to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese government, stabilize the countryside, and help contain Communism. The Domino Theory was dominant then, predominant as a

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<sup>11</sup> Terry. *Bloods*, 112.

<sup>12</sup> Terry. *Bloods*, 63.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Surface to Steve Maxner. Mr. Richard Surface Collection, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, January 3, 2003.

matter of fact. I was gung ho. And I thought the war would last three years at most.”<sup>14</sup>

Some Vietnam soldiers ranging from commissioned and noncommissioned officers black and white were drawn to military duty through a patriotic desire to answer the country’s call to defend democracy against communism. The support for the war and anticommunism was responsible for many men, black and white, choosing to serve in Vietnam. However, as the war progressed, that sense of duty started to wane amongst soldiers.

While many men around the country embraced anticommunism, for black soldiers, such a stance was complicated. Segregationists often used anticommunism as a tool to undermine the Civil Rights Movement. Civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were deemed communist even before the Vietnam Era. Historian John Dittmer discussed the dangers of being associated with the NAACP in Mississippi during the 1950s. Dittmer said, “Simply belonging to the NAACP in Mississippi was risky business. Most whites accepted without question the false accusation that the NAACP was a communist organization, and thus any card carrying member was by definition a traitor.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, not only were some African Americans motivated by a sense of duty to the country but also some may have also been willing to fight communism abroad to dispel any racial associations to communism. The anti-communist rhetoric continued to be a weapon used against civil right activists in the 1960s. One example was when the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party enlisted the help of attorneys from across the country to fight for voting rights some

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<sup>14</sup> Terry. *Bloods*, 221.

<sup>15</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 29.

of the members were labeled communists.<sup>16</sup> Even prolific civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were scrutinized for possibly having communist ties. Steven Lawson and Charles Payne discussed how J. Edgar Hoover monitored King during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations under the guise that he was a communist.<sup>17</sup> Communism during the 1950s and 1960s could have held a deeper meaning for African Americans during the Vietnam era because not only was it a threat to democracy, but also segregationists used the label to undermine efforts by black civil rights activists.

As the Vietnam War progressed, and soldiers became disillusioned regarding the war cause, their stances shifted. For instance, African American soldier Harold Bryant discussed how he felt when he entered the war and how those feelings changed over time. “When I came to Vietnam, I thought we were helping another country to develop a nation. About three or four months later I found out that wasn’t the case.”<sup>18</sup> Bryant’s disappointment in the war stemmed from the belief that the United States was just another player in the bigger Civil War between China and Vietnam, and that territorial acquisition was not a priority for American military officials.<sup>19</sup> The changes in the approval ratings of the war were echoed in a new Gallup poll, which indicated that by October 1968, 54 percent of Americans believed it was a mistake to send troops to Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> Another study by the Pew Research Center also discussed the decline in the war’s approval ratings. According to the study by 1969, 52 percent of the American

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<sup>16</sup> Dittmer. *Local People*, 341.

<sup>17</sup> Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne., *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2006). 37.

<sup>18</sup> Terry. *Bloods*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Terry. *Bloods*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Lydia Saad. “Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam”, *Gallup*. May 24, 2016.



public felt involvement in the war was a mistake and that disapproval rating would continue to climb to 60 percent by 1973.<sup>21</sup> Soldiers started to mimic the general public's opinion of the war once they arrived in Vietnam and came to believe it was not the patriotic war they initially agreed to fight. The approval fluctuations and soldiers' testimonies indicate that the political nature of the war transformed the soldier's reasons for fighting in Vietnam.

Vietnam era soldiers were motivated by several factors prompting them to either enlist in the military or willingly accept their draft notices. One of the biggest motivators was the prospect of economic advancement through military service. Census records indicate the poverty status of American families in 1967.<sup>22</sup> According to the census, 11.4 percent of white families lived below the poverty level and 33.9 percent of African American families were living below the poverty level.<sup>23</sup> Many black and white soldiers mentioned the hope of economic advancement in their oral histories. For instance, in his interview, white officer Bruce St. John stated that one of the reasons he joined the military was to escape life on the farm in rural Illinois.<sup>24</sup> Black enlisted soldier Vernon Jackson of Biloxi, Mississippi thought the military would be an opportunity to leave his dead-end job at a local furniture store.<sup>25</sup> The military proved to be the opportunity he

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<sup>21</sup> Tom Rosentiel, "Polling Wars: Hawks vs. Doves", Pew Research Center, November 23, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> The census data for 1965 and 1966 was inconsistent regarding race, there was no data for the poverty level for all African American families. However, 1967 data provided a clearer picture as to the poverty status of all races, therefore it was used to give some insight as to the level of poverty during the Vietnam era.

<sup>23</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Poverty Status of Families by Type of Family, Presence of Related Children, Race and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 2019. Table 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald "Bruce" St. John to Jason Stewart, Ronald Bruce St. John Collection, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, June 7, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Vernon Jackson to William Henderson, F341.5 M57, Vol. 747, pt.1, The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. June 7, 2000.

hoped it would be since he was able to travel the world, which he asserts he would not have been able to do as a civilian. Jackson and St. John are just two examples of why some soldiers may have been influenced by economic factors to serve in Vietnam. Another example was black Air Force Captain Harold Beaver, who grew up in Tennessee and enlisted in 1971. Beaver grew up in the 1960s doing agricultural work. After receiving a speeding ticket, Beaver ran into a recruiter who told him about the benefits of joining the military such as education, and travel, two things Beaver likely would not have achieved working on a farm.<sup>26</sup> Economic advancement was a common theme for black and white men who chose a life in the army.

In addition to travel, economic advancement also included the possibility of receiving an education. David McCray was a white student at the University of Oklahoma and was working twelve hours a day to pay for his education when he received his draft notice. McCray mentions, “I was in some ways relieved to be drafted.”<sup>27</sup> Paying for a college education was a difficult task for many American families and the military provided a way for men to receive an education and skills outside of the world of academia. For instance, Hispanic American Manuel Valdez managed to enroll in college for one year before the expense became too much for his family to maintain. Valdez said, “My family didn’t have enough money for me to stay in college, and that’s when I started thinking seriously about joining the marines. I knew I didn’t want to get drafted. I wanted to make my own choice.”<sup>28</sup> According to “Consumer Income” from the Census Bureau

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<sup>26</sup> Harold Beaver to Jasmine Morris, Harold Beaver Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. October 9, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Xiaobing Li, *Voices from the Vietnam War: Stories from American, Asian, and Russian Veterans* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 102.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson. *Landing Zones*, 45.

the average median income for families in 1965 was \$6,900.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the average income, the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that the average cost to attend a university in 1965 was \$1,051.<sup>30</sup> Since the average income statistic is just the overall average income for American families at the time, it does not reveal much about the poverty levels of most families during the Vietnam Era. However, when combined with the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line in 1967, the studies indicate at least 44% of Americans both black and white could not easily afford college at the height of the Vietnam War.<sup>31</sup> The cost of an education was just not attainable to almost half of the population in the mid to late 1960s. While not every soldier entering the service at the time hoped for economic advancement, those who came from the lower class may have been drawn to military service with the hope of utilizing the G.I. Bill for college education and other future benefits.

In any war part of the soldier experience is learning to survive in the various conditions the nature of war entails. For Vietnam soldiers that sometimes meant contending with the diverse and oftentimes unforgiving terrain of Vietnam, and the traps the environment concealed. Surviving battle was another test of the soldier's ability to survive the Vietnam War, and battle in Vietnam varied depending on the type of soldier and where they were stationed. However, some examples show how chaotic battles were for soldiers and the way they tested leadership. Insight into some of the conditions that

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<sup>29</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Consumer Income: Income in 1965 of Families and Persons in the United States." January 12, 1967.

<sup>30</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "Average undergraduate tuition and fees and room and board rates charged for full-time students in degree-granting institutions, by type and control of institution: 1964-1965 through 2006-2007." Table 320.

<sup>31</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Consumer Income: Income in 1965 of Families and Persons in the United States." January 12, 1967.

challenged survival in a war like Vietnam is important because it is another point of transition for American soldiers. Any romantic notions of war soldiers may have had before arriving in Vietnam were quickly replaced by the realities of warfare.

The environmental factors of Vietnam were something that all soldiers needed to address while serving in the war. South Vietnam was around 66,000 square miles with a hot and humid climate, with an average temperature of 80 degrees.<sup>32</sup> Rain is one example of how the environment proved to be problematic for American soldiers in Vietnam. Harry Summers, Jr. writes, “The monthly mean temperature is about 80° F, and the annual rainfall is consistently heavy. The monsoons, blowing generally from the south in the summer and from the north in winter, profoundly influence the temperature and rainfall.”<sup>33</sup> In the *Vietnam War Almanac* Summers, divided South Vietnam into three major regions.

In geographic terms, South Vietnam comprised three major regions: The Mekong Delta, the southern portions of the Chaine Annamitique and the coastal enclaves. The Mekong Delta occupied the southern two-fifths of the country; its fertile alluvial plains, favored by heavy rainfall, made it one of the great rice-growing areas of the world. The Chaine Annamitique, with several high plateaus, dominated the area northward from the Mekong Delta to what during the war was called the Demilitarized Zone or DMZ, between North and South Vietnam and extended into North Vietnam. The coastal enclaves consisted of fertile, narrow, coastal strips between the eastern slopes of the Chaine Annamitique and the South China Sea.<sup>34</sup>

While the environmental factors may seem like a small piece of the soldier experience, they contributed to a much larger problem for United States troops. American soldiers landed in Vietnam with the expectation that the only enemies were communists but did

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<sup>32</sup> Harry G. Summers, Jr. *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Summers. *Vietnam War Almanac*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Summers. *Vietnam War Almanac*, 3.

not anticipate how the environment would be used to conceal booby traps. Survival in Vietnam was made even more complicated by the country being peppered with enemy traps. Men did not need to be in battle to risk injury or death because of the presence of booby traps. The added threat of traps made the soldier experience even more dangerous because something as routine as a patrol could be disrupted by the detonation of a mine. The thick jungle of Vietnam made it easier for the enemy to hide while providing the perfect setting for booby traps that plagued all soldiers.

During the Vietnam War, booby traps were responsible for 11 percent of American casualties in Vietnam, and 15 percent of all soldiers experienced wounds caused by booby traps. In comparison, booby traps were only responsible for 3 percent of the casualties in WWII and 4 percent of casualties during the Korean War.<sup>35</sup> Traps and mines were common foes in the Vietnam war, so much so that they posed a daily threat to American soldiers. “The possibility of a booby trap going off at any moment out in the field took a tremendous toll on infantrymen’s psyches. Even if they never came across a booby trap, the potential for encountering one raised tension, altered patrol routes, and made troops more distrustful of South Vietnamese civilians.”<sup>36</sup> The psychological effects of traps and landmines added another level of fear to the war. There is a sense of helplessness that accompanies traps, because once the weapon is set off there is little that can be done to help the soldier. When asked about his encounter with enemy weapons and the ones he feared the most, white soldier David Taylor claimed it was the booby traps that frightened him the most. “Truthfully, I rarely encountered the enemy. When I

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<sup>35</sup> Summers, Jr. *Vietnam War Almanac*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> The United States of American Vietnam War Commemoration, “Week of June 20”. Accessed November 2020.

did, they were up close and personal. But the Ak-47 and mortars. They would mortar us and the AK-47, and then the weapon of the enemy that we feared the most that we had the most contact with were the mines and booby traps.”<sup>37</sup> At least when a soldier is facing a gun or a mortar the weapon can be heard or even seen before it makes impact. An analysis on the impact of landmines and booby traps is one example of how the soldier experience was dangerous even when the men were not in combat. They also illustrate how surviving Vietnam was more complex than surviving battles, and that a soldier needed to always be alert even in areas that seemed safe.

Another element of the soldier experience was the experience of battle. Battle in Vietnam was just as diverse as the country itself, so the goal is to not only understand the hardship of battle but to also depict the realities of warfare. Lieutenant General Harold G. Moore and Joseph Galloway described what the men of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry endured during the Battle of Ia Drang in *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young: Ia Drang-the Battle that Changed the War in Vietnam*. Since Moore and Galloway were on the ground with the troops, they provided a vivid first-hand account of battle. For instance, when describing the heat of battle, Moore wrote, “The din of battle was unbelievable. Rifles and machine guns and mortars and grenades rattled, banged, and boomed. Two batteries of 105mm howitzers, twelve big guns located on another landing zone five miles distant, were firing nonstop, their shells exploding no more than fifty yards outside the ring of shallow foxholes.”<sup>38</sup> Black soldier Martin Latigue articulated the fear that

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<sup>37</sup> David Taylor to Richard Verrone. David Taylor Collection, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, April 5,8,15; May 4, 2005. 58.

<sup>38</sup> Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway., *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young: Ia Drang-the Battle that Changed the War in Vietnam* .( New York: Presidio Press, 1992), 8.

occurred when fighting broke out at night. When asked about what it was like anticipating nightfall Latigue said,

It was another degree of fear. You're scared of death in the light, but darkness made it more-well, if I was a level ten in the fear department, I must've been a twenty when it got dark. Not only you couldn't see the enemy, but they were using a lot of tracers, you can see those things. Daytime you can't see tracers and bullets. So you could see these tracers and they were coming close to the ground, I mean three, four feet above the ground, you know if you stood up, you'd get hit. You could see the burst of the explosion behind them from the artillery around, but the darkness itself increased the fear.<sup>39</sup>

The fear articulated in Latigue's testimony is a transitional moment for soldiers.

The heroic notions that may have caused some soldiers to enlist became replaced with the fear and chaos of battle. Keegan and Holmes also discussed this transition in *Soldiers*. "As contact with the enemy draws nearer, anticipation sharpens into fear. Its physical effects are striking. The heart beats rapidly, the face shines with sweat and the mouth goes dry- so dry that men often emerge from battle with blackened mouths and chapped lips."<sup>40</sup> The soldier experience in Vietnam was no exception to this transformation when encountering enemy combatants. Survival in Vietnam was key to the soldier experience and battles were one element that soldiers faced. To be sure, battle for an infantryman was different from a pilot's experience but the uncertainty of the realities of war remained the same for any soldier. For instance, Rayburn Smith was a white colonel pilot with the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Cavalry and discussed how he was unsure if he was going to make it out of the battle of the Ia Drang Valley alive.<sup>41</sup> After his aircraft

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<sup>39</sup> Martin Latigue to John Milam. Mr. Martin Latigue Collection, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, November 11, 2005. 16-17.

<sup>40</sup> Keegan and Holmes. *Soldiers*. 261.

<sup>41</sup> Rayburn Smith to Richard Verrone, Col (ret) Rayburn Gene Smith Collection. The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, November 11, 2005.

was hit in the Ia Drang campaign Smith remarks that he did not think he would make it until the end of his one-year service. “I’m not going to make this year because if you think of it, how many times your aircraft has been hit, your buddy’s aircraft had been hit. How many times bullets come through the windshield and think, ‘I’m not going to make it!’<sup>42</sup> A major aspect of the Vietnam War was air mobility and while infantry soldiers were battling on the ground pilots were fighting another battle in the air. One thing becomes evident when analyzing battle in Vietnam, and it is how motivation shifts. While the sense to duty to the country remains a soldier’s foundation, the need to survive and go home to their families takes precedence when battle erupted.

The experience of battle highlighted another side to war that only soldiers understood. The death of another soldier who was viewed as a brother through the shared experience of war was a common theme throughout Vietnam soldier’s testimonies. Soldiers formed bonds when they went to war together. These men trained together and then fought together and shared a trust that only those who have experienced could understand. Therefore, a casualty list takes on a different meaning; those numbers represented more than a fallen soldier. Major Curt Munson was a white officer and provided an example of the toll the casualties of war took on American soldiers. Munson was nineteen years old when he joined the Marines and shipped off to Vietnam and was later awarded the Navy-Marine Corps Medal for saving a helicopter pilot after a failed medevac mission.<sup>43</sup> Similar to McCray, losing friends in the war was the worst part about Vietnam for Munson. “In an infantry company, casualties are the cost of waging war. I

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<sup>42</sup>Rayburn Smith interview.

<sup>43</sup> Li. *Voices from the Vietnam War*, 112- 115.



became more blasé as my tour progressed, even fatalistic, but I never got used to it. I saw so many guys lose their legs to booby traps that I was convinced my number was coming up. A rifle company is a pretty tight-knit group. I had friends that were killed or wounded. That was the worst thing that happened to me.”<sup>44</sup>

The combination of the chaos and the loss of men took a heavy toll, not just on the standard enlisted soldier but on leadership as well. This element of war is also discussed in *Soldiers* by Keegan and Holmes; losing men in battle resonates differently with military leadership than it does with enlisted men. “For leaders-officers or NCOs- this fear is heightened by the knowledge that they have a status to maintain, and the realization that the lives of their subordinates hang upon their decisions.”<sup>45</sup> When soldiers lost friends in battle it was devastating but they typically blamed it on the nature of war. To military leaders, the loss of those men was their responsibility. In his interview with Richard Verrone, Hal Moore articulated the responsibility of being a leader when discussing training soldiers for war. “Also, in such a situation you learn to love your fellow soldiers. Which is a phenomenon that many civilians cannot understand. You love your fellow soldiers as if they were your brothers. And if you’re the leader, you’re responsible for their total welfare.”<sup>46</sup> African American leaders described similar feelings. Clovis Jones was a black major during the Vietnam War and one of his duties in the field was to identify men before they went to the morgue. Jones said as a coping mechanism he pretended it did not bother him, but the reality was the opposite. Jones

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<sup>44</sup> Li. *Voices from the Vietnam War*, 115-116.

<sup>45</sup> Keegan and Holmes. *Soldiers*. 261.

<sup>46</sup> Hal Moore to Richard Veroone, Harold Moore Collection, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, November 10, 2005.

said, “Well, it meant the world to us! We just lost one of your best friends and there’s a special bond between members of combat. When you’re in a combat situation, members of your unit- there’s a special bond because you would literally give your life to save your buddy.”<sup>47</sup> During the Vietnam War, black and white leadership had to teach soldiers how to navigate a country that none of them were familiar with, while also continuously adapting to warfare in Vietnam. Therefore, when soldiers were killed in combat, leaders felt like it was a failure on their part, while also dealing with feelings of losing a brother.

The complex nature of the Vietnam War also meant that the soldier experience was bound to be equally complex. The sense of duty to one’s country was a strong motivator for many Vietnam soldiers but that did not remain as the war progressed. Soldiers began to question the morality of the war but also the United States no longer served as the beacon of morality it once had when compared to the Second World War. Military training taught soldiers how to fight and use their instincts, but preparation could only go so far. The terrain of Vietnam camouflaged one of the key elements of the soldier experience in the war, booby traps and mines. Soldier motivation shifted from duty and advancement to survival through their wartime experiences. None of the initial reasons for being in the military mattered if the men did not survive the many obstacles of the Vietnam War. These factors became even more complicated for African Americans.

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<sup>47</sup> Clovis Jones to Richard B. Verrone, Clovis Jones Jr. Collection. The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, November 11, 2005.

### CHAPTER III– AFRICAN AMERICANS IN VIETNAM

African Americans have fought in every conflict since the formation of the United States. Black bodies were used to uphold the ideals of freedom and democracy the nation was built upon. Despite this, African Americans were denied the basic rights promised within the United States Constitution. Until the integration of the armed forces by President Harry Truman in 1948, African American soldiers fought in segregated units. Subsequently, African American troops made up 11 percent of the United States armed forces in Vietnam.<sup>48</sup> The sheer number of black soldiers in the Vietnam War makes their wartime experience unique because not only were they fighting alongside white soldiers in large numbers but also they served at a time where the United States was experiencing extreme social unrest regarding race relations. The experiences of African American soldiers highlight how race was a major component in shaping their involvement in the Vietnam War. Analyzing the experiences of black soldiers also reveals the emergence of the activist soldier. Instead of accepting the racist treatment they faced many African American soldiers began to show signs of resistance while in the service by embracing and reaching out to the Black Power Movement.

The story of the black Vietnam War soldier is more complex than just one of institutional racism, though most experienced such treatment. Serving in the military gave African American soldiers the ability to advance economically and socially but while also being treated as outsiders. The experience of African American soldiers during the Vietnam War is best understood with the idea of twoness, described by W.E.B. Du

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<sup>48</sup> Gerald Goodwin, “Black and White in Vietnam,” *The New York Times*, July 18, 2017.

Bois. In *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois wrote, “One ever feels his twoness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>49</sup> The struggle of double consciousness was present throughout the experiences of black soldiers, but this also depicted the contradiction of the Vietnam War as a whole. Black soldiers have always been forced to choose between loyalty to their race and loyalty to a white-dominated the country, but during the Vietnam War massive social movements were taking place. The injustices that African Americans faced were being brought into the public’s consciousness while the United States was attempting to rescue oppressed peoples from a different country from the evils of communism.

Black soldiers’ experiences during the Vietnam War differed from their white counterparts because they represented two different versions of American society. On one hand, black soldiers represented an American society that sought to defeat communism and on the other hand black soldiers had to live with the oppressive nature of American society. Race in American society and in the military was an ever-present issue. The military provided African Americans opportunities that would have otherwise been closed. These factors have already been briefly discussed in the previous chapter as motivations for all soldiers, but the cause of those factors is what differentiated white and black soldier motivation. An important thing to note is that these motivations stemmed from the racial inequality and injustice that has always plagued African Americans in the United States.

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<sup>49</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1903), 3.

Life under Jim Crow influenced the lives of African Americans in more ways than segregation. Jim Crow enforced white supremacy by controlling where black people worked, lived, and were educated. These limitations relegated African Americans to second-class citizens to maintain white supremacy. The understanding of Jim Crow in the black community illuminated why some black soldiers viewed the military as a potential refuge such treatment. An analysis of Hattiesburg, Mississippi during the era of Jim Crow is one example of how invasive those laws were on Southern blacks. In *Hattiesburg: An American City in Black and White* William Sturkey articulated what life was like for African Americans under Jim Crow.

In small black Southern communities, Jim Crow ensured that all black people experienced the same forms of social, educational, and economic discrimination. Rich or poor, black people had no choice but to live, shop, dine and worship among themselves. And because middle-class blacks were excluded from participating in all-white organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the only form of leadership they could claim lay in membership in statewide networks and programs they developed to benefit people in their own communities.<sup>50</sup>

Southern African Americans were placed in low wage jobs and denied access to adequate education for decades under Jim Crow. In the Hattiesburg case study Sturkey discusses how the city capitalized on poorly paid black labor for manual labor jobs like digging trenches, building sewers and sweep streets.<sup>51</sup> Another example of the impact of Jim Crow was in the education system. In Hattiesburg there was no high school for the black community until 1921, the education that was offered only went to the eighth grade. At the same time those schools lacked funding and suffered from overcrowding.<sup>52</sup> While

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<sup>50</sup> William Sturkey, *Hattiesburg: An American City in Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 140.

<sup>51</sup> Sturkey. *Hattiesburg*. 82.

<sup>52</sup> Sturkey. *Hattiesburg*. 82.

*Hattiesburg* is only one representation of a Southern city burdened with Jim Crow laws, the problems addressed in the study went well beyond the confines of the city.

Analyzing the education and income inequalities on a national scale show that African Americans all over the country earned far less than whites and did not receive an education at the same rate as whites. The census data from 1960 indicated the income disparity between whites and nonwhites. The median income for white families in urban and rural areas was \$5,835, whereas the median income for nonwhite families was \$3,233.<sup>53</sup> The education statistics for 1960 also depict a large disparity. According to the data 43.2 percent of the white population completed four years of high school education, and out of the black population only 20.1 percent completed high school. The disparity between college educated whites and blacks is just as startling. In 1960, 8.1 percent of the white population completed four years of college or more with only 3.1 percent of the black population graduating with a college degree.<sup>54</sup> The education attainment for African Americans did increase marginally after 1960, but the disparity between whites and blacks in the education sector remained. All of this is to show that the economic and education motivations for Southern black soldiers stemmed from a legacy of racial discrimination that created a class system based on racial hierarchy. Therefore, it is understandable as to why some black soldiers may have chosen military service because it held the potential of economic promise. This also indicated that black families across the country suffered from a large wealth and education gap. The testimonies from

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<sup>53</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Region and Color: Families and Unrelated Individuals by Total Money Income in 1960, for the United States, Urban and Rural." Table 16.

<sup>54</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Educational Attainment, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1960 to 1998." Table 263.

Southern black soldiers reinforced the notion that one of the goals for African American soldiers was to transcend the limitations of a segregated society.

Vernon Jackson received his draft notice in 1965, and Jackson had the opportunity to avoid going to war, but instead he decided that the military could be beneficial to him. When discussing his experience Jackson says, “Well, military experience was- it was before I went into the military, the farthest I’d been away from Biloxi, probably New Orleans, Mobile. You know, I’d been at Pensacola, Florida, playing baseball. But when I got in the military, I got the chance to go overseas, to see part of the world I never would have seen before. So, that was an experience in itself, you know, to see just how other peoples lived and experience other cultures.”<sup>55</sup> When discussing his time overseas Jackson said, “Now to be honest with you, the only time I really felt like a complete human being is when I was overseas in Germany. And that’s a shame you got to go 8000 miles away from home to feel like you’re actually a part of the human race.”<sup>56</sup> Since African Americans lacked the funds to travel, the military provided an opportunity to experience the world beyond Jim Crow. Moses Best, Sr was one of ten children, and he grew up in Lenoir County, North Carolina. Like many of his fellow Vietnam friends, Best looked to the army as a way to escape the segregated South.<sup>57</sup> In his discussion with Wilson, Best recalled the time he witnessed members of the Ku Klux Klan beat his father who tried to acquire school busses for black children.<sup>58</sup> Within Best’s narrative lies the other side of life for Southern blacks. The unrelenting violence against

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<sup>55</sup> Vernon Jackson to William Henderson, F341.5 M57, Vol. 747 pt. 1. The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. June 7, 2000.

<sup>56</sup> Vernon Jackson interview, June 7, 2000.

<sup>57</sup> Wilson. *Landing Zones*, 63.

<sup>58</sup> Wilson. *Landing Zones*, 63.

the black community at the hands of white supremacists was a constant in the lives of African Americans.

African American officers also discussed growing up with the overt racism in the United States. Even though his family was respected by the whites near Suffolk, Virginia Colonel Fred Cherry recalled the segregation he experienced growing up. “Being in a rural area, there weren’t segregated swimming pools or recreation centers where you had to face that kind of racism. But the schools were all segregated. The whites had busses. We had no busses. So on the rainy days, the snowy days, the half-full busses would drives past us, and we would just go on walkin’ that 3 miles each way.”<sup>59</sup> Captain Joseph Anderson discussed how the military provided opportunities that were not typically afforded to African Americans as civilians. “There weren’t many opportunities for blacks in private industry then. And as a graduate of West Point. I was an officer and a gentleman by act of Congress. Where else could a black go and get a label just like that?”<sup>60</sup> In this regard, some men who would become officers shared a common experience with black enlisted soldiers through their shared experience of growing up with racial discrimination as civilians. The prospect of joining the military and going to war seemed like a better opportunity for black men because of the racist and hostile environment of American culture toward African Americans.

African Americans outside of the deep South were also struggling with the marginalization of blacks and minorities from social advancement. Insight into urban inequalities provides further understanding as to why African Americans from these areas

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<sup>59</sup> Terry. *Bloods*, 268.

<sup>60</sup> Terry. *Bloods*, 221.



were motivated by military service. First, census records from 1967 give an overall idea as to the poverty status of African Americans within urban areas. The United States Census Bureau indicates that 33.9 percent of black families with and without children lived below the poverty line. Whereas only 9.1 percent of white families with and without children lived below the poverty line in 1967.<sup>61</sup> Another set of data from the Census Bureau indicated that the poor in the United States resided primarily in urban areas. According to the data in 1967, 10.9 percent of the population resided in metropolitan areas and another 15 percent lived in central city, or downtown city areas.

During and after the Second World War African Americans fled to urban areas in the North and West in the hopes of finding better job opportunities and an escape from Jim Crow. Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* studies race and inequality in post-war Detroit. The 1940s and 1950s was a time of black urban growth and Detroit was one of the biggest recipients of that growth. According to Sugrue, "Black migrants fled poverty rates that soared as high as 80 percent in the rural black belt. They also sought freedom from a political climate that grew harsher as Jim Crow desperately fought for survival. Whether attracted to the opportunities of the Motor City or pushed from the tiny farm plots from where they had toiled for generations, southern blacks looked to Detroit as a land of hope, a 'New Caanan.'"<sup>62</sup> However, as Sugrue's study pointed out blacks in urban areas like Detroit would later be faced with job discrimination and housing inequalities. The practices of redlining and restrictive covenants in areas like

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<sup>61</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Poverty Status of Families by Type of Family, Presence of Related Children, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 2019," Table 4.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.), 30.

Detroit forced blacks to live in substandard and overcrowded segregated neighborhoods.<sup>63</sup> Even in the urban industrial workforce black residents faced racial discrimination regularly and were often given the lowest paid and least desirable jobs.<sup>64</sup> The inequalities of urban residents were not limited to Detroit. Black poor residents lived in many metropolitan areas around the nation. According to the data, 81 percent of nonwhite families living below the poverty line lived in low-income urban areas, whereas 30.8 percent of whites lived in poverty areas.<sup>65</sup> African Americans in Washington D.C. also suffered the same inequalities as those in Detroit. The issues of race and class are constant in the narrative of urban history. *Chocolate City* chronicles race and democracy in Washington D.C, and it shows that blacks in Washington D.C also lacked access to fair employment and housing. According to the authors, African Americans constituted more than half of D.C.'s workforce but represented less than 10 percent of the highest paying positions, while also paying more for overcrowded housing and shoved in black neighborhoods.<sup>66</sup> Just like Jim Crow in the deep South, urban areas created discriminatory practices that forced African Americans to remain second-class citizens. Therefore, when the Vietnam War started, African Americans viewed military service as an advancement opportunity from being treated as a class of outsiders.

The military did prove to be a source of advancement for African Americans in multiple ways. Herman Graham's *The Brothers' Vietnam War* discussed why the military

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<sup>63</sup> Sugrue, "Detroit's Time Bomb": Race and Housing in the 1940s." In *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*. 33.

<sup>64</sup> Sugrue, "The Meanest and Dirtiest Jobs": The Structures of Employment Discrimination." In *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*. 91.

<sup>65</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Poverty Areas in the 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas." Table A. November 13, 1967.

<sup>66</sup>Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 335.

appealed to so many African Americans. “Promising young blacks genuine opportunities for upward mobility, military recruiters enthusiastically welcomed them. Although the military’s reputation as a model of successful integration was overstated, it nonetheless functioned as an imperfect refuge from racism that shielded African American men from many of the offensive racial indignities of black life in America.”<sup>67</sup> Many black Vietnam War soldiers who came from low-income families that could not afford to send them to college and the wages being offered to most black Americans could not cover tuition costs. In *Fighting on Two Fronts* Westheider wrote, “Military service was viewed not as an undue burden but as an opportunity, a chance for both social and economic advancement. Consequently, blacks joined the service in great numbers and reenlisted at over twice the rate of whites. Many black leaders around the nation lauded the military for its advances and held it up as a model for the rest of the nation to emulate.”<sup>68</sup> One of the advances the military provided was in the education sector. Robert Daniels grew up poor from the South Side of Chicago and was working for the post office when he decided to join the Army. After his time in the Army, Daniels was able to use his G.I. benefits to obtain a degree in accounting.<sup>69</sup> Arthur Woodley initially viewed the army as an escape from his rough neighborhood in Lower east Baltimore. Woodley claims, “You had to fight to survive where I grew up.”<sup>70</sup> After not receiving a college scholarship Woodley felt the army would be his best opportunity to get ahead in life.<sup>71</sup> The subpar

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<sup>67</sup> Herman Graham III, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 23.

<sup>68</sup> James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>69</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 230-234.

<sup>70</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 237.

<sup>71</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 237-239.

educational and economic prospects offered to blacks at the time made college almost impossible for African American civilians. However, the military offered a remedy to that issue so the ability to attend college through military service was a motivator for some African Americans.

The military also offered the possibility of higher pay. For example, Nathaniel Adams was working on a farm in North Carolina making fifty cents a day when he received his draft notice in 1954. When he arrived at boot camp, he was given a muster pay of \$31, and Adams says it would have taken him six months to earn that money as a civilian. In his interview, he mentioned how African Americans were considered second-class citizens but through the military he felt was finally a first-class citizen.<sup>72</sup> Adams and Woodley's stories highlight how the issues with race and class in the United States played a key role in African American enlistment. To provide some understanding as to what military pay was, the Defense Finance Accounting Service (DFAS) provided the monthly pay and allowances that servicemen received in 1969. The data stated that a sergeant (E-5) with under two years of service made a monthly salary of \$254.70, and a Private (E-1) made \$115.20.<sup>73</sup> While it is reasonable to assume that these figures varied based on a number of different variables, it does provide some insight into soldier pay. For someone like Nathaniel Adams the base military pay offered a big lifestyle change. Census data from 1969 indicated that the median income for black families was about \$6,000.00 a year and the median income for all families for that year was around

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<sup>72</sup> Nathaniel Adams to Emilierose Gillaspy, Nathaniel Adams Collection. Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>73</sup> Defense Finance Accounting Service, "Monthly Basic Pay and Allowances." July 1, 1969.

\$9,400.00.<sup>74</sup> African Americans in the South made 14 percent below the national median and an average income of \$4,990.00.<sup>75</sup> Farm workers like Adams had an average income of around three thousand dollars a year, an even smaller average than the overall incomes of the southern and northern regions as a whole.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the base military pay provided a steady income that dwarfed what most African Americans were making as civilians in 1969. Military service provided African Americans an escape from the marginalization they experienced as civilians, even if it just provided a more reliable income.

In 1966 the divisions between races were also linked to class. In 1966 Robert McNamara announced the implementation of a new program that would use the military as a form of social and economic uplift. The program was called Project 100,000 and it lowered the admission standards to enter the armed forces. This would mean that men that previously would not have been allowed in the military due to a low Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) score would now be permitted to join the armed forces. The AFQT tested the soldiers proficiency in reading, writing and mathematical reasoning. McNamara argued that Project 100,000 would give America's poor the opportunity to obtain skills and learn trades in the military that they would have not been granted in the civilian world.<sup>77</sup> In reality, the main goal of the program was to bolster the number of troops sent to Vietnam. In 1967, Robert McNamara stated the main goal of the Defense

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<sup>74</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Income in 1969 of Families and Persons in the United States." December 14, 1970.

<sup>75</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Income in 1969 of Families and Persons in the United States." December 14, 1970.2.

<sup>76</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Income in 1969 of Families and Persons in the United States." December 14, 1970.33.

<sup>77</sup> Lisa Hsiao, "Project 100,000: The Great Society's Answer to Military Manpower Needs in Vietnam." *Vietnam Generation*, Vol. 1, no. 4 (1989).

Department in a speech to the National Association of Educational Broadcasters. In the speech McNamara stated,

But before discussing these programs, let me make it unmistakably clear that our primary responsibility and our clear mandate from the President and from the Congress is to procure and maintain a high state of combat readiness whatever military forces are necessary to protect this nation from external attack, keep our commitments to our allies, and support the objectives of our foreign policy. We are meeting that responsibility.<sup>78</sup>

This speech was given one year after the implementation of Project 100,000, and the men recruited for the program were responsible for the high state of readiness.

McNamara's program targeted the lower-class and as evidenced from census records, the African American population was a large portion of America's lower class. McNamara disguised the program to "salvage the poverty-scarred youth of our society"<sup>79</sup> but in reality, the program caused more damage than uplift. According to a report that analyzed the characteristics and performance of the New Standard Men, the name given to the recruit who entered the project, the incidence rates were much higher than the control group in the study. The report states that 13.4 percent of the New Standards Men had committed non-judicial or minor incidents, and the control group was 8.2 percent. The percentages for court-martial convictions were also higher for New Standards Men at 3 percent, and the control group only had 1.4 percent of incidences.<sup>80</sup> Since these men

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<sup>78</sup> Robert McNamara, "Remarks by Secretary McNamara to the National Association of Educational Broadcasters." Veterans Members of the 109<sup>th</sup> Quartermaster Company (Air Delivery) Collection. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. November 3, 1967.

<sup>79</sup> McNamara remarks, November 3, 1967.

<sup>80</sup> Assistant Secretary of Defense, "Project One Hundred Thousand. Characteristics and Performance of 'New Standards' Men. U.S. Department of Commerce. December 1969.

had more disciplinary actions there was less of a chance they would advance within the military, only ten percent of the men reached the rank of sergeant.<sup>81</sup>

Instead of implementing programs that would address the issues of poverty, racism, and urban decay within communities, McNamara exploited the lower-class. While 42.9 percent of the men admitted to the program were unemployed, and the military provided them a source of income, this offered a temporary fix to the larger issue of unemployment in the country. The consequence of being one of the New Standard Men was that 21.6 percent of them ended up in infantry units, and black soldiers from the program comprised 39.5 percent of the overall infantry units across all branches.<sup>82</sup> While whites made up 58.8 percent of the total number of men in the program, they were less likely to end up on the front lines. The 39.7 percent of African Americans admitted into the program ended up being the majority of men placed in combat units.<sup>83</sup> The goal of Project 100,000 was not to target the black community, but since it targeted Americans in a lower-class African Americans were indirectly targeted.. Since many blacks were either denied access or could not afford an education, their scores on the AFQT placed them in the worst positions in war. In analyzing Project 100,000 it became clear that race and class were exploited for an increasingly unpopular war. The contradictions of the United States involvement in the war also became evident through this program. While American officials touted that they were fighting Vietnam in the name of democracy and

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<sup>81</sup> Assistant Secretary of Defense, "Project One Hundred Thousand. Characteristics and Performance of 'New Standards' Men. U.S. Department of Commerce. December 1969.

<sup>82</sup> Assistant Secretary of Defense, "Project One Hundred Thousand. Characteristics and Performance of 'New Standards' Men. U.S. Department of Commerce, December 1969.

<sup>83</sup> Assistant Secretary of Defense, "Project One Hundred Thousand. Characteristics and Performance of 'New Standards' Men. U.S. Department of Commerce. December 1969.

freedom, an entire population of African Americans were being systematically oppressed. Then the government capitalized on the consequences of the oppression they caused to ensure combat readiness. It is important to note that the issue of race and class also became an issue for black officers, because as it will be discussed further, black officers were sometimes considered to be a part of the black middle class. This distinction may have been a source of conflict between black officers and members of the working-class black communities.

Black soldiers who hoped to find a reprieve from racism in the military realized that the racist culture from the United States followed them to Vietnam. In the overall soldier experience, a shift occurred where soldiers realized, that the war they were prepared to fight was more complex than they realized. Black and white soldiers went through this transformation as the realities of war set in. However, for black soldiers the racism they endured set their Vietnam experience apart from white soldiers. Racism in Vietnam appeared in different ways, but all for the same reason. Some soldiers viewed the field positions blacks had been placed in as an issue of race, while others focused on the racial tensions on the base camps.

One issue that arose for African American soldiers in Vietnam was the high death rate of black soldiers. According to James Westheider, “Since African Americans comprised, on average, about 9.3 percent of the total active- duty personnel assigned to Vietnam, the death rate for blacks was roughly 30 percent higher than the death rate for U.S. forces fighting in Southeast Asia.”<sup>84</sup> At the beginning of the war, black soldiers made up 31 percent of the combat units in Vietnam, and in 1966 causality figures

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<sup>84</sup> Westheider. *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 13.



revealed that African American soldiers had the highest causality rates.<sup>85</sup> These figures decrease over the course of the war but they did not go unnoticed by some soldiers. Richard J. Ford III was one of the soldiers who noticed the disparity between white and black soldiers in the field. “It wasn’t so much that they were against us. It was just that we felt like we were being taken advantage of, ‘cause it seemed like more blacks in the field than in the rear.”<sup>86</sup> Historian and Vietnam veteran Ron Milam discussed how he learned that black soldiers felt they were targeted to carry the M60, which was a cumbersome weapon.<sup>87</sup> This was a dangerous position for any soldier to be placed in because enemy soldiers would target that weapon.<sup>88</sup> However, there were other factors to be considered as reasons for more black soldiers being stationed in combat roles. Milam believed it was because the best soldiers should hold those positions and did not think it was a racial matter.<sup>89</sup> Westheider also believed this was one of several variables that placed African Americans in dangerous positions. “Ironically, black pride and military prowess might have inadvertently contributed to the high death rate. Army combat units as well as many of the marine units engaged in the early heavy fighting were composed of volunteers and a high percentage of them were black. Moreover, African Americans enlisted and reenlisted in higher rates than whites.”<sup>90</sup>

The desire to be the best soldier on the battlefield was a common theme within the oral histories of African American soldiers. Nathaniel Adams expressed his desire to be

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<sup>85</sup>James Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms*. (Lanham: Rowam and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2008), 48.

<sup>86</sup> Terry, *Bloods*, 38.

<sup>87</sup> John (Ron) Milam to Richard B. Verrone, John R. (Ron) Milam Collection. The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, June 27, 2005.

<sup>88</sup> John (Ron) Milam to Richard B. Verrone. June, 2005.

<sup>89</sup> John (Ron) Milam to Richard B. Verrone. June, 2005.

<sup>90</sup> Westheider. *The African American Experience in Vietnam*. 49.

better than the white soldiers when he was at boot camp. Adams felt that in order for him to succeed he had to be better than the next soldier. Adams was one of the soldiers to reenlist, and for his second tour he was in a combat position.<sup>91</sup> During his time in Vietnam Richard Ford and the other black soldiers also wanted to prove that they were not afraid of the enemy and that they were the best. Ford says that this bravado “made us more aggressive, more ruthless, more careless. And a little luckier than the person that was scared.”<sup>92</sup> War gave black soldiers the opportunity to dispel the racist ideas that African American soldiers were inferior to white soldiers. Here is another example of how black soldier motivation differs from white soldiers. The history of African Americans being viewed and treated as the inferior race motivated them to prove otherwise, even if it meant putting themselves in the most dangerous situations.

There was one place during the Vietnam War where it appeared as though American soldiers were able to cast aside any bigoted beliefs that existed before their service. The battlefield proved to be a place where black and white soldiers coexisted often without a racial divide. Several Vietnam soldiers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds remarked on how racial divides were minimized when in the field. When asked if he witnessed any racial tensions during his service, Frank Gutierrez made it clear that they did not occur on the battlefield. “There’s no such thing as racial tension in the field because everybody’s armed, everybody’s on equal ground.”<sup>93</sup> Richard Ford’s experience was like Gutierrez’s when in the field racial tensions were put on hold. “The

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<sup>91</sup> Nathaniel Adams to Emilierose Gillaspy. Veterans History Project.

<sup>92</sup>Terry. *Bloods*. 36.

<sup>93</sup> Frank Gutierrez to Kim Sawyer, Frank Gutierrez Collection. The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, January 24, 2001. 23.

racial incidents didn't happen in the field. Just when we went to the back.”<sup>94</sup> Jeremy Maxwell discussed this phenomenon of racial harmony in the field in *Brotherhood in Combat*. Maxwell wrote, “Race mattered little if we were dying; therefore racial harmony was required while in the field for units to survive.”<sup>95</sup> Both black and white soldiers had the same goal while in the field, and that was to survive. The only way that could happen was by soldiers working together as a unit. The field experiences for African Americans represented the moments in the Vietnam War where black soldiers were treated by whites as fellow Americans instead of black men, whom whites deemed inferior. However, the racial dichotomy that existed in the Vietnam era did not allow black soldiers to be respected as black Americans all the time. Ford's mention of racial incidents occurring when the men went to the rear was another side to the African American experience.

The racist culture that had long defined America's society plagued black soldiers once they arrived on base camps. The experience of Haywood T. Kirkland combines several elements that embodied the African American experience in the Vietnam War.

We was heroes, but I didn't feel like it for long. You would see the racialism in the base-camp area. Like rednecks flying rebel flags from their jeeps. I would feel insulated [sic], intimidated [sic]. The brothers they was calling quote unquote troublemakers, they would send to the fields. A lot of brothers who had supply clerk or cook MOS when they came over ended up in the field. And when the brothers who was shot came out of the field, most of them go the jobs burning shit in these 50-gallon drums. Most of the white dudes got jobs as supply clerks or in the mess hall.<sup>96</sup>

Kirkland's wartime experience delineates the same second-class treatment black soldiers endured as civilians. The practices of giving blacks the undesirable jobs, harsh

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<sup>94</sup>Terry. *Bloods*. 38.

<sup>95</sup> Jeremy P. Maxwell, *Brotherhood in Combat: How African Americans Found Equality in Korea and Vietnam* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 128.

<sup>96</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 99.

punishments, and labeling black men as troublemakers was not a new experience for African Americans. These reasons were motivating factors that caused some black men to enlist. Arthur Woodley noticed the labor disparity between white and black soldiers during his training. Woodley also noticed that black soldiers would be assigned dirty details while white and even lighter skinned soldiers were given easier chores.<sup>97</sup> This is not to say that white soldiers were never assigned bad jobs, however, for black soldiers some of the behavior exhibited on base camps mimicked the habits of Jim Crow. Isaac Hampton II discusses the ramifications of the racist behavior on base. “Because of things such as some white soldiers flying the Confederate flag and the presence of others who were overt KKK members, black soldiers banded together for protection and camaraderie.”<sup>98</sup> The toxic culture on base camps towards black soldiers caused a de facto form of segregation. The analysis of the cultures black soldiers experienced in the field versus the environment on base depicts the double consciousness of the African American soldier. In the field race did not matter and black soldiers were treated as the equal of white soldiers, but on base they were still being treated as outsiders. These behaviors eventually culminated, and many black soldiers started to embrace their black identity and become active resisters in the military.

One other aspect of the black soldier experience that Kirkwood alluded to in his testimony was how African Americans received a disproportionate amount of punishments compared to white soldiers. A report compiled by a task force which had African American representation, commissioned by the Assistant Secretary of Defense

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<sup>97</sup> Terry, *Bloods*, 238.

<sup>98</sup> Isaac Hampton II, *The Black Officer Corps: A History of Black Military Advancement from Integration through Vietnam*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 153.

found that racial discrimination was rampant in the military, and that included how the military handled punishments.<sup>99</sup> The report provided multiple studies regarding the disciplinary actions against all soldiers, but the data on the incident reports alone depicted that black soldiers received a much higher number of incident reports. The task force found,

In both the Army and the Marine Corps (the only services reporting enough incidents to permit statistically reliable analysis), the percentage of reports of incident involving black servicemen exceeded their percentage of the population at the installations from which the reports were gathered. In the Army, where blacks comprise 21% of the population at the installations reporting, they accounted for 26.1% of such reports. In the Marine Corps, they constitute 16.% of the population of the installations reporting and accounted for 23.3% of such reports.<sup>100</sup>

Not only were black soldiers reported at higher numbers, the punishments for those actions indicated they were punished more severely. African Americans were not given the same type of disciplinary actions as white soldiers who committed the same crimes. For instance, black soldiers charged with an unauthorized absence and no prior record were placed in confinement for 31.9 days, whereas whites with the same charge and record were only held for 26.9 days.<sup>101</sup> The inequality of the military justice system became even more evident when the report showed that oftentimes white soldiers were released without further disciplinary actions. In the case of unauthorized absences in the Army, 173 whites were released without further actions, and only 97 African Americans

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<sup>99</sup> Manpower and Reserve Affairs on The Administration of Military Justice in the Armed Forces, by Nathaniel R. Jones and C.E. Hutchin, Jr., et al. "Task Force on the Administration of Military Justice in the Armed Forces." (Washington D.C.: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, November 30, 1972).

<sup>100</sup> Manpower and Reserve Affairs. "Task Force on the Administration of Military Justice in the Armed Forces." November 30, 1972. 25-26.

<sup>101</sup> Manpower and Reserve Affairs. "Task Force on the Administration of Military Justice in the Armed Forces." November 30, 1972. 29.

were given the same treatment.<sup>102</sup> African American soldiers also had a higher number of court martials, punitive discharges, and received longer prison sentences of hard labor than white soldiers.<sup>103</sup> Consequences of both court martials and nonjudicial offenses impacted soldiers who hoped to make the military a career and advance through the ranks, therefore these disciplinary actions hindered black soldier advancement. The unfair judicial practices within the military were additional factors that lead to soldier dissent within the military, and they also highlighted another reason why there were so few black officers and higher-ranking enlisted soldiers.

In April of 1968 the world learned that the national leader of the Civil Rights Movement Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been murdered in Memphis, Tennessee. Despite being on a different continent, this was a profound moment for black Vietnam soldiers. While both black and white soldiers had similar reasons for losing faith in the war, this was a major moment of transition in how black soldiers viewed the war and the nation. Black soldiers reacted to Dr. King's death with a mix of anger and sadness. Don F. Browne's reaction when he heard the news was to want to lash out at whites. "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 hurt. All I wanted to do was go home."<sup>104</sup> Roosevelt Gore was home for one month before his company was sent to Chicago for riot duty after the assassination. "When Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed in April, it

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<sup>102</sup> Manpower and Reserve Affairs. "Task Force on the Administration of Military Justice in the Armed Forces." November 30, 1972. 29-30.

<sup>103</sup> Manpower and Reserve Affairs. "Task Force on the Administration of Military Justice in the Armed Forces." November 30, 1972. 31-32.

<sup>104</sup> Terry, *Bloods*, 167.

seemed to me that the real war wasn't in Vietnam, it was in the United States."<sup>105</sup> The death of Dr. King ushered in a new wave of radicalism among soldiers and civilians.

Even before King's death, the Black Power Movement had been growing, but it became even more prominent after his death. Black soldiers angry over the war and King's death started to embrace its principles. Peniel Joseph argued that the Black Power Movement filled the void left because of Martin Luther King's murder. Joseph said, "Black Power would fill the vacuum brought by King's death, its focus on politics and culture transforming race relations and black activism in the United States and beyond."<sup>106</sup> Joseph argued that King's murder was a moment that fueled Black Power activists, proving that the United States was a deeply racist nation.<sup>107</sup>

The Black Power Movement's pursued a more radical approach radical approach when compared to the nonviolent approach of organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1966 SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael articulated the goals of the Black Power Movement. "Carmichael argued for the cultural and political autonomy of black communities. He defended the black power concept as a response by black people to the need 'to reclaim our history and our identity from the cultural terrorism and depredation of self-justifying white guilt.'"<sup>108</sup> One of the weaknesses of the Civil Rights Movement was that it required

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<sup>105</sup> Wilson. *Landing Zones*, 84.

<sup>106</sup> Peniel E. Joseph. *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Owl Books, 2006), 242.

<sup>107</sup> Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 241-242.

<sup>108</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 216.

blacks to integrate into mainstream American society, which sometimes came at the expense of their own identity. In his article “The Black Culture Movement and the Black Community” John Runcie points out that this was a major issue African Americans found in the Civil Rights Movement. Runcie says, “One of the weaknesses of the Civil Rights Movement was that it offered no cultural programme other than the integration of Blacks into the dominant white culture, and the implications of this type of ‘integration’ were greater than a growing number of those Blacks were prepared to accept.”<sup>109</sup> At this point in American history African Americans had their jobs, housing, education, and basic civil rights controlled by white America, which is why compromising their cultural identity became a point of contention.

The principles of self-determination, cultural identity, and community building resonated with black Vietnam soldiers. Herman Graham articulated the values of the Black Power Movement in *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, “Central to the new black identity was the development of black consciousness based upon the appreciation for black history and culture in both the New World and Africa. By reclaiming their culture and history, blacks could develop an identity that was self-affirming, that reflected the values, needs, and interests of African Americans. Black Power meant rejecting mainstream American values that did not facilitate liberation.”<sup>110</sup> Harold Bryant managed to maintain a form of his cultural identity when he went to Vietnam. Bryant’s grandmother was from Africa, and the warriors in the village she was raised in had their ears pierced. This tradition passed on to the men in the Bryant family and he chose to

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<sup>109</sup> John Runcie, “The Black Culture Movement and the Black Community,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (August 1976), 186.

<sup>110</sup> Graham, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 98.



keep that tradition when he went to Vietnam. Bryant said, “I would go to in the Army wearing the mark of the African warriors I descend from.”<sup>111</sup> Another example was the use of the “dap” a handshake common among black soldiers. Graham described the “dap” as, “Black GIs called their ritual greetings “the dap,” and its abbreviated versions “the power” and “the power check.” Although the dap was a ritual of unity, its complexity allowed participants to express their individuality.”<sup>112</sup> The “dap” was a form of resistance and way for black soldiers to embrace the cultural elements of the Black Power Movement.

The black men who willingly enlisted in the military were likely prepared to have to conform to the military’s grooming and behavioral standards. The men who were drafted on the other hand, were forced to give up their personal identity for military service. Black GIs embraced their identity by embracing the Afro, and black accessories to set themselves apart from white soldiers. “In addition to the Afro, black men adorned their bodies with black colored accessories to showcase their manhood. They wore black sunglasses, black armbands, black shirts and black gloves. They carried walking sticks with black panther heads on the handles. They even made subtle choices to distinguish themselves from their white peers.”<sup>113</sup> Graham said that this was an important point of contention for black soldiers in *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*. Graham wrote, “They could either strictly obey military dress codes and thus violate their sense of manhood, or they could express their black identity through their hairstyle and cultural paraphernalia and so

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<sup>111</sup> Terry, *Bloods*, 18-19.

<sup>112</sup> Graham, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 104.

<sup>113</sup> Graham, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 109.

jeopardize their livelihood.”<sup>114</sup> It is also important to note that the “dap” sometimes posed a problem for black officers. Hampton II discussed how some black enlisted soldiers hoped African American officers would provide special treatment to black soldiers.<sup>115</sup> Hampton II wrote, “Lieutenant General Julius Becton (retired) recalled ‘there were instances when the Black Power salute was given and if the recipient, the officer, let that go by, then he had a major problem. When that happened to you, you stopped it and corrected it.’”<sup>116</sup> While the Black Power Movement may have provided a point of solidarity for African American enlisted soldiers, it was also a potential source of division between black officers and enlisted men. The bolstering of black culture through black power while the Vietnam War was raging, forced black soldiers to choose between their cultural identity or being an American soldier.

The struggles of black soldiers during the Vietnam War had an unexpected consequence for military officials. The military indirectly created a small group of radical soldiers who actively reached to the Black Power Movement to show their support and tell their stories. In some cases, soldiers would write to *The Black Panther* seeking help with legal funds. Vernon D. Chatman wrote the newspaper hoping to become a member of the party and to ask the organization if they could provide a lawyer to help him fight a court martial.<sup>117</sup> The soldier’s letters to *The Black Panther* revealed that black soldiers sometimes took on the twin roles of activists and G.I.s in Vietnam. A letter published on May 25, 1969, from a soldier in Fort Jackson, South Carolina reveals just how involved

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<sup>114</sup> Graham, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 95.

<sup>115</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 164.

<sup>116</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 164.

<sup>117</sup> Vernon D. Chatman, *The Black Panther*. “Military Pig.” Vol. 2, No. 28. March 31, 1969.

The Black Panthers were in helping soldiers. The letter was from the soldier responsible for founding the organization G.I.'s United at Fort Jackson. G.I.'s United was an anti-war organization composed of around 100 enlisted men.<sup>118</sup> The Army arrested four of the members and charged them with breach of the peace, disrespect to an officer, disobeying an order, holding an illegal demonstration, and breaking restriction.<sup>119</sup> One of the names on the sponsor list for the G.I. Civil Liberties Defense Committee pamphlet was Fred Hampton, a well-known Black Panther leader and martyr. On May 4, 1969, *The Black Panther* published a letter from a black G.I. serving in the Air Force, who chose to keep his identity anonymous. The soldier told the Black Panthers "I would like to bring to your attention the plight of the pig to rid us Black G. I's from this station."<sup>120</sup> The anonymous soldier's story revealed that the black G.I.s formed an organization to protect one another. He then discussed a racial incident in which the letter "KKK" were written on another black soldier's door. According to the G.I. no disciplinary action was taken against the offending soldier who admitted to the crime.<sup>121</sup> This soldier's stories depicted how black soldiers who faced discrimination survived in the military. Black Vietnam soldiers were not only influenced by the principles of the Black Power Movement but also they were forming their own organizations within the military. Graham argues that military officials targeted black soldiers they feared were militant, and disguised racial harassment as

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<sup>118</sup> *The Black Panther*. "Open Letter from a Black G.I." Vol. 3. No. 5. May 25, 1969.

<sup>119</sup> G.I. Civil Liberties Defense Committee Pamphlet. "The Case of G.I.'s. United Against the War in Vietnam, Ft. Jackson, S.C." 1969. Social Change Collection (MS 457) Special Collections at University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>120</sup> *The Black Panther*. "Military Pigs", Vol. 3, No. 2. May 4, 1969.

<sup>121</sup> *The Black Panther*. May 4, 1969.

military justice.<sup>122</sup> Soldiers who spoke out against the war risked various forms of military justice, including a court martial.

The military feared black militancy, but the tactic was the response to centuries of black marginalization in American society. The black soldier experience during Vietnam began with hope that military service would alleviate some of the burdens of inequalities. To be clear, some soldiers did find refuge within the military and managed to obtain social and economic advancement. At the same time some African Americans returned from Vietnam broken and felt their country failed them again. At any given point in the black and white soldier experiences the contradictions of the Vietnam War were present. Both groups had similar motivations but the causes that led to the motives made them different. In analyzing the soldier experiences, it becomes difficult to understand who the real villain was during the Vietnam War. Even though *The Souls of Black Folk* was published in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois' words articulated the struggles endured by African American Vietnam soldiers. "He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."<sup>123</sup> American society barred the doors of opportunity to African Americans, and when the military seemed to offer some refuge, those experiences ended up being yet another source of hardship. One area of advancement in which African Americans were able to make some progress was in the form of leadership opportunities.

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<sup>122</sup> Graham, *The Brothers' Vietnam War*, 95.

<sup>123</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

## CHAPTER IV- AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

In 1949 African Americans composed a total of 0.9 percent of the entire officer corps in the United States military. This number steadily climbed through the Korean War reaching to just over two percent at the height of the Vietnam War.<sup>124</sup> Black officers were an anomaly within the African American community and clearly sought to defy Du Bois' double consciousness and prove that black men can be Americans and African American. When considering the whole of African American history this was an important accomplishment. Black officers were given positions of leadership that were denied to them in previous wars, and they were not in segregated units. These officers commanded white and black soldiers on and off the battlefield, and their experience provided insight into the development of military and black leadership. The role of the noncommissioned black sergeant (E-5 and above) is another facet of black leadership during the Vietnam era. These soldiers were also in unique positions of leadership because they were the primary means of communication between officers and enlisted. Sergeants were also responsible for training incoming soldiers, leading soldiers into battle and those responsibilities made their positions even more unique. An analysis of these two types of leadership revealed how different the two roles were. The analysis of experience is not about battles or even about being in the field. Instead, it is an analysis of how the officer experience transcended the confines of the U.S. racialized class system, changed race relations within the military and the price they paid within the black community.

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<sup>124</sup> *The Negro in the Armed Forces: A Statistical Fact Book*. (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Equal Opportunity, September 15, 1971), 1-3.

The activism in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in an upswell of civilian black leadership. These individuals redefined leadership through community activism and outreach. The topic of civil rights activism is large and contains the stories of a number of civil rights leaders, but for the purpose of this study the focus will be on just before and during the Vietnam Era. A brief analysis on some of the civilian black leaders is useful when analyzing black leadership experience. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Malcolm X rose to national prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, but there were people on the local levels leading the charge for civil rights. Grassroots organizers all over the South orchestrated voter registration drives, and freedom schools and sit-ins to fight against the Jim Crow ruling class. In 1961 New York native Robert Moses joined the freedom fight in the South by launching a voter registration project in the Mississippi Delta with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Moses inspired local black communities to join together to push for voter registration and integration in Mississippi in cities all over the state, and this tactic was used by SNCC along with other civil rights groups during what has become known as Freedom Summer.<sup>125</sup> The freedom struggle of the 1960s introduced the world to the indomitable Fannie Lou Hamer, Diane Nash, and Ella Baker. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded by Ella Baker in 1960, and Diane Nash would also be a leader within the organization.<sup>126</sup> Hamer was a constant warrior in the fight for civil rights from the moment she was evicted from her home for attempting to vote.<sup>127</sup> The grassroots leaders

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<sup>125</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 102-104.

<sup>126</sup> Carson. *In Struggle*. 19-21.

<sup>127</sup> Dittmer. *Local People*. 137-138.

during the Civil Rights Movement showed that leaders of the movement did not need to possess political power or formal titles to be considered a leader.

The main purpose of introducing grassroots leadership in a study about military leadership during Vietnam is to discuss the importance of bridge leadership. In *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* Belinda Robnett provides a complex analysis the role of black women within the movement. Robnett describes these women as bridge leaders, and while her study focuses on women it can also be applied to black noncommissioned officers. Robnett defined bridge leadership in multiple ways, but essentially a bridge leader is not confined to the same restrictions as a national figure. Robnett said,

How might bridge leadership be contrasted with formal leadership? The primary difference is that formal leaders possess institutional and organizational power. In contrast, bridge leaders make similar decisions except that their organizational and mobilization skills are performed within what Evans and Boyte term a “free space.” Such a free space might be defined as a niche that is not directly controlled by formal leaders or those in their inner circle.<sup>128</sup>

The concept of bridge leadership is used more broadly than Robnett’s when applied to black soldiers. That is because ultimately she is referring to the work of women within the community and Civil Rights Movement. Another important distinction is that Robnett argued that bridge leaders acted outside the hierarchy of formal leadership. The military is a hierarchical organization; therefore the concept of bridge leadership is reframed to take place within a hierarchical organization and the NCOs role within their own spheres of influence. Robnett is viewing bridge leaders and their actions within the community, but in this case the platoon or squad the NCO is responsible for is the community. The

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<sup>128</sup> Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21.

role of a sergeant can be performed by soldiers of any race or ethnicity, but for black soldiers this was an introduction into a leadership role.

There were only 5.8 percent of black soldiers with the rank of E-5 in 1949, and that increased to 10.9 percent in 1970.<sup>129</sup> Considering that number almost doubled by Vietnam indicated there was an influx of black soldiers in leadership positions. Robnett argued that women in the movement lacked positional power from within the movement and from the organizations as a whole.<sup>130</sup> The same can be said of black men in the military, because historically they have been excluded from positions of power. The sergeant ranks E-5 and E-6 were composed of a higher percentage of African Americans than the higher-ranking sergeant positions. The only exception was in 1970, ten percent of African Americans were promoted to the rank of E-7. However, from 1965 until 1969 sergeant ranks E-5 and E-6 consisted of nine to thirteen percent African American soldiers.<sup>131</sup> These numbers reveal two things, the first is that black soldiers obtained some leadership positions consistently throughout the Vietnam War. The second point was how the percentages also indicated that African American advancement in the military was limited. Not only did the numbers for the high-ranking enlisted positions decline, but the numbers continued to dwindle for commissioned officers. Since education was such a large component of becoming an officer this could also indicate a trickledown effect of the issues with blacks and education in the United States. This is why an analysis of African American sergeants is useful for the larger picture of African American

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<sup>129</sup> *The Negro in the Armed Forces: A Statistical Fact Book*. (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Equal Opportunity, September 15, 1971), 6.

<sup>130</sup> Robnett. *How Long? How Long?* 23.

<sup>131</sup> *The Negro in the Armed Forces: A Statistical Fact Book*. (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Equal Opportunity, September 15, 1971), 12-13.



leadership. These men represented a middle ground of sorts, they were leaders while also being considered regular soldiers by officers and fellow servicemen.

Sergeant Major Edgar A. Huff was one of the first fifty African Americans to be accepted into the Marine Corps when he enlisted in 1942. Huff reached the rank of sergeant major by the time the Tet Offensive began in 1968. Huff experienced some of the same hardships as the lower- ranking enlisted men. Huff came from humble beginnings in Alabama and was raised by his mother. He experienced racism from the very beginning of his military career, but he never let that impact the way he commanded. However, it is during Huff's retelling of his experience during the Tet Offensive that his ability as a bridge leader came forward. Huff was in Danang with the 1<sup>st</sup> Military Police Battalion near the main airstrip when the enemy attacked. Huff was in a bunker with a colonel when they received a transmission that the men outside were being overrun. When this happened Huff said, "And I told the colonel, "Lets go." From this moment Huff defied the colonels order to wait and rushed in to save another soldier. "This wasn't a black boy. He was a white boy. I knew I might get killed saving a white boy. But he was my man. That's what mattered."<sup>132</sup> While Huff's actions certainly demonstrated an impressive level of heroism, it is his response to the colonel that deserved attention. Huff could have easily obeyed orders but instead he acted on his own accord. Historically, when a black man disobeyed a white authority he was met with harsh punishments, but for Huff he was awarded the Bronze Star. In the context of bridge leadership Robnett describes this kind of leadership as a community bridge leader.

Many community bridge leaders, because of their extraordinary courage and skills, often acted as formal leaders during moments of crisis, when formal and

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<sup>132</sup>Terry, *Bloods*. 145-151.

secondary leaders were unwilling or unable to do so. These leaders are often the decision makers during these temporary periods, which were characterized by spontaneous, emotional events when planned activities went awry.<sup>133</sup>

The idea of a community bridge leader when applied to African American NCOs articulated the shift in black leadership. In this position these men were able to openly defy white leadership, and also overcame racial barriers. In the past, this kind of insubordination from a black man almost certainly would have been met with severe disciplinary action. For instance, First World War black soldiers experienced physical abuses at the hands of white noncommissioned officers if they questioned their authority.<sup>134</sup> Another example of this type of leadership can be seen in Roosevelt Gore's story. Gore was running point on a patrol one night when the squad was attacked. "We got attacked and the E-4 that was in charge of the squad, a white guy cracked up. I got everybody back, no casualties, wounded or nothing, because I was a pretty good soldier by then. I got my sergeant's stripes the next morning."<sup>135</sup> Even though the squad leader was a lower rank, in this instance he acted as the formal leader and was unable to take control and Gore assumed the leadership role, and the leadership vacuum was filled. At first glance, Huff and Gore's stories present as the typical war story. Two soldiers performing extraordinary acts against insurmountable odds, but their stories depict a much deeper component. Both men came from the South where Jim Crow stripped authority from African Americans and ostracized them from American society.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup>Robnett. *How Long?How Long?* 21.

<sup>134</sup> Chad Williams. *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 110-111.

<sup>135</sup> Wilson. *Landing Zones*. 82.

<sup>136</sup> C. Vann Woodward. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. ( New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.), 6-7.

Situations like Huff and Gore's demonstrate a power shift in the black soldier experience. Black sergeants not only performed their duties but they also reclaimed some of the power that racist regimes like Jim Crow withheld.

Another element of bridge leadership concerns the connections that these leaders established between formal and informal leaders. In the instance of black NCOs who had to act as direct leaders for all of the soldiers under their command and put their survival first. One way black sergeants bridged the gap between races in Vietnam was by reenlisting. In the previous chapter, James Westheider discussed how African Americans reenlisted at a higher rate than other soldiers. Since these soldiers had actually been to Vietnam and understood the conditions of the country they were often sent to be instructors. While reflecting on his training experience Ron Milam also noticed that most of the drill instructors were African American. "And so one of the observations that I made in AIT [Advanced Individual Training], and later would see the same thing in OCS, is so many of the drill sergeants and so many of the cadre teaching all of the courses were African-American because they were re-upping."<sup>137</sup> James Wheeler, Jr. was from Nashville, Tennessee and the first time he took orders from an African American was from Sergeant First Class Brown at Fort Polk. Wheeler expressed a great fondness for Sgt. Brown while discussing his time at basic, and this was a common theme throughout the testimonies of soldiers.<sup>138</sup> The influence of African American instructors was so impactful for Milam that he makes a point to teach how their training was instrumental in

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<sup>137</sup> John (Ron) Milam to Richard B. Verrone. June 28, 2005.

<sup>138</sup> James Wheeler, Jr. to Richard Verrone. Mr. James P. Wheeler Jr. Collection. The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, July 11, 2003.

the survival of American soldiers because they passed on their knowledge.<sup>139</sup> African American drill sergeants not only acted as bridge leaders between black and white soldiers but to soldiers of all backgrounds. These men were not just bridges regarding race, but they were also the difference between life and death. Survival was a key motivator for all soldiers, and the best way to do that was to listen to someone who lived through the experience regardless of race.

A bridge leader possessed several characteristics and some of those have been defined but the black NCO embodied some of the other qualities of a bridge leader. First, Robnett says, “They operate in the movement’s or organization’s free spaces, thus making connections that cannot be made by formal leaders.”<sup>140</sup> For instance, James Wheeler discussed how they rarely saw the commander but instead spent most of their time with the platoon sergeant.<sup>141</sup> Wheeler’s account coincides with the Army’s description of the basic duties of a sergeant. According to the Army, the lowest ranking sergeant (E-5) is the first line leader who has the most direct impact on soldiers, leads a squad or team, and is responsible in overseeing the soldiers in their daily tasks.<sup>142</sup> This means the sergeant spends the most time with the soldiers under their leadership creating more personal bonds than the more formal leadership of an officer. These connections can be seen in the language used by Huff, who referred to the white soldier he saved as his man. Officers certainly had a connection as well, but they have to focus on the bigger

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<sup>139</sup> John (Ron) Milam to Richard B. Verrone. June 28, 2005.

<sup>140</sup> Robnett. *How Long? How Long?* 20.

<sup>141</sup> James Wheeler, Jr. to Richard Verrone. July 11, 2003.

<sup>142</sup> United States Army. “U.S. Army Ranks.” Web.

picture and work with military administrators. The sergeant, on the other hand, had a bit more freedom to interact with the men and can form deeper bonds.

The presence of a black NCO forced the soldiers who harbored any bigoted notions to confront those feelings by either choosing to work with the sergeant or resist their authority. For the most part, soldiers chose to work with their sergeant once they realized it was in their best interest. Whites resisted a black sergeants at first,, but the sergeant had the upper hand by virtue of his rank. For instance, Edgar Huff had to deal with a white gunny sergeant who did not want to room with another black sergeant. The white soldier did not know that Huff was also African American and was terrified when he realized his mistake. Ultimately through Huff's leadership the white gunny sergeant and black sergeant ended up becoming friends.<sup>143</sup> Huff forced the white soldier to confront his racism by either sleeping in the same room with a black man or outside. Given Huff's rank as a master sergeant the white soldier submitted and bunked with a black man. The free space Huff occupied was because of his rank which overrode the fact that he was a black man. In return, this forced white and black soldiers to bond in a way that would not have happened organically in the civilian world, and this was one of the ways black NCOs acted as bridge leaders. When compared to what civilian life was like for African Americans, black NCOs occupied a space of leadership that was not entirely confined by race.

African American noncommissioned officers represented community bridge leadership, and only stepped into formal leadership roles out of necessity. The commissioned officers represented the formal leadership roles within Robnett's concept

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<sup>143</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 148-149.

of leadership. Formal leadership contained institutional and organizational power, and this is the type of power commissioned officers obtained.<sup>144</sup> The commissioned officer ranks began with the warrant officer (WO) through the rank of general (O-10). Commissioned officers performed a wide range of duties, which varied based on rank, but in basic terms they were responsible for leading enlisted soldiers. The Army's description of officer ranks describes them as, "Commissioned officers are the managers, problem solvers, key influencers and planners who lead enlisted Soldiers in all situations. They plan missions, given orders and assign Soldiers tasks, and that job description was similar in the Vietnam era."<sup>145</sup> The free space that noncommissioned officers were able to navigate was not the same for commissioned officers. These leaders could not occupy the same kind of free space as sergeants because their responsibilities were so diverse. Officers had a dual responsibility to the men under their command and to the country, and this means their decisions have to be weighed heavily. If an officer exercises poor judgement, it could not only mean the end to their career, but it could cost the lives of soldiers under their orders. This is true for white and black officers, however African American officers in Vietnam came from a society that gave them very little room for error.

Despite the obstacles placed before African Americans, a small number of men managed to rise to the upper echelons of leadership during the Vietnam Era. Since the military has so many roles for an officer, *The Negro in the Armed Forces: A Statistical Fact Book* sheds some light on the type of leadership positions black officers held. The

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<sup>144</sup> Robnett. *How Long?How Long?* 21.

<sup>145</sup> United States Army. "U.S. Army Ranks." Web.

top three occupational groups which contained the most black officers in 1968 were administrators (2.2 percent), engineering and maintenance officers (2.3 percent), and supply procurement and allied officers (2.8 percent).<sup>146</sup> Another operational group that maintained a consistent number of black officers for the duration of the war, was the tactical operations officers at around 2 percent. Those numbers remained around the same percentages for the other groups as well during the Vietnam War. The only exception was in 1970 when African American tactical officers reached 3 percent and engineering and maintenance officer spiked to 4 percent.<sup>147</sup> This data depicts those black officers were able to break through some of the racist practices the military imposed on black soldiers in the past. The increased number of black officers in combat leadership roles indicates a stark change when compared to the amount of officers in the Second World War. The officers who were present in the Second World War were rarely placed in combat roles, so this indicates another change. Black officers during the Vietnam era had several factors in common that helped lead to their successes in the military.

The first factor that helped many black soldiers become commissioned officers was their involvement in ROTC programs especially from historically black college and universities (HBCUs). In 1965 Howard University granted 37 Army commissions, and the Hampton Institute granted 34 commissions that same year.<sup>148</sup> In fact ROTC programs from HBCUs granted just over two percent of Army officer commissions every year

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<sup>146</sup> *The Negro in the Armed Forces: A Statistical Fact Book*. (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Equal Opportunity, September 15, 1971),50.

<sup>147</sup> *The Negro in the Armed Forces: A Statistical Fact Book*. (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Equal Opportunity, September 15, 1971),56.

<sup>148</sup> *The Negro in the Armed Forces: A Statistical Fact Book*. (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Equal Opportunity, September 15, 1971),247.

from 1965 until 1970.<sup>149</sup> Wallace Arnold was one of the officers who received his commission from Hampton, and he retired a Major General after serving 34 years in the military.<sup>150</sup> While serving in Vietnam from 1969 until 1970, Arnold became the Chief of Psychological Operations in northern I Corps.<sup>151</sup> Historically black colleges and their ROTC programs provided the gateway for black leadership during the Vietnam War and were responsible for producing 75 percent of the overall black officer corps throughout the United States military.<sup>152</sup> The road to formal leadership for African Americans was dependent on such alternative routes because the traditional methods such as military academies did not accept a high number of black applicants. The 1968 graduating class of the U.S. Military Academy had nine African American graduates after only accepting ten for that same year.<sup>153</sup> . This trend continued in the rest of the military academies in the United States. Another option for African Americans to achieve a commission was through Officer Candidate School (OCS). Ron Milam discussed black enlistment through OCS in *Not a Gentleman's War*. Milam said, "OCS classes enrolled black candidates from prior enlistees and the College Option Enlistment Program, but the numbers were low. While no records were kept, a perusal of OCS class yearbooks indicates that there were usually eight to ten black candidates in each class of 200 students, which would be

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<sup>149</sup> *The Negro in the Armed Forces: A Statistical Fact Book*. (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Equal Opportunity, September 15, 1971),248.

<sup>150</sup> Wallace C. Arnold to Joe Galloway. Wallace C. Arnold Collection. Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. September 22, 2015.

<sup>151</sup> Wallace Arnold to Joe Galloway. September 22, 2015.

<sup>152</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 56.

<sup>153</sup> *The Negro in the Armed Forces: A Statistical Fact Book*. (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Equal Opportunity, September 15, 1971),244.



consistent with the 4 percent total.”<sup>154</sup> Even though the admission standards to be admitted into OCS were relaxed during the Vietnam War very few African Americans went to OCS. Therefore, in order to have a chance at becoming a commissioned officer African American soldiers often turned to historically black colleges (HBCUs).

One of the most valuable experiences of black officers going to an HBCU was having a mentor. Historically black colleges offered a mentorship that most soldiers would not have had at other schools or in the civilian world. Hampton III discussed how mentorship was important at HBCUs, “During the late 1960s and early 1970s, some blacks at traditional universities found it difficult to establish personal relationships, achieve social acceptance, and find genuine mentors on white campuses.”<sup>155</sup> Since black soldiers had to fight the concept that they were inferior to white soldiers, HBCUs made a point to instill a level of professionalism and excellence in future black officers.<sup>156</sup> The training and mentorship that occurred at HBCUs produced generations of officers who would try to combat systemic racism through military service. For example, James Timothy Boddie attended Howard University and received his commission through ROTC and also graduated in the top ten percent of his class. Boddie became a fighter pilot and retired a brigadier general.<sup>157</sup> Another example was Major John William Lattimore who attended Morgan State College and served in the Marines, Army and

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<sup>154</sup> Ron Milam. *Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 19-28.

<sup>155</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 58.

<sup>156</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 61.

<sup>157</sup> James Timothy Boddie to Joseph Galloway. Vietnam War Commemoration. September 3, 2015.

Washington D.C. National Guard.<sup>158</sup> In order to understand the officer experience it is important to understand some of foundations of the black officers success.

The practice of mentorship was available to individuals who were fortunate enough to attend a HBCU, but not every soldier was afforded such an opportunity. Even though a few black officers were able to obtain leadership, the low numbers of African American officers is undeniable. One of the reasons for so little African American representation in leadership roles was lack of mentors outside of the HBCU system.

Successful commissioned and noncommissioned officers often gave credit to the mentors they had over the course of their career as reasons for their success. Lieutenant Colonel Melvin M. Adams had multiple mentors who helped him advance over the course of his career, from brigade commanders to generals.<sup>159</sup> Colin Powell had mentor Major George B. Price while he served in Vietnam, and in turn Powell helped other black soldiers.<sup>160</sup>

Westheider noted the importance of black mentorship in the military for African American officers. "Promotion depended not only on merit but also to a certain degree on personal connections. It helped greatly to have a champion or mentor in the form of a senior NCO or officer who could provide help and guidance and promote one's career."<sup>161</sup> One sentence that appeared throughout African American officer's testimonies was that they were usually the only black officer in their unit. Mentorship was important

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<sup>158</sup> John William Lattimore to Rachel Childress. John William Lattimore Collection. Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. June 28, 2014.

<sup>159</sup> Melvin M Adams to Gaetana Broillet. Melvin M. Adams Collection. Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. January 13, 2016.

<sup>160</sup> Westheider. *The African American Experience in Vietnam*. 45.

<sup>161</sup> Westheider. *The African American Experience in Vietnam*. 45.

for furthering the careers of black officers it and the lack of mentors provided one reason as to why there were so few commissioned black officers.

The black officer experience during the Vietnam era was similar and yet different from the black enlisted soldier's experience. In some ways having an officer rank acted as a form of armor for African American officers. This did not mean that they did not experience racism, but they had more authority than enlisted men to address the offense, and therefore had to change how they responded to racism. When asked if he experienced racism while serving in Vietnam Colonel D.R. Butler replied with, "You just have to demand respect."<sup>162</sup> Another reason for the difference in response to racism may also have to do with the fact that even the most virulent racist would not disrespect a high-ranking officer no matter their race. First Lieutenant Archie "Joe" Biggers handled racist soldiers by making molding them into better soldiers, and showing them that he was looking out for their best interest. "Southerners at the first sign of a black officer being in charge of them were somewhat reluctant. But then, when they found that you know what's going on and you're trying to keep them alive, then they tried to be the best damn soldiers you've got."<sup>163</sup> Biggers also discussed how black soldiers would expect preferential treatment because he was black, but he refused. Biggers used his professionalism as a trained officer to combat racism by demanding respect from all of his men but while also trying to keep them alive and those qualities (coupled with his formal power) enabled him to sometimes superseded racism. Butler's and Bigger's reactions especially to black soldiers who hoped for preferential treatment could also be

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<sup>162</sup> D.R. Butler. (retired United States Army Colonel) in telephone discussion with the author, October 20, 2020.

<sup>163</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 111.

viewed as defensive measures in order to get promotions. As mentioned previously that black officers had very little room for error, and a black officer had to constantly be better than white officers.

The data presented earlier in this chapter depicted that most black officers were still being assigned to menial work assignments, and one way they combated this was by excelling in their leadership duties. Westheider described black officers as becoming super-soldiers to offset these assignments. “To compensate for “dead-end” assignments and the slow promotion rate, black officers were often forced to become, in the words of one critic, “super-soldiers.” They had to be more intelligent, more motivated, more patriotic, and more aggressive than white officers to get the same consideration for promotion.”<sup>164</sup> This also depicted how black officers, as formal leaders, suffered another form of constraint, they could not allow racism to cause them to react in a way that would be deemed unprofessional and thus put their career at risk. Even former Secretary of State Colin Powell acknowledged that he had experienced racial tension because he was a black officer, but he was more diplomatic about the subject when compared to how candid black enlisted soldiers were about the subject.<sup>165</sup> Westheider also discussed the conservative approach black soldiers had when dealing with racial tensions. “In general, black officers did have few racial problems in their units, but their ability to contain racial friction was often limited by their conservatism. African American military careerists were usually uncomfortable with and embarrassed by the more aggressive symbols of black solidarity such as the ‘dap’.”<sup>166</sup> This explains why the language of black officers

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<sup>164</sup> Westheider. *Fighting on Two Fronts*. 126.

<sup>165</sup> Colin Powell to Joe Galloway. Vietnam War Commemoration. February 25, 2014.

<sup>166</sup> Westheider. *The African American Experience in Vietnam*. 94.

differed in so many ways from black enlisted soldiers, because they could not allow outrage over racial tension cost them their careers. The double consciousness of black officers is also present because black officers had to choose between defending their race or acting like an American officer. However, by using their formal position as a military leader to pave the way for future black officers and leaders, they were exhibiting a form of racial uplift through military service. They also helped to make changes to military policies within these leadership positions.

The officer promotion system for African American officers used the backgrounds many black men came from as a weapon to prevent them from advancement. The educational disparity between the races was a problem created by the United States, but the black community was forced to face the consequences. When black soldiers turned to HBCUs to adapt to the education gap, it was used as a reason to hold them back. In order for any officer to be granted a promotion they must have a high-performance evaluation on their officer efficiency reports (OERs).<sup>167</sup> “The Butler Report” was a study performed by Colonel Douthard (D.R) Butler and it was an analysis of OERs from 1956 to 1971.<sup>168</sup> The study exposed the biases of the officer promotional system by depicting the inequalities of the rating system between white and black officers.<sup>169</sup> One of the ways black officers were excluded from promotions was their association with HBCUs. In discussion with Colonel Butler he expressed how he observed that white officers felt an education from a HBCU was inferior to a degree from a traditional

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<sup>167</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 63.

<sup>168</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 72.

<sup>169</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 69.

university.<sup>170</sup> Hampton II then asserted that this discrimination against HBCUs was why so many black officers did not receive promotions.<sup>171</sup> Based on the overall treatment of African Americans, it is not surprising that officers faced discrimination within the service. The bias against HBCUs depicted how the military perpetuated the racist climate of the United States and the struggle of blacks across the country. Black officers were similar to enlisted men in that they viewed the military as the best opportunity for advancement, and like those men they were excluded from white controlled establishments. Therefore, when they found a way to advance in the military by attending HBCUs, this was weaponized against them in the form of education. Historically black colleges represented the African American community and were thus deemed inferior, and the typical military academies were considered prestigious institutions. So this bias was made clear in the promotion system.

Remarkably, some black officers still found themselves in leadership positions and managed to break through the stigma that surrounded African American soldiers. First, the fact that Colonel Butler, a black man who also attended a HBCU was asked by the military to perform a study that analyzed the promotion system was a sign of progress. Lieutenant Colonel Melvin Adams was another black officer asked to conduct a staff study regarding leadership. Adams was assigned as a briefer when he was sent to Vietnam in 1966. One of his assignments was a presidential level briefing discussing race relations in Vietnam, and while Adams did not give any more details about the briefing he did state that the information was not favorable.<sup>172</sup> Adams was an African American

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<sup>170</sup> Butler interview. October 2020.

<sup>171</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 101.

<sup>172</sup> Melvin M Adams to Gaetana Broillet. January 13, 2016.

officer leading a briefing in front of three- and four-star generals who were interested in race relations. This was no small feat; black men were rarely given positions like this in the United States at the time, and he commanded the attention of white men who could have ended his career. Colonel Butler was in a similar position when he presented “The Butler Report,” he commanded the respect of higher ranked white officials.<sup>173</sup> Through the black officer experience, a shift in the white power structure subtly shifted. Senior black officers found a realm of respect within the military, which was something that was not an option in the civilian world. Adams continued to represent black leadership when he was asked to help integrate The Citadel Military Academy in South Carolina. In 1968 General Harris of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division asked Adams to work at The Citadel and he mentored cadets for three years before being sent back to Vietnam.<sup>174</sup> The opportunities Adams received from his time in the military are what gave him the opportunity to help foster more black leadership. As formal leaders, black officers were able to use their influence to represent the black community, and they became a force of change through duty to their country.

The African American officer experience was also directly linked to their noncommissioned officers. Throughout their oral histories, of black officers, praised their NCOs and credited them for their success. Major General Robert Wilson Smith was one of the officers to praise the NCO corps while also demonstrating the power senior NCOs wielded. As a second lieutenant Smith was assigned to Fort Campbell for about a year, where he reported to the brigade commander and a sergeant major. This was when he

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<sup>173</sup> Butler interview. October 20, 2020.

<sup>174</sup> Melvin M Adams to Gaetana Broillet. January 13, 2016.

learned that a sergeant major had the ability to make or break an officers career even though Smith was the ranking officer. The NCOs on Fort Campbell also helped him pass inspections before he left for Vietnam. Smith said he would have never been an officer without the help of his senior NCOs who helped guide him.<sup>175</sup> Melvin Adams also praised his sharp sergeant for preventing him from drinking too much G.I. gin just before the presidential level briefing.<sup>176</sup> The relationship between officers and NCOs combines the symbiotic relationships between formal and bridge leadership. “Both types of leadership are required, and neither the bridge leadership nor the formal leadership is more important than the other. Rather, the two operated in a dialectical relationship marked by symbiosis and conflict.”<sup>177</sup> Robnett described the two leadership roles as dependent on each other in order to achieve a mutual goal. This can be seen through the officers dependency on their NCOs. Isaac Hampton II noted the importance of NCOs in the success of officers. “The best young black and white officers would gravitate to NCOs who had more experience in order to sharpen their leadership skills and shorten their learning curve in comprehending the nuances of their men and understanding their real world responsibility as leaders of war fighters.”<sup>178</sup> The dependency on noncommissioned officers was applicable to white and black officers alike, but for black officers it helped fill the mentorship void they did not receive from above. This is significant for black officers because if they were not going to receive help from the top-down then they needed to utilize assistance from below.

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<sup>175</sup> Robert Wilson Smith, III to Daniel Brightwell. Robert Wilson Smith, III Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. May 30, 2012.

<sup>176</sup> Melvin M Adams to Gaetana Broillet. January 13, 2016.

<sup>177</sup> Robnett. *How Long?How Long?* 21.

<sup>178</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 163.



Black officers rarely distinguished between the race of their NCOs when they discussed their influence, but this also demonstrated how the dynamics of race shifted some during Vietnam. In the civilian world, it was uncommon for a black man to receive professional help from whites, that was just the world most blacks came from. Therefore, when a white NCO went out of their way to make sure a black officer was successful it not only benefitted the men under his command, but it also assisted the black officer's career. The dynamics between officer and NCO was another sphere within Vietnam in which race could become secondary. Some African American NCOs found a sense of pride whenever they saw a black officer, so their assistance to black officers was another form of racial uplift. The relationship between officers and noncommissioned also illustrated that some NCOs had a certain degree of independence through the virtue of their war experience. They had a level of knowledge that officers sometimes lacked and therefore their opinions were of higher value, and they exercised a certain level of authority over officer and enlisted men.

Black officers during the Vietnam era embodied the class of leaders W.E.B Du Bois called the Talented Tenth.<sup>179</sup> In an essay published in 1903 in *The Negro Problem* Du Bois argued that racial uplift within the black community depended on the development of a class of highly-educated African Americans. In the essay, Du Bois advocated for blacks to receive higher education so that they may rise to leadership positions and therefore uplift the black community. Du Bois wrote, "The Negro race, like all races is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then,

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<sup>179</sup> Booker T. Washington, et al. *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of Today*. (New York: James Pott and Company, 1903).

among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”<sup>180</sup> Though Du Bois wrote at the dawn of the twentieth century, black officers can be considered to be a part of the Talented Tenth because not only did most of these men obtain the higher education that Du Bois advocated for, but they used that education for leadership opportunities. The military was a platform for the creation of exceptional men whether it was through ROTC programs, battlefield commissions, or officer candidate schools. Military service served as an alternative form of higher education when the traditional routes were closed to African Americans.

Even the black officers who did not attend historically black colleges received some form of education through the military that was not afforded to them as civilians. One of those forms was through the leadership training courses offered through military programs. Lieutenant Commander William S. Norman was one of the officers to receive leadership training through the Navy. Norman was working as a mathematics teacher when he received his draft notice in 1961 and was accepted into the Aviation Officer’s Training Program.<sup>181</sup> Another example was senior NCO Nathaniel Adams who attended leadership school after basic to train troops.<sup>182</sup> For Du Bois, the training of the Talented Tenth was meant to stem from the traditional academic sphere and then evolve into the black middle-class. Du Bois’ description of the Talented Tenth consisted of a group of black professionals whose education led them into occupations such as doctors, lawyers,

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<sup>180</sup> Du Bois. “Talented Tenth,” 33.

<sup>181</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 190.

<sup>182</sup> Nathaniel Adams to Emilierose Gillaspy. Veterans History Project.

businessmen, and teachers.<sup>183</sup> However, black officers also fell into this category of professionals. Not only did black officers receive some form of higher education but they also fulfilled another key purpose of being members of the Talented Tenth.

According to Du Bois, the main goal of these professionals was to use their leadership positions within the community to lift up other African Americans. Du Bois said, “The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground.”<sup>184</sup> While black officers lacked mentorship for themselves, this did not stop many of them from breaking that cycle by helping to uplift other African Americans. Melvin Adams’ time at The Citadel was one example of a member of the Talented Tenth using their position to propel more blacks into leadership roles. Lieutenant Colonel Maurice Adams was another example of a black officer who rose to leadership and then went on to teach. After his tour in Vietnam as an advisor, Adams worked at the University of Cincinnati where he taught ROTC. In 1970 he got word that he was going back to Vietnam and when he returned he was assigned to military intelligence school.<sup>185</sup>

Black officers proved that racial uplift not need to be limited to civilian occupations, and that a career in the military could lead to similar leadership opportunities as civilian professionals. All of this was meant to depict that perhaps black officers represented the Talented Tenth stronger than many other black professionals. Du Bois advocated for education through historically black colleges, and most black officers used those institutions as a gateway for their officer commissions. Next, was the

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<sup>183</sup> Du Bois. “Talented Tenth,”.53.

<sup>184</sup>Du Bois. “Talented Tenth,”.45.

<sup>185</sup> Maurice L. Adams to Denis Daly. Maurice L. Adams Collection. Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. June 11, 2019.

development of exceptional men into leadership positions, and of course those men accomplished this task. African American officers then used those positions to represent the black community through their professionalism and mentorship. In choosing to have a career in the military black officers also fulfilled another key point of the Talented Tenth. Du Bois stated, “All men cannot go to college but some men must; every isolated group or nation must have its yeast, must have for the talented few centers of training where men are not so mystified and befuddled by the hard and necessary toil of earning a living, as to have no aims higher than their bellies, and no God greater than Gold.”<sup>186</sup> In the case of black officers, they were certainly the yeast of the black community during the Vietnam Era. Since those men chose to have careers in the military their aims were geared toward serving their nation. They seldom mentioned economic reasons for choosing to remain in the military. Instead, themes of leadership and duty to their country and the men were the main goals of black officers. W.E.B. Du Bois did not discuss the military as a prospect for professional advancement for African Americans, and that was probably because the essay was published in 1903 when there were few blacks in the military and even less in leadership positions. However, African American officers of the Vietnam era solidified their place among the Talented Tenth because they represented black leadership within an American government agency, but they also aided in the evolution of black middle-class professionals.

The theme of racial duality has been present throughout the course of this study, and final aspect of the black officer experience did not deviate from that concept. There was an unexpected cost of leadership for black officers, and it was the unforeseen

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<sup>186</sup>Du Bois. “Talented Tenth,” 46.

rejection that some African American officers faced from the black community. Archie Biggers was one of the officers who experienced this alienation when he came home.

But the thing that really hurt me more than anything in the world was when I came back to the States and black people considered me as part of the establishment. Because I am an officer. Here I was, a veteran that just came back from a big conflict. And most of the blacks wouldn't associate with me. You see, blacks are not supposed to be those guys that take orders, and not necessarily those that give them. If you give orders, it means you had to kiss somebody's rear end to get into that position.<sup>187</sup>

While it would not be accurate to assume every member of the African American community felt this way about black officers, it was still a point of contention for some black officers. Colonel Butler also expressed that this was an issue for him when he returned home.<sup>188</sup> At the heart of this community rejection was the idea that black officers had chosen to embrace the (white-dominated) American side of Du Bois' double consciousness. This rift was not limited to the black community but also existed between some black enlisted men and black officers. Hampton explores this in *The Black Officer Corps*. "To many African Americans it looked as if black officers had actually bought into the philosophy of the white power structure. Of course for the majority of black officers this was not true, but in the angry and frustrated eyes of scores of young black enlisted soldiers or Marines experiencing combat, it was a logical conclusion."<sup>189</sup> Black officers had crossed the metaphorical leadership bridge that Robnett discussed, and this caused a form of separation amongst the black community. The long history of oppression the United States inflicted on the African American community was not something that could be easily forgotten.

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<sup>187</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 117.

<sup>188</sup> Butler interview. October 20, 2020.

<sup>189</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 163.

The conflict between black officers and the community may also be linked to class tension within the black community. The role of the black middle-class was a point of contention in the African American community before the Vietnam Era. Thomas Sugrue illustrated the class divide between working-class and middle-class blacks with an analysis of the post-war Detroit housing market. In the 1950s, some African Americans were able to capitalize on segregation in Detroit. Sugrue said, “Because of systematic discrimination in public facilities, blacks created a separate system of “race” businesses- black-owned private hospitals, hotels, restaurants, and funeral homes.”<sup>190</sup> This resulted in the development of the black middle-class who later sought better housing outside the confines of the inner-city where most working-class blacks lived.<sup>191</sup> Black working-class contempt towards the black bourgeoisie had less to do with its social and economic advancements, and more to do with the middle-class disassociating itself with the lower-class African American community. The middle-class African Americans who moved into better neighborhoods instituted restrictive covenants and zoning codes like the upper- and middle-class whites.<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, Sugrue discussed how African Americans who aspired to reach middle-class status distanced themselves physically and symbolically, in the pursuit of respectability.<sup>193</sup> Sugrue’s study proved to be useful in not only depicting how African Americans in Detroit faced discrimination but also in how the black bourgeoisie distinguished themselves from their own communities. One other study should be mentioned when discussing the black middle-class, because it provided a

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<sup>190</sup> Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.188.

<sup>191</sup> Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.188-189.

<sup>192</sup> Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.205.

<sup>193</sup> Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.205.

deeper understanding as to why this class met resistance from some members of the black community. E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* was a harsh sociological analysis in the 1950s on the development and behaviors of the black middle-class. Frazier asserted that the black bourgeoisie assimilated into white culture through economic independence instead of actually reaching racial equality.<sup>194</sup> The cost of assimilation was that the black bourgeoisie lost its connection to black culture. Frazier wrote,

The black bourgeoisie has been uprooted from its "racial" tradition and as a consequence has no cultural roots in either the Negro or the white world. In seeking to conform to bourgeois ideals and standards of behavior, this class in the Negro community has sloughed off the genteel traditions of the small upper class which had its roots among the Negroes who were free before the Civil War. But more important still, the black bourgeoisie has rejected the fold culture of the Negro masses.<sup>195</sup>

Frazier and Sugrue articulated that the black bourgeoisie separated themselves culturally and economically from the rest of the black community, and those divides persisted into the Vietnam Era. Due to their education, occupations, and finances some African American officers were elevated into the black middle-class, which was already beginning to be alienated from the black community. The black bourgeoisie came under even more scrutiny during the Vietnam War from the Black Panther Party who continually criticized the black middle-class. Huey P. Newton, one of the founders of the party spoke against the black middle class. Newton said, "The black middle class, he argued, failed to help the poor because they despised their social mores."<sup>196</sup> Newton's rhetoric echoed the same sentiment towards the black middle class as Frazier, and the

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<sup>194</sup> E. Franklin Frazier. *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States*. (New York: Collier Books, 1957). 26-28.

<sup>195</sup> Frazier. *Black Bourgeoisie*. 98.

<sup>196</sup> Joseph. *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*. 209.

Black Panthers continued to attack the black middle-class over the course of the Vietnam Era. The party used the *Black Panther* newspaper to criticize black struggles in the United States.<sup>197</sup> Historian Peniel Joseph discussed the publication and the topics it targeted. Joseph said, “The paper’s combative language-provocatively criticizing rival Black Power organizations, law enforcement officials, politicians, and the black middle class-stripped, at least for its readers, longstanding American institutions of moral and political legitimacy.”<sup>198</sup> This impacted black Vietnam officers because not only were they associated with the black middle-class, but they also represented an American institution and that branded them members of the white establishment in the eyes of black radicals.

However, while understandable this view was flawed when considering the entirety of the black freedom struggle. One part of Steven Lawson and Charles Payne’s *Debating the Civil Rights Movement* is that change must occur in some part from the top down.<sup>199</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois advocated for the top-down approach to civil rights progress in “The Talented Tenth.”. Du Bois said, “Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character? Was there ever a nation of God’s fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters.”<sup>200</sup> The systems of oppression were set in place by people in positions of power, therefore that was where the change had to occur. In order to do that, there would need to be representation within the higher ranks of American society. The criticisms of

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<sup>197</sup> Joseph. *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*. 211.

<sup>198</sup> Joseph. *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*. 211.

<sup>199</sup> Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne. *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968*. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2006).

<sup>200</sup>Du Bois. “Talented Tenth,” 45.



black officers from people who considered them conformists were unfair when considering the larger picture. Black men who became officers did not compromise their identity, instead they found a means of survival and social progress.

Even though some officers may have been less vocal than others when it came to discrimination that did not equate to passivity. William Norman turned in a letter of resignation from the Navy over the institutional racism he noticed other black troops were facing. Norman actively spoke out against racism throughout his career, even if it would have been at the detriment of his military career.<sup>201</sup> The only reason Norman did not follow through with his resignation was because of a new Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt. Together these two men instituted a number of changes in the Navy geared towards equal opportunity for African Americans. Norman said,

In less than three years, we instituted some 200 programs. We had a new Navy. The first ships were named after black heroes. The first black was promoted to admiral. Ten percent of our NROTC units were set aside for predominantly black colleges. We guaranteed that blacks would be on promotion boards, assignments boards, and would make their way to the command colleges. The steward's rate was opened up to anyone, not just blacks and Filipinos. We opened all rates to women and welcomed them into the Naval Academy. And we relaxed the rules on haircuts and allowed beards.<sup>202</sup>

Norman's role as a formal leader illustrated how a black officer used his position to advance black soldiers from the top-down within the military.

Another example was Master Sergeant Leonard Fowler who enlisted in the Air Force in 1972, and while this was near the end of the Vietnam era his experience provided insight as to how leadership worked for change within the military. While he was stationed in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the airman's club on base would have

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<sup>201</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 186-189.

<sup>202</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 197.

entertainment that focused on certain genres of music like country western, and rock night. Fowler and a group of African Americans wanted to have a soul music night, and when it was given to them it was the smallest room in the club. Fowler, and other soldiers asked for the bigger room because the room could only accommodate around fifty people, and they were denied. In response they formed little organization of blacks on base to push for some changes. They wanted to name the organization Blacks United for a Better Air Force, but Fowler argued against this because it would appear too radical to the Air Force. Fowler convinced the others that the radical approach they wanted to take would not work, and he was labeled a sellout and Uncle Tom by a few black soldiers. Fowler grew up in a family that was active in the civil rights struggle, and was familiar with the Black Panther Party, which was why felt that the military would not respond well to embracing their radical approach. Instead, he helped gather black military personal, wives and girlfriends and they marched to the airman's club on country night. They were asked to leave but before they did Fowler and the group asked to speak to the club manager privately to discuss access to the larger space and their request was denied again. So they went back the next weekend and staged a peaceful sit-in, this time they called in the military police. Eventually, they got the base commander's attention, and they were granted use of the larger room.<sup>203</sup> The fight for soul night may seem insignificant when compared to the other issues civil rights activists were fighting for, but it depicted how cultural representation was important to black soldiers in the military.

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<sup>203</sup> Leonard Fowler. (United States Air Force Master Sergeant) in telephone discussion with the author, September 17, 2020.

Issues like the lack of black hair products in commissaries, the availability of black music and magazines, and even grooming practices was a common issue for black soldiers. The most effective way to remedy those issues was to have men in leadership positions who understood those problems. Hampton II discussed the importance of minority leadership within the military. “The stronger presence of African Americans and other minority officers would change the face of the country’s armed forces by putting leaders in place who better understood the challenges of other minorities.”<sup>204</sup> An example of this was when William Norman and Admiral Zumwalt invited a group of African American officers and enlisted men and their spouses to Washington to listen to the various issues they experienced in the Navy. One of the points they brought up was the need for black hair products in the Navy exchange.<sup>205</sup> This was significant because Admiral Zumwalt realized that there were cultural differences that needed to be addressed. Fowler and Norman depicted how black leadership played an important activist role within the military by advocating for black soldiers.

The military is not often regarded as a source of activism, and that makes sense given the overall purpose of the institution. However, during the Vietnam era the military did become a place where some activism emerged, although it was on a much smaller scale than domestic activism. Not every black soldier participated in the activism on bases, and the same could be said for black officers. However, small does not mean insignificant, especially for the black soldiers who served during the time, and certainly not for the future generations of soldiers. The emphasis on how some black officers used

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<sup>204</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 132.

<sup>205</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 196.

their positions for racial equality was important because they were agents of change in an American institution and within their communities. More importantly, they defied the perception that they sacrificed their own identity in order to join the white establishment. Instead, they used the military for black advancement, and helped create a more inclusive military. The only way this could have happened was by acknowledging their blackness, and that there were disparities with African American soldiers. Black officers did not take the radical approach to achieve equality; instead, they used professionalism as a means to achieve progress. Isaac Hampton II also noticed this approach in his work on black officers. Hampton said, “The act of fighting inequalities and injustices with competence and professionalism practiced by Gaskill and other black officers helped to alter many racists’ preconceived notions that officers of color could not measure up to their white contemporaries.”<sup>206</sup> This tactic could have also been another reason why other African Americans thought they were just appeasing whites, but in reality they were trying to change the system from within with the non-violent approach.

Black military leadership during the Vietnam era depicted that resistance occurred in different ways. Unlike black enlisted men, they did not embrace the radical methods of the Black Power Movement, and they did not march on bases demanding equality. Most black officers chose the path of silent resistance, for both career necessity and social progress. Racial progress was dependent on having minorities in positions of authority, and black officers could not achieve that if they prevented their own advancement. After his service, Colonel Fred Cherry traveled the country speaking for the Tuskegee Airmen’s Association. Cherry encouraged young African Americans to study

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<sup>206</sup> Hampton II. *The Black Officer Corps*. 36-37.

engineering, science and technology.<sup>207</sup> Cherry did this in the hopes that, “Maybe one of those young black lads that hears me will walk across a field one day, look up at an airplane, like I did so long, long ago, and say, I’m going to fly. I’m going to be a fighter pilot.”<sup>208</sup> The presence of a black officer within the community had the power to inspire other African Americans.

African American leadership during the Vietnam era consisted of a complex variety of race relations, both good and bad. In some areas black leadership found equal footing with white leadership and soldiers, and they solidified their place within the military power structure. At the same time elements of society still crept through to military life. Officers and NCOs experienced racism but it revealed itself in different ways. Noncommissioned officers had a certain level of freedom that officers could not use or else they risked their careers. The limitations of the American education system was displayed through the African American leadership experience, and how it was used as a weapon to hinder black leadership. Leadership provided black soldiers the ability to subtly resist white hierarchy in the military by becoming the best soldiers they could be and countering stereotypes of inferiority stereotype that was associated with black soldiers. African American officers were also occasionally faced with backlash from black communities. Throughout all of the adversity thrown their way the constant cycle of resistance and adaptation that African Americans knew well also appeared in the African American leadership experience.

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<sup>207</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 291.

<sup>208</sup> Terry. *Bloods*. 291.

## CHAPTER V- CONCLUSION

There were no parades or eager crowds awaiting Vietnam soldiers returning home from war. Instead they were sometimes greeted by hostile anti-war crowds. The soldier's return was just as subjective as their wartime experiences, but they were all returning from a war the country no longer supported. Vietnam soldiers received the public's backlash over decisions that were made by United States officials. A soldier's duty to their country became more convoluted during Vietnam because the public no longer separated military duty from politics. It seemed as if anti-war civilians viewed the Vietnam War with the mentality of a sports fan. When the United States lost the Vietnam War, the public criticized the soldiers who were sent to execute a flawed strategy.

There were several reasons for the negative reception of Vietnam soldiers, but perhaps one of the most influential was the media coverage of the war. The role of the media has been deeply debated and analyzed about how it influenced the outcome of the war, but that will not be the purpose of its mention here. Instead, the brief discussion of the media during the Vietnam War is meant to provide some insight as to why soldiers were treated so poorly. In the later years of the Vietnam War until the war's end, the Vietnam War was visible to any American with a television. Images of war that used to only be mostly accessed via newspaper and newsreels were being displayed on a daily basis in American homes. Daniel Hallin wrote an in depth analysis on media coverage of the Vietnam War in *The Uncensored War*. Hallin covered media reports from the early years of the war until near the end of American involvement, but one point Hallin made was how the Tet Offensive became a transitional moment for how the media portrayed the war. Hallin wrote, "A faithful television viewer, watching the evening news five night

a week, would have seen film of civilian casualties and urban destruction in South Vietnam an average of 3.9 times a week during the Tet period (January 31 to March 31), more than four times the overall average of 0.85 times a week. Film of military casualties jumped from 2.4 to 6.8 times a week. Tet was the first sustained period during which it could be said that the war appeared on television as a really brutal affair; even later, only the period of the North Vietnamese spring offensive in 1972 would resemble it for sheer volume of blood and destruction.”<sup>209</sup> The increased visibility of the destruction of war could have influenced soldier reception when they returned home, because those soldiers were associated with the brutal images of war presented on the news. Even in the earlier years of the war, the darker side of war began to appear. One example was Morley Safer’s report on the village of Cam Ne in 1965. Even though depictions like Cam Ne were rare in the beginning of the war they still held a certain level of shock value for the public.<sup>210</sup> The accessibility of the Vietnam War unwittingly made American soldiers the villains in the eyes of the American public, or at the very least had some small part to play in their public perception.

The media may have helped blur the lines between the role of the soldier from those who gave the orders in terms of accountability, but Vietnam era soldiers such as were on the receiving end of the public’s backlash because simply put, they were accessible. Public figures like Johnson, McNamara, and later Nixon had the benefit of traveling with armed escorts at all times, the public simply could not act out their frustrations on them in the same way they could the average soldier. When those soldiers

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<sup>209</sup> Daniel C. Hallin. *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 171.

<sup>210</sup> Hallin. *The Uncensored War*. 132-133.

came home they were not protected in the same way politicians were; they had no escorts or armed guards making sure they were safe. In short, they were vulnerable targets the public could easily access to vent their frustrations. This led to soldiers being spit on, physically and verbally accosted and publicly alienated when they returned. This was a very common theme in black and white soldier's testimonies; they were treated as the other from their own country. It was perhaps another sacrifice those men made on behalf of their country. Due to this reception, many soldiers repressed their Vietnam experience and did not speak about it until much later. In fact that was another common element with Vietnam soldiers, in their oral histories many of them remarked how their interview was the first time they had discussed Vietnam. This led to an entire generation of soldiers who were never given the credit they deserved for the sacrifices they made for their country.

The soldier experience can have many different perspectives, and meanings. This study did not focus on some of the traditional military history elements like battles, strategy, politics, and tactics. Instead, it focused on what motivated black and white soldiers and how those were similar and different. Black and white soldiers had similar motivations for military service, including poverty, social advancement, and support for war's cause. However, for black soldiers those motivations were rooted in Jim Crow and other social inequalities that were used as tools of oppression. Once in the field, survival was key for all soldiers, but the nature of war revealed how survival was going to be more difficult than soldiers had imagined. The contradictions of the Vietnam War became apparent through the soldier experience; soldiers began to realize that the war they signed up to fight was something else entirely. This depicted the transitional moment of the Vietnam War, for many it went from being a conflict that most of the soldiers



supported to one they grew to resent. The issues of class divisions between white and black America, and within the black community also became apparent.

When black soldiers first entered the war for many it was in the hopes that military life would be a refuge from the second-class citizenry they were relegated to as civilians. In some ways the military did prove to be a form of uplift, through educational opportunities, travel, and leadership. However, black soldiers were soon faced with the choice to tout his blackness, and face punishment from military personnel, or his Americanness, and downplay his racial heritage to fit into a white-dominated military. The racism black soldiers experienced in the rear created a pocket of resistance within the military, and the Black Power Movement infiltrated the military as a result of the institutions failings. For black soldiers this was another moment of transition, and they began to question why they were fighting for a country that did not value them as humans. Project 100,000 exploited America's racialized class system to push more poor black men into an unpopular war. It is important to note that Project 100,000 was not instituted by senior level military official, but by Robert McNamara who was focused more on the politics of the war. Still, the emergence of black leadership during the Vietnam War provided an opportunity for black soldiers to claim power they were always denied. Black leadership through bridge leaders and formal leaders showed how these men overcame racial boundaries and tensions through interactions with white soldiers. Black noncommissioned officers navigated a leadership space that allowed them to communicate and lead white soldiers while also uplifting black officers. Meanwhile, African American officers were placing themselves in positions of authority that could institute change from the inside.

The analysis of African American and overall soldier experience covered a number of broad themes, and this caused a number of omissions that deserve further study. For instance, the manner in which the United States chose to fight the war. Studies have been done on the military actions in Vietnam and their limitations. Enlisted and commissioned soldiers often commented on those failings, but they were not mentioned in this study. Instead, this study focused on large conceptual ideas of the soldier's experiences instead of military strategy. Also, a number of issues remained to be discussed about the soldiers' return from the war. Issues like post traumatic stress disorder, unemployment, the disruption of family life, and the continual racial indifference are just a few issues that deserve further study. This was by no means a comprehensive study of the black and white soldier experience, and it is reasonable to assume that not every soldier experienced the problems presented within this study. However, it was meant to provide an understanding of the convoluted nature of the Vietnam era. This was a time where race, war, class and even gender intersected, and when leadership was tested from multiple fronts. However, this study has shown that while a small percentage of leadership during the Vietnam era, black leaders began to change leadership from within and made an important impact on the institution.

Overall, the military was a place that African Americans were able to thrive. Despite the challenges they faced, the military reacted quicker to racial tensions than American policymakers. Melvin Adams and D.R. Butler's experiences depict that the military was showing some interest in the issues of race. That military leadership assembled, with Adam's and Butler's participation, a task force to study race relations in the military and made suggestions for a remedy shows progress. The military was

certainly not without fault, particularly with its promotion systems and educational institutes, but it was a sphere of opportunity for African Americans. Within the military African Americans could find a career, education, social status, and respect that was not available to them in the civilian world. The African American military experience through the eyes of black leadership depicted the complexities of the Vietnam War and racial dichotomies in American culture.

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