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"OUR MEN IN VIETNAM": BLACK MEDIA AS A SOURCE OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

WILLIAM KING

In an appendix titled "The Warrior's Knowledge: Social Stratification and the Book Corpus of Vietnam," James William Gibson, in his book, *The Perfect War*,¹ discusses the ways in which the combatants' experiences of the war expressed in their writings and in oral histories contradict "the war-managers at virtually every level." Gibson observes that "[r]ace and ethnicity also constitute important social divisions in the warrior's knowledge" as this special issue of *Vietnam Generation* is intended to demonstrate. "Blacks, Latinos, American Indians, Asian Americans and other minorities are not present in the published accounts with anywhere near the frequency with which they were present in combat units...."² One way of addressing this shortcoming respecting the black experience in Vietnam obtains by consulting articles and letters to the editor appearing in the Afro-American periodical literature and in black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, *Amsterdam News*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *Ebony*, *Baltimore Afro American*, and *Sepia*.³

As a case in point, what I wish to consider here is the monthly magazine *Sepia* which in August, 1966 inaugurated a regular feature called "Our Men in Vietnam," and invited black troops to send in letters, photographs, and stories detailing their "experiences ...heartaches [and] joys while fighting communism in Vietnam." The stated purpose of this request was that "*Sepia* want[ed] to salute our fighting men."

The range of material contained in these submissions varies by the branch of service (the army is most heavily represented), duty assignment (whether in the rear area or in the "bush"), rank (officer opinions differ markedly from those of enlisted men, and those of lifers or careerists differ from those of conscripts), length of service in country and the period of service (initial buildup of U.S. Forces, before Tet, January, 1968, after Tet, withdrawal of U.S. forces). Wrote one correspondent [August, 1968] "...I could tell many things that go on over here that you never hear about in the States, but all I can say is,

everyone has his own story about Viet Nam and each one is different.”

Still, however, there were a number of repetitive themes that cropped up in the letters and articles that appeared in *Sepia* during the years that the column ran. Most prominent was racism in the military whether it was manifest in assignment policies, promotion practices or awards criteria. A second important theme was the contradiction between black men fighting for the freedom of the South Vietnamese at the same time that black people did not enjoy many of those same freedoms back in the World. Indeed, both these themes were often embraced by the larger rubric of Blacks having to fight a two-front war: one against the North Vietnamese Army and the National Liberation Front, and the other against white racism given that “the white man spreads his racist policies wherever he goes” [August, 1968].

A third theme, which appeared with regularity, was concern with domestic matters—particularly the treatment of black people, and black veterans. Black soldiers expressed unwillingness to be remanded to the second-class citizenship accorded to black troops returning home from World Wars 1 and 2. A fourth theme embraced both the anti-war protests and the rise of Black Power. Appearing less frequently than the four major themes mentioned above, but arriving on a regular basis were letters raising questions about war aims (more specifically, questions about what we were doing in Viet Nam in the first place, what it was we expected to accomplish while there and how long we would be there) and strategic policies. Letters also arrived which addressed the feelings of some black soldiers that the Vietnamese people resented their presence in Vietnam. Other writers described matters of personal impact, and complained about the inherent pettiness (and potential stupidity) of maintaining certain military practices [September, 1966].

What follows below, then, is a sampling of material drawn from these letters and expressing a wide variety of concerns. The excerpts are roughly chronological, and illustrate changes in the thinking of some black soldiers as the political environment in which they operated changed around them.

In your July issue, I read the story on PFC Milton L. Olive III [He had thrown himself on a grenade saving four of his compatriots at the cost of his own life, 22 October 1965. For this he was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the first black to receive the award since Korea and the first person to receive the decoration in Vietnam.] I thought that it was a good story about a fine hero. But as you know he was from South Side, Chicago. I would like to ask:

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Do you think that Negro men should look up to this as a good thing or should they ask why this young man died? Did he die for the freedom of all or did he die for the freedom of the white man only? How does the Negro really feel about this? [September, 1966].

In January, 1967 a Marine stationed at Camp Pendleton, California, complained about having to go back to Vietnam after a six month turnaround when there were so many that hadn't been over there once. This, he felt, was unfair and so he wrote in to tell people what was really going on because there were so many others "who are reluctant to speak out for fear of the disciplinary action which would be taken against them." There was also a trooper from the 173d Airborne Brigade who, in responding to the article "Why Do More Negroes Die in Viet Nam?", said "he [had] experienced resentment from the Vietnamese People toward the Negro; and these are the people we are fighting for! Also, why must we fight over here only to go home and be treated like dogs?"

A somewhat different point of view is exhibited in this letter: "It's time to call all men to fight for their country. It is time to stop the cause of aggression before it erupts any further, and it is time to distinguish the men from the boys. It is time to cease useless talk, and start reality. Its time for all nations of the world to unite and keep democracy strong for eternity." Still, there is the soul brother who wrote in June, 1966 that although he was assigned to a non-aggressive unit, he and "another Blood (only 2) were among those picked when a platoon was picked to go up front." He had been in country for six months and in that time of the 25 Blacks in his battalion, he had only seen one promoted. In August, 1966, another soldier wrote in to confirm this when he observed "how people are moved from position to position to avoid promoting them." However, he didn't "mind fighting to make Vietnam free, because Alabama might be next."

A September, 1966 letter is interesting because it points out some of the contradictions between the first of the six codes of conduct issued to members of the U.S. military forces ("I am an American fighting man. I serve in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense."), and the American way of life—hell for this soldier because his skin "is black and the wounds of racial prejudice are still too fresh and painful for us Negroes to erase them from our memories." This can be contrasted with a letter in the same issue which observes that "If the white discriminator thinks the War in Vietnam is one of fierce fighting and bloodshed, it will seem a game compared to the action resulting from

an ex-Vietnam troop being segregated from those things he fought to save while away in Vietnam." The writer concludes his letter by calling for "first-class citizenship for Negroes—Mexicans and Puerto Ricans."

That black troops had their share of problems with the military justice system early on is demonstrated in comments about the court-martial of a Marine sentenced to life imprisonment for shooting a suspected NLF guerrilla: "It seems the war is becoming a very stupid and unwarranted thing. We train a man to kill in a country where the front-lines are non-existent and rob him of his life because he is fulfilling our President's wish to 'Bring the coonskin home.'"

In October, 1966, a few short months after Stokely Carmichael had called for Black Power from the back of a flatbed truck in Greenwood, Mississippi, one PFC wrote in to offer his opinion on Black Power and "this Vietnam mess." He observed that he loved Black Power with all his heart. And he believed it was "the only way the American black man can achieve equality in the home of the red man. How else can one deal with the white power structure? The strong never has to bend for the weak, but two strongs must and will come to a medium—power versus power." He also chose to take issue with the magazine's earlier editorial contention that Americans were in Vietnam to help the Vietnamese people. "Only a fool would think this war will stop communism. I am not a communist, but just a man who inquires, reads and loves Stokely Carmichael. The people here in Vietnam think we are fools. They don't know why the American G.I. is dying over here, so how can you know?..."

In November, 1967, one airman, second-class, penned a "Eulogy for America":

You sit back and slip the man \$100 to get your son his deferment while you chastise Cassius Clay for his beliefs. Just what do you believe? Sure, we're all behind the war. Just as long as our Johnny is scheduled for 11 credits and gets his beloved 25. This past week a friend of mine gave all he had for the glorious U.S. 'A good American,' you say? Hardly. The record will show he was Canadian. He voted for Uncle Sam, and he voted for freedom. What the record will not show is that he was more 'American' than 90% of you complacent bastards! But this is not a eulogy for my departed friend. It is a eulogy for America—unless you good people remember that there was once a Rome.

I am said to be a fighting man.

Through the muddy fields and swamps I plunder,
After endless days, I can help
but wonder.

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I could walk into a restaurant and be totally sincere.
The waiter will say, 'I'm sorry, but you can't eat here.'

Now until death will I fight,
But my gain I do not know [December, 1967].

Many of the soldiers writing to *Sepia* said how grateful they were for the magazine because it kept them informed about what was going on back in the World. Some also complained that it seemed to take longer for information about black America to reach the field than it did for many of the white publications that were placed on sale in the exchanges and distributed through the military library system. There were also a number of requests for mail including the provision of addresses so that those who wanted would know where to write. And there were criticisms of earlier letter writers in an attempt to get across the point that everyone who went to Vietnam had a different story to tell:

Regarding a letter in your October, 1967 issue [the earlier cited letter about Black Power]. [Name] has every right to express his narrowed opinion, however, none of your readers should take his views to be that of any significant number of servicemen here. Frankly, I am as confused as most people are concerning the meaning of the phrase, "Black Power." Opinions differ as to the meaning of it, however, if it does mean social and economic equality it's a fine thing. I think many people regard this phrase simply as a war or battle cry to be used for the purpose of spurring on restless and dissatisfied people to violence.

[Name] has done himself, his fellow soldier and his countrymen a grave injustice in assuming the role of soldier and patriot, when really he shares no responsibility in our effort. I feel very fortunate that I have never had to serve in battle with him. This man certainly possesses no true convictions or he would not be serving in a cause under protest when he clearly had the option to refuse.

In being here, not only do we aid the Vietnamese people, but strategically, we are in defense of our country and those of other friendly non-communist countries. In addition to his weak will [Name] also appears to be a sleepwalker. One has only to see the tears of joy of an elderly man, the timid smile of a child, or the hesitant, but thankful touch of a mother, all members of a village recently liberated from V.C. control. These people are grateful and thankful for our presence here.

[Name] should have long applied for separation from

the service. Upon learning of his intense hatred of his country and his undying love for Stokely Carmichael, (an avowed enemy of the state), his application would have received great consideration, and probably aided in a discharge as an undesirable.

I pray for the sake of his unit members that [Name] is engaged in duties other than direct combat. A man with such an attitude threatens the life of everyone in his organization. Few of us here share [Name]'s feelings. On the contrary, we see the necessary cause which warrants our presence. If we risk our lives, the cause has not been unworthy. Finally, I hope that (Name) will soon become Mr. [Name] in order that he can freely become a disciple of Stokely Carmichael.

God bless [Name], Carmichael and all other such people, as I pray that He'll bless all mentally ill persons in our society. [January, 1968]

Despite the assurance of the letter quoted above, many black soldiers still questioned what they were fighting for. In what way might they benefit from what they had been asked to do? One correspondent wrote in June, 1968:

...many times I have felt I was fighting in vain. I ask myself: What will I come home to? There will be no arms of love from the white man, who has gotten more out of the war than the Negro. With all the riots and hate I can't help but try to find an answer to the problem we face at home.... Let's face it, the white man can't get along without the Negro and the Negro can't get along without the white man.... Love is the answer to our problem. I can say I have no hate for anyone, yet when I get home I want what I fought for.

Another wrote one month later: "I think this conflict will end very soon, but the thing that bothers me most is how will I be treated when I get home? Will I still be discriminated against? Will I still be a second-class citizen? Will my family be able to ride at the front of the bus? These are the things I worry about." And from a third who was an army medic: "I'm just hoping that after my tour I can just go home to a nice quiet life with my family. Really, I wouldn't know how or what to do if I leave here after having been here and safe for so long and then get shot at home in a riot. I'm just hoping that we can find peace at home instead of looking to the long, hot summer." Still another wrote:

Often we pay no attention to radio, but this bulletin was the news of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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It was really a shock, not only to me but to everybody who stands for peace. It made us all realize that now is the time to unite for peace. We knew that with the death of Dr. King, a great peace symbol had been discarded from life, and we knew that without his teaching of peace the nation was in great danger from the violence we knew was to follow from hippies and Negroes who just thought it would be fun to participate in the burning of a city.

It made the fighting man stop and ask himself: Am I fighting so those at home can keep on rioting and burning? My answer, at least for one, is a resounding no!

As young Americans, we have proved we will fight and die for the land we love. We have served in honor and have given our lives for a cause far greater than the senseless burning of cities. Dr. King died preaching nonviolence, and these people desecrated his memory.

In the last five years, about 175,000 troops have served in Viet Nam and returned home, and I believe the most of them feel the same as I do about the situation, and I hope through our educated minds to solve our problems. At the same time, I feel that if we have to fight against these people we will, because it will be in the same cause we're fighting and dying for now. [August, 1968]

As the ideological orientation of black people changed throughout the 1960s, and as the percentage of volunteers and lifers went down and the numbers of conscripts went up, there began to appear more and more letters addressed to the subject of Uncle Toms—the name given to the more moderate or conservative brothers who did not always see eye to eye with the nationalists:

I know you probably will get many letters calling me an 'Uncle Tom,' but I'm going to speak my piece anyway. I think it is no more for the Negro to serve in 'the Nam' than it is for the rest of the people here, and there are people here from throughout the world. Many men who have written to you in the past seem to have a complex against their country.

I am a Negro serving here in Viet Nam and I take it as an honor. You see, I read most of the time, and I wonder why none of the Negro entertainers want to come to Viet Nam. They will take part in all kinds of demonstrations, but they don't think of their 'soul brothers' over here fighting the war.

My people will raise hell about equal opportunity, but they resent serving this country in a worthy cause. Can you please tell me why? I have gone through as many mortar attacks as any soldier serving here in Viet Nam, so please tell them to stop feeling sorry for themselves. I'm not home with

my wife and family, either.

If they didn't want to serve here, they should have taken the same course Cassius Clay did. I am going to give my country 2 years, and then I'm going back to live in it. I hope you will print this letter because maybe it will help our people to get a better outlook on life as an American Negro. I am up north at a place called Tay Ninh, and it is surrounded by Viet Cong, but they haven't gotten me yet. I've still got about six months to go. See you soon world. [August, 1968]

And then there was the officer [October, 1968] who enclosed a copy of a letter he was going to send to Robert Kennedy. He sent it to *Septia* because he did not know what to do with it now that Kennedy was dead:

After considering the contents of the letter and the caliber of men I command, it became evident none of the shortcomings mentioned in my letter...exist among the 33 paratroopers in my platoon. Instead, they exist among the ranks of those for whom so many of our comrades have made the supreme sacrifice. Before coming to Viet Nam I felt quite sure than one American life was too high a price to pay for these very unstable people. I've since had reason to change my mind.

[The letter to Kennedy follows, in italics.]

For the last two weeks I've been wanting to write you, but have always managed to convince myself that due to the upcoming elections you probably would never receive the letter anyway. It appears you are in the race for the presidency, and to be honest I had hoped you would pass it up this time and try later, not that I doubt you could handle the job, but there are other reasons that seem to bother me.

Your brother, President John Kennedy, took a stand for minority groups such as mine, and was one of the few leaders brave enough to face the nation and speak out in our behalf, which I would say accounts for the majority of the hatred so many Americans developed for him in spite of his overall abilities as a world leader.

As an American Negro I feel as responsible for President Kennedy's death as I did for the death of Dr. Martin Luther King. As bad as I hate to think violently, I would say that our people should have gained complete freedom many years ago, even if it meant fighting for it.

Mr. Kennedy, I consider you as being one of our country's most patriotic leaders, and at present our patriotism leaves much to be desired. I see a need for our country's leaders to call on all our people to try to become better Americans.

Because of the temper of the times it is quite easy for anyone to see that unless some changes are made Americans are going to destroy America. Too many of our people are protesting every policy set by our leaders, yet if asked what they are in favor of they couldn't begin to tell you. There are many things being done that I don't agree with 100 per cent, but I feel the only decent thing we can do is support those we put in office and not allow our country to fall apart because it is composed of Negroes and whites, Democrats and Republicans. We are all Americans, and if there has to be a line, there is where it should be drawn.

I don't meet too many who feel the way I do about our country. Maybe it's because I'm the grandson of a slave and just now beginning to enjoy the freedom so many of our people seem to take for granted.

In closing I would like to say that I think you, like your brother, will be strong enough to face the world and state facts, and I also think you will consider the needs of all Americans....

One of the advantages of being away from one's mother culture is the perspective that it provides on the society that supports that culture and the contradictions between what it is and what it says it is.

It seems unbelievable that I'm sitting in Viet Nam, participating in a war which I hardly know anything about. Why? I ask myself this many times and the only conclusion I seem to arrive at is: 'I have no idea, only that Uncle Sam said that I should fight to safeguard America's freedom.' Should I regard America as being a free country, when thousands are starving, lack decent housing conditions, deprived of educational equality, and living without future perspective?

When I drain the truth out of this situation, I literally become infuriated for not being gifted with the eloquence and courage to tell the world that this is wrong.

At one time, America could hide its domestic problems, but that time has passed now. Today, these problems deface us in the eyes of the world. Even our so-called adversary, the communists, see these difficulties as a destructive means in which to obliterate us. People of America, wake up before it is too late.

The existence of our nation and the unification of its people lay in our hands. We can all walk the down staircase, but in the end, we'll all fall on our faces. [November, 1968]

Or this from a Marine PFC:

Being here in Viet Nam I find myself somewhat confused. Here I am fighting this war, while back home there is still

another war. My people are still struggling for equality.

I often ask myself what I'm doing here when I should be helping my own people back home. I know when I go home I'll still be discriminated against.

I have many questions on my mind, but the one I ask myself most is why does the white man want to keep the Negro down? Why are we treated so cruel?

And then there were the experiences of those like the trooper who wrote, in December, 1968, about the unprovoked attack upon him by a white soldier. "Going through the chain of command, I was required to get permission to see my battery commander. In confronting him about this incident, I was given a small sermon by my commander, in the presence of the battery executive officer and first sergeant." His commander informed him that he did not "like Black Power [or] African haircuts," as if this was the issue at hand and not the request for remedy of the complaint. He also pointed out in his letter that a fellow soldier had problems with this same commander who paid no attention to the man's medical record (doctors had recommended he be excused from shaving because of a skin condition), and how he dumped this man's "Negro reading material" on the floor to indicate his displeasure with the same. The writer concludes by asking, "Now can you tell me who my enemy really is?"

Clearly, one enemy was the "aura of prejudice" which was "so strong and intense that many brothers [were] lashing out with vigor stronger than that in the cities of the United States. There [were] two separate wars being fought...in Viet Nam. One [was] the war against the Viet Cong and the other [was] white against Negro. This has spread to Southeast Asia. The white man [had] brought [it] along with many of his other Western traits." [January, 1969]

The black man, sooner or later finds himself stigmatized. His immediate supervisors are white, as usual, and without orientating himself, he knows they are racists. Most blacks see this as a manifestation of racism, whether his constituents are aware of the fact or not.

Not later, but right then and there, the black man becomes stubborn, his resistance becomes very strong.

The militancy and the prejudice he was not aware of before comes to light. Therefore the white man quickly realizes he is not facing the usual 'Tom,' that was once common to him...even in a war zone, the black man is still discriminated against. Therefore it's time for the black man to lay his weapon down and go home to play his role in 'black power.' [February, 1969]

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A PFC felt that if a survey of rank in the army was done "the white on up through the chain would have the rank." He follows this with the observation that "Most of the soldiers in L[ong] B[inh] Jail are Negro soldiers who were forced one way or the other to do something against [their] will or belief. There are riots because white drivers have hit and run down Negro and Mexdcan Americans. If there must be discipline, let it be fair. Talk to some of the fellows in L.B. Jail and find out why they are there. Not all are there because of murder." He gives an example: "An incident took place where a white soldier and an Afro-American soldier had a disagreement which led to strong words and eventually blows. The white soldier didn't get any type of punishment whatsoever, The Afro-American was reduced in rank and was transferred to another unit so he wouldn't know what had happened. After trying to find out why he had been punished for defending himself, he was told by a white officer to let well enough alone." [April, 1969]

Especially valuable were the perspectives of those who served more than one tour where there was some space between the two tours. Consider the observations of an army specialist who served his first tour in 1965 and his second beginning in early 1969:

Since I've been here, things have really changed a lot. The brothers are really sticking together now—all except the few Uncle Toms we have to put up with. A majority of us are being treated as if we are the ones who started this war. The little rank we get we have to do twice as much as the white man to get it and we have to wait twice as long. For instance, we have soul brothers who have been here in the field and jungle over six months and are still Pfc's.

Many white guys come over as Privates and when they leave, they either are Sgt. (E-5) or higher. That's why, today, the brothers are coming out of the field every chance they get because the white man is misusing them.

I know of many black soldiers that do their part out in the field but don't get credit for it. I know a brother who burned up two M-60 barrels on Viet Cong and saved many fellows from their deaths, and all he got was a slap on the back. But a white guy was given the Silver Star and a promotion to Sgt. The Viet Cong are treated better than the Negro soldier. We go out and fight Charlie, and when we get back to the base, we still have a private war on our hands with the white man.

So you see, the Negro soldier has two wars on his hand. Most of the good jobs in the rear are held by white guys, and if a Negro comes out of the field and tries to get a rear job, he is called a coward. Many black soldiers are AWOL today

right here in Viet Nam because they are being pushed too hard.

In every stockade in Viet Nam, the majority of the people in them are Negroes. As I said before, we are really sticking together now and the white man sees it and doesn't like it, but it's nothing he can do about it, unless he puts all of us in jail.

My personal opinion is that the Army should be segregated because Negroes and whites can't live together and get along. There are a lot of people who don't know the armed services is one of the most prejudiced organizations in the world. I am speaking from experience, because I've been in the service for quite some time. I truly hope that one day someone back there will do something about what's happening over here and other places, before it's too late and before there is a war between the Negro soldier and the white soldier.

Every day, things are changing, and every day there are soul brothers coming out of the field shouting how they are being misused. Really, I don't blame any of them because all they are getting is a hard time.

I only wish there were more people back there interested in what the Negro soldier is going through over here. A lot of people might say the white guys are going through the same thing. Well, yes, they are—in the field—but the black man's fight doesn't really begin until he gets back out of the field. We fight the white man physically and mentally to have a place in this world.

Some of the submissions to the magazine took the form of poetry. Sometimes it was the only way that the soldier felt he could get his feelings across:

Take a man, then put him all alone,
 Put him 12,000 miles away from home.
 Empty his heart of all but blood,
 Make him live in sweat and mud.
 This is the life I have to live,
 And why my soul to the devil I give.
 You 'peace boys' pant from your easy chairs,
 But you don't know what it's like over here.
 You have a ball without near trying,
 While over here the boys are dying.
 You burn your draft cards and march at dawn,
 Plant your flags on the White House lawn.
 You all want to ban the bomb,
 You say there's no real war in Viet Nam.
 Use your flags, your drugs and have your fun,

Then refuse to use your gun.
 There is nothing else for you to do,
 And just think—I'm supposed to die for you!
 I'll hate you until the day I die,
 You made me hear my buddy cry.
 I heard them say, 'This one's dead.'
 It's a large price he had to pay.
 Not to live to see another day.
 He had the guts to fight and die,
 He paid the price, but what did he buy?
 He bought your life, by losing his,
 But who gives a damn what a soldier gives?
 His wife does, and maybe his son,
 But they're just about the only ones. [June, 1969]

Two letters that speak differently to the same subject appear in the December, 1969 and January, 1970 issues of the magazine. The first, written by a sergeant, chastises those who would mistake the actions of one committed to doing his own thing "without having to prove to anyone how black and proud he is," for Uncle Tomism. The sergeant insists: "The only way to beat a man at his game is to play it like he thinks he's playing it and then find his weak points and use him as much as possible." He continues: "At the several bases I've been assigned to, I wasn't a part of the segregated ideas and thoughts of those who greeted me with, 'What's going on, brother?' I tried to get along with everyone and I demanded respect as an individual and not as a member of a group creating social pressure as the white supremacist and black power advocates continue to do over here in Vietnam." He says that the black men in his company became "unified, utilizing integrity and suppressing violence, when we knew a cool head could solve a problem instead of a hot temper." However, he cautions, "Unity is great when it's used correctly. And I'm not talking about the unity that comes from a whiskey bottle or a head that's turned on by pot. I'm talking about the type of unity that comes about because one respects the man standing next to him because he is a man and an individual, black or white." Still one should not dwell "too heavily upon the past, for it would only anger you, and hate is a blinding factor, for our destiny is tomorrow, a not too distant tomorrow, my brothers." Concludes our first writer, "The main reason why there is more racial strife on a non-combat base is due to the lack of communication between the people in charge of our bases and each individual. All the guys who've turned their backs on the white society need the help of the nearest head doctor and so does the white man who still lives on the hate taught to him by his ancestors." The letter written a month later stands in opposition to the sergeant's point of view: "I found out

one thing, my brothers, individuality gains naught but rebuke in the eyes of the white man—while unity will slow or stop his quick and hasty persecution of our black brothers and sisters the world over.” The second writer adds:

Three hundred years of constant attempts at dehumanization of the black man, repeatedly repelled by the unyielding thought that we are also men, should qualify us as judge over the white man, for it was indeed he, who said, ‘all men are created equal, and therefore have a right to the pursuit of happiness.’ It was an idea believed wholeheartedly by him, until he discovered the beast of burden he purchased on the slave block could actually reason, the one single factor that separates man from beast, and you can believe this brothers, ‘we are going to keep on keeping on.’

Another poem, published the next month, seems to echo the sentiments of the January letter:

Dear America, I just had to write.
 Because this may be my last night.
My buddies and I are pinned, there's
 nothing we can do.
But I would like to ask two favors
 of you.
You see, I fought through day, dawn
 and night;
Knowing all the time that this was
 not right.
My people, black Americans, they are;
In America are being pushed back so
 far.
The young, are being deprived of a
 real education;
The old are being forced into a
 low paying occupation.
America! America! Please tell me why?
Because for that place I'm about
 to die.
Give them a chance. They're human,
 too.
These were the favors I wanted to
 ask of you.
And if they're answered, my life I'm
 ready to give;
I would not see America again, but
 I know my people would live. [February, 1970]

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Returning once again to the vagaries of military justice, one airman who had been in country for seven months observed that he was more than ready to leave: "This is not the black man's war, it's the white man's. The white man is always trying to impress everyone that he's the king of the world. I'll never go along with that." He continues:

A few days ago there were two blacks here who were sentenced by a court-martial to a year in the stockade for something the court couldn't prove they did. It was a white man's court, and of course they were guilty before they were tried.

There are brothers here in trouble who never committed any crime before they came to the Nam. The reason we get in trouble here is that we're tired of the white man bugging us. We can't take it any longer. [May, 1970]

But take it they would, for the war was not yet over, and life had to go on:

Even the Vietnamese people are prejudiced to a certain extent. They are saying the white man is No. 1 and the black man is No. 10. I think a small minority of white GIs bring their hates with them to Vietnam. I can say that the brothers in Vietnam are together.... We are showing our black unity in so many ways, and it would make you feel good to see all the brothers getting together and doing their thing. [January, 1971]

The white man here is the same as he is there. He thinks he's a better human being than anyone else. The white man is trying to use the Vietnamese as he uses us. He wants them to work for him for nearly nothing, and is always trying to 'use' them.... [Indeed, the] Vietnamese are faced with some of the same problems the black man has, but maybe in a different way." [February, 1971]

This is my story. I am in LBJ [Long Binh Jail]. Why? Because the white man put me here because I didn't think like he wanted me to!....When the white man gets you in his jail, he puts leg irons and handcuffs on some of the black brothers and five or six of them jump, kick and beat you. But the black people back in the U.S. don't know this and some of them don't want to know....A lot of the older blacks are set in their ways. They are used to having a white man over them and they can't get used to having a black man over them. But I think it's about

that time. [April, 1971]

One black soldier was courts-martialed because he refused to cut his hair:

Out in the bush they try to be friends because they know that the black man can fight because they've been fighting all their life. But in the rear they try to do us any way. They try to give us the work detail. As far as rank, they don't give it to us, not like they do the beast [white men]. They say we are fighting communism, but me I'm fighting to get home where I can fight for my black people. Communism isn't what's kept us back over 400 years. It's the beast. My enemy isn't the VC. It's the beast." [May, 1971]

In that same issue, there is a rather lengthy letter from a Spec. 4 (E-4) that covers a multitude of topics. In reading through the several parts that are excerpted here, note how the themes that he discusses are linked together, having everything to do with the differential status accorded different race designations in a supposedly desegregated (not integrated) military organization. Note also the evidently different political orientation of this young man when contrasted with some of the essays from earlier periods in the conflict. Consider also that American troops were being withdrawn from the country at an ever increasing rate. At the time of this missive, overall troop strength was down to less than a third of what it had been in the Summer of 1968.⁴ Consider also that at the warrior level survival—not being the last man to die in Vietnam—becomes ever more important:

I am a black GI serving in Vietnam and the people here are very cheap. All they think about is cheating the American GI. Whenever they see a GI in trouble, they sit back and giggle to each other and shrug their shoulders. I wonder why the government is making such a big Federal case of this My Lai stuff. The soldiers out in the field have had enough without having to worry about jurisdictional or legal torture when they get back home. These people don't give a damn whether a man lives or dies, just so long as they get all they want.

Does that sound like the poor, innocent, defenseless people the white man has lied to the American public about? No, it's entirely the opposite. These people don't want us over here. They never did. But you know how it is—the whites got to have their way or else. Or else— someone's got to suffer, whether it be the American black man or the poor white man or Mexican-American.

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A lot of the white GIs around here are nothing but a bunch of George Wallaces, Lester Maddoxes and Spiro Agnews. Sometimes when I walk into a latrine for a little private business, I see on the walls...All Niggers—and literally just about every sexual insult to the black man the smut peddlers can produce. I'm not going to repeat the insults because they are so nasty somebody might throw up.

Yes, no matter where he goes, the white man always has to show him bigotry and cowardly prejudice. He turns the Vietnamese people against us by lying the 'Niggers are inferior,' are No. 10, stupid, crazy or some other kind of BS like that.

Prejudice affects people in strange ways, he explains, pointing to the phenomenon of Uncle Tomism, which he describes as "a constant problem among blacks in this man's army." He details the story of a black sergeant promoted from E-5 to E-6 who "went around making war on the brothers to look good in front of the pigs." but when the sergeant takes advantage of his new rank and "starts messing up his so-called white friends...his superiors who recommended him for that particular rank want to see him busted." The man was transferred to another unit. "Just imagine," says the author, "All that Tomming, all that kissing backsides and look what it got him. A black man is still subject to certain prejudices, certain injustices, regardless of rank, certain feelings of white bigotry, certain feelings of being inferior to the white man." He continues:

I'm going to say something else and I don't care who likes it and who doesn't like it. The thing that's holding the black people down is that too many of them are too stupid to face reality. They only see what they want. They exercise too much faith and trust in the enemy (the white man) and too little trust in real black men, like for example, Adam Clayton Powell, Elijah Muhammad, Muhammad Ali, Eldridge Cleaver. To some colored people that last man I mentioned (2nd to last also) is criminal because he is a Black Panther sticking up for the black cause and the other because he is in my opinion the heavy-weight champion of the world and refuses to be bullied or tricked into this war and treated like two cents. Also, he's showing the white man that he doesn't have to jump every time he moves his finger. If he doesn't want to come into this Army, that is his prerogative.

Why die for the white man? We don't owe him anything. He expects the young black men to come over here and fight the VC but won't even grant us a decent trade when we get our discharge....

One particularly interesting letter appeared the following month [June, 1971]. It is one of the few to address the issue of the wounded warrior from the veteran's point of view:

We speak of Hanoi and the crime wave in American streets, but the majority seems less eager to fulfill our needed goals. There is a prolongation of the war in Southeast Asia and trouble everywhere.

People have called me foolish since I got hurt. Others have said worse. Nevertheless, it has happened. What are they going to do with our wounded men after they come home and after recuperation?...

Ten months I lay in the hospital after the grenade explosion. Five years have elapsed. I am worse off than the day I arrived in Vietnam.

I suffered multiple leg wounds that left me maimed. I'm not bitter, only curious as to what America and our government can do when we return. The prisoners there perhaps have it real bad. I was never a prisoner, but being a holder of the Purple Heart, I can say I am a lucky man....

Notable in this corpus of letters for its rare insight was one from a brother who had done a tour, gone back to the world and returned to the war of his own volition. This time, because of the isolation of his unit, he had "ample time to read and think."

What am I, as part of a despised race in a white majority society, doing fighting for democracy in Vietnam?

While at home, I am continued to be looked upon as "the white man's burden" with little or no rights that society will respect or enforce. It is indeed ironic. When will democracy in the United States mean equal treatment for all its citizens? Am I not human? Being black is not a crime. I am not an animal. I have a right to exist on this earth as all black people have a right to live and exist.

I have given thought to leaving the United States for more visible signs as related to democracy elsewhere, though the United States has been my home.

I fear the United States is not a mature nation nor will it be until blacks are allowed to develop freely and to their fullest potentials with the blessings of white Americans.

The black soldier in Vietnam like his counterpart back in the world, suffered through his "blacker than thou" phase, especially with the rise and spread of black militancy in the military establishment.

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Cognitive dissonance had its effect. Though my own time in the service was a little earlier than the Vietnam era, I have memories of my years in the United States Navy, in and out of the South China Sea. I understood the ambivalence of the black soldier. On one extreme of the political spectrum was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (the sixth foundation of their party platform was that no black man should be required to serve in the United States military). At the other end was the lifer (which many claimed stood for Loud, Ignorant Fool, Escaping Reality) who represented blind adherence to classic American rhetoric. However, experience—which is ordinary for no one—has a way of confounding the canons of our beliefs. Most of the brothers, just like the folks back home, were somewhere in between, adrift in a sea of confusion. Given the historic treatment of black people in the United States, were black men obligated to serve “their” country in its time of need? It was a classic case of ideology shaping consciousness.⁵ Resolving the question of duty was a preoccupation for some soldiers:

A Brother [Name] stated in *Septia* that he would rather be an Uncle Tom than give another brother the ‘power sign.’ He calls this action ‘street clowning.’ Since he has viewed and reviewed the racial situation, there are some questions I would like to ask.

Who am I to fight for the freedom of another race in a distant land? Why should I place my life in jeopardy for a cause not known to myself? Should I be at home fighting and dying with my black brothers and sisters instead of placing myself at the mercy of the very ones who seek to destroy the black revolution? How can my conscience allow me to kill another being in the name of democracy when this rare and precious idea is seldom experienced in my home land?

How can the rulers of our land so readily pass legislation to send me 10,000 miles away to fight and die and then so reluctantly pass laws to make or proclaim me equal? Why should I be a first class fighting man and salute proudly the red, white and blue, when back in America I’m a second class citizen and the mere color of my skin exempts me from the rights to be equal in pursuit of happiness? Doesn’t the flag work for us when we salute it? Is it too much to ask to be made a first class citizen before you ask me to risk my life? [July, 1971]

But the flag did not work for them. In August, 1971 Brother Ray and 29 other others sent in a letter stating that there was a need for blacks to stick together to mellorate where possible the racist practices and attitudes to which they were subject:

In this brigade there are whites who try desperately to keep the black brothers from getting any type of rank at all. This statement was made by a white officer. He said that the black man is not capable of leadership. And another captain had a bad habit of calling us brothers boys. When we brothers try to stand up and fight these racist swine, we are put in military custody and are considered militants and troublemakers....

The whites try very hard to keep us separated from each other because they know when some black brothers get together, we stick together no matter what happens. It makes it hard for the white man to mess with us. When there are just two or three of us, they will try to make us do averting and keep us out in the field while the white guys get all the rear jobs. They get their R and R on time and get their leaves anytime they want them. When applications come down for rank, all the white guys make it. They go by time in the country but if you have more time than the white guys they still skip over you.

The blacks over here don't have a chance because of prejudiced whites. We have to fight for anything we get. The swine even try to turn the Vietnamese people against us brothers. They tell them we are Number 10, which mean troublemakers, no good....When we try to protect our interests,...they say we have broken the military law. The military law is just protection that the white man uses against the black man to lock him up for such things as standing up for his rights.

From standing up for one's rights to protesting the underlying theme of genocide that troop assignment policies in Vietnam seemed to articulate is but a short step: "...I share the feelings of my brothers here because we are the victims of this unannounced genocide the white man has so oppressively put into practice. We are the product of his greed for money, while at the same time, carrying out his ingenious plan of keeping young black strength down to a proportion which is in his favor." This writer made it clear that black veterans should not "accept business as usual with racist cops striking out against any black organization that questions the system." In that regard, they would set a new standard. There would be no more lynchings of blacks in uniform as there were during and after World War 1. They would launch themselves along new roads, building upon the gains of those black soldiers who returned from World War 2. Somehow, they would find a way to defuse and redirect a system rife "with lynchings, head beatings and all the corrupt politicians" to stop the dope flow into the black community: "[My] brothers and I plan to

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change it and we are willing to perish if necessary to do so.”

The popular culture image of the black soldier as a doper, a coward, or a malcontent ignores the truth that there were some brothers in the Nam who sought to make a difference. The struggle for change is evident in the letter of a Spec 4 who wrote that the “black revolution cannot be won on a white horse.” One brother wrote to ask “why black publishing companies don’t send black reporters over here to do stories on the black GIs and the way we are treated, so that all our black brothers and sisters can be aware of it.” He wanted them to explore the reasons that the inmate populations of Da Nang stockade and the LBJ prison were almost 90 percent black. Perhaps, he suggests, if black media publicized the inequity, black soldiers might not be given the inordinate number of courts-martials they currently received—often because of insignificant breaches of the code of military conduct. He closes by saying how it hurt him to have to see unnecessary pain, especially since the war was for a white cause not a black one.

A group which rose out of black soldiers’ attempts at coalition building was the American Minority Servicemen’s Association. One of its members wrote to *Septia* in November, 1971, about the uses of propaganda and lawful suppression as weapons for keeping the different, the dispossessed in their proper places: “It’s used to stifle, distress and confuse us, with the obvious but latent motive of diverting ourselves against each other.” He explains that those who succumb to its siren song are given “guest cards” to a closed society. They are even made token leaders. “Those who resist are quickly branded dumb niggers, militants and fools who don’t know any better.” However, he suggests there is another way of looking at this; especially as we “begin to realize that maybe all those dumb niggers, militants and fools have rediscovered what it is to have honor, to have pride, and to possess manhood, a right in the sea of wrongs, a path in the land of the forgotten, this country of contradiction.” These will be the issues over which any future struggles will be fought “whether it’s behind the levers at the polls or the triggers of guns, you and I will be responsible for its outcome.”

1972 brought additional letters which addressed many of the topics already covered. As more and more men were withdrawn from Vietnam, the tone of the letters suggests that institutionalized racism increased in virulence as the war drew to a close. There was discussion about the vagaries of the military justice system, and the punishment of black soldiers because they did not share white American attitudes about American conduct in Vietnam. There was concern that some brothers might be pimping their black power or at least treating with it in a faddish manner instead of being really committed to the Cause.

There was even one letter, in September, 1972, which stated that though there were some good white people, most of them were "swine": "The swine (racist fanatics) have created their own ugly image, for it was they who destroyed Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, John and Robert Kennedy, Medgar Evers."

In addition to the letters, *Sepia* published a series of articles that echoed and amplified several of the expressed concerns in more detail. An October, 1966 piece asked the question "Why Do More Negroes Die in Vietnam?" It raised questions about assignment and promotion policies that kept black men in the field longer than white soldiers, and placed them in more hazardous situations. In February, 1969 there was a story titled "Black Soldiers Fight Two Enemies in Vietnam." The piece stated that black soldiers were shot at by the National Liberation Front and the NVA from the front, while from the rear they were sniped at (both literally and figuratively) by racists on support bases and in the towns. The June, 1971 issue offered an essay entitled "GI Race War in Germany," and explained that during and after the Vietnam war, American military bases in Germany had some of the worst troubles between the races in the whole military establishment.⁶ The August, 1971 issue gave readers "The Marines v. Prejudice," which talked about the policies and programs the Corps was instituting to lessen tensions created by the arrival of a new kind of black Marine with a different self-consciousness and agenda than some of his predecessors. And finally, in April 1973, there appeared "What Now for Black Vietnam Veterans?" This essay was published three months after the column "Our Men in Vietnam" (renamed "Voices from Vietnam" mid-war) was closed out in January, 1973.

Several secondary pieces can help to provide a sense of organization and direction for interpretation of the letters: Gerald Gill's, "Black American Soldiers in Vietnam;"⁷ is particularly useful because it covers a number of topics and can be used to provide an outline of the black experience in Vietnam. Charles C. Moskos, Jr.'s "The American Dilemma in Uniform: Race in the Armed Services,"⁸ and William Stuart Gould's "Racial Conflict in the U.S. Army,"⁹ provide important contextual materials that seek to put specific incidents into a larger pattern. Two members of the Lawyers Military Defense Committee of the ACLU, David F. Addlestone and Susan Sherer, who served in Vietnam from November, 1970 to November, 1971, have some interesting things to say in "Race In Vietnam,"¹⁰ as does Jack White in his "The Angry Black Soldiers."¹¹ Myra MacPherson's fourth chapter, called "The Blacks," in her book *Long Time Passing*¹², opens with a recapitulation of one man's experience, illustrating the kinds of problems black men endured in the war.¹³

Whatever meaning is made of the black experience in Vietnam,

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must be shaped by black people. Because of the character of the black experience in America and its relation to America's activities, we are forced to address the DuBoisian "Double Consciousness,"¹⁴ Clearly, meaning would best be made within an Afrocentric orientation whose world view, normative assumptions and frames of reference flow out of the historical experiences and folk wisdom of black people.¹⁵

It is a fundamental truth of the Afrocentric perspective that knowledge is a social product not an objective ideal that can be possessed, owned or brought in from the outside as if it has an independent existence. That is, knowledge is information that has been organized for some specific purpose whose intent is implicit in the organizational design. It is not so much that we discover the truth as it is that we manufacture the truth in keeping with our own interests and the criteria specified by the guardians of the craft or guild who saw to our own occupational socialization. To postulate an objective ideal of knowledge is not only an illusion but also suggests that the scholar in some way is separate and distinct from the phenomena and forces being investigated. This is, of course, patent nonsense that all too often is used to evade responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Our descriptions of reality are not independent of the realities they purport to describe. Our beliefs shape our scholarship and the values we embrace give meaning to the facts we select to buttress our arguments. Because the black experience in America goes to the very core of what this society is said to be about, to its founding concepts of freedom, equality, liberty and justice for all, especially in time of war, much is to be gained by examining that experience from the perspectives of the persons who lived it. For it is when a country is at war that it is forced to come face to face with its contradictions. As I have attempted to show here, the black media is a useful source of the evidence required for that task.

¹ (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press) 1986.

² *Ibid.*: 469.

³ One guide to some of this material is contained in Lenwood G. Davis and George Hill, comps., *Blacks in the American Armed Forces, 1776-1983* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press,) 1985. See especially, chapters IX, "Blacks in the Vietnam War," and X, "Blacks in the Post-Vietnam Era."

⁴ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File) 1985. See especially pp 27-59, "The Vietnam War: Chronology, 1959-1975."

⁵ A trenchant and sometimes troubling account of the many dimensions and subtleties involved in this process is Maulana Karenga, "Society, Culture, and the Problem of Self-Consciousness: A Kawaïda Analysis," in Leonard Harris, ed., *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy*

from 1917 (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt) 1983: 212-28.

⁶ For a detailed account of the military in Germany see Haynes Johnson & George C. Wilson, *Army in Anguish* (New York: Pocket) 1972.

⁷ *Indochina Newsletter*, January/February, 1984: 1-6.

⁸ *Annals* (406), March, 1973: 94-106.

⁹ *Race* (15: 1), July, 1973: 1-24.

¹⁰ *Civil Liberties* (298), February, 1973: 1,2.

¹¹ *The Progressive* (34: 3), March, 1970: 22-26.

¹² (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday) 1984: 632-55.

¹³ MacPherson believes that a disproportionate number of these problems can be attributed, to the tremendous social costs incurred by Project 100,000. Project 100,000 is the subject of an essay included in this volume, written by Lisa Hsiao.

¹⁴ "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. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. 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. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett Books edition) 1961: 16-17.

¹⁵ There are a number of sources that one may consult for additional information on the Afrocentric perspective. Some of the more readily available include: Maulana Karenga and Jacob H. Carruthers, eds., *Kemet and the African Worldview* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press) 1986; Wade W. Nobles, *African Psychology* (Oakland, CA: Institute for the Advanced Study of Black Family Life and Culture) 1986; Molefi K. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press) 1987.