The Black Soldier in Vietnam War Literature and Film

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LAST YEAR'S SPRING ISSUE of *Vietnam Generation* and other published opinions suggest that popular culture materials depicting the Vietnam War routinely overlook black soldiers or portray them negatively. In fact, Blacks established a record of exceptional performance and heroism in combat, marked by 20 Congressional Medals of Honor. Many black soldiers testify that Vietnam service made them feel special, somehow more worthy, because they survived the test of manhood in war (Terry, *Bloods passim*). Thus, they fought valiantly while recognizing that service in Vietnam would not guarantee them full citizenship in the United States. Yet, Wallace Terry states that "rarely in any of the films or novels about the Southeast Asian war does one see or read about Blacks or even glimpse a Black face" (Martin 126).

These accusations of neglect and negative treatment are clearly exaggerated, however, for positively depicted black soldiers are ubiquitous in Vietnam narratives. A few black characters are cowards or shammers, who shirk duties, blame others for problems, or harp about discrimination when they want to avoid unpleasantness. But most fictional Blacks are brave, loyal, and protective of their comrades—no matter the color of their skin—because they share the same trials of war, the same need to survive that causes brothers (and sisters) in arms to bond together. In addition, black noncommissioned and commissioned officers appear as complex but sympathetic characters, who must balance racial and professional issues while continuing to perform admirably in the combat zone. Perhaps surveying a few of these portrayals in prose narratives and films about Vietnam will restore a similar balance to the scholarship regarding black soldiers in American popular culture.

Admittedly, in some cases, fictional black soldiers represent how primarily white authors have tried to counteract racist portrayals of the past. These fictional soldiers tend to merge into a "type" with certain standard characteristics. For example, most Blacks are cool, menacing, and capable, because of their supposed natural toughness—developed on the streets of Detroit, Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles. A memorable example of this type is Sergeant Oscar Johnson in *Going After Cacciato*, the National Book Award-winning novel by Tim O'Brien. Johnson leads a squad of men who, along with their new platoon commander, must track down a deserter across the eastern world to Paris. He speaks of raping and looting and cracking heads with a sledgehammer, wears dark glasses even at night, has black skin and eyes, and carries himself with a bearing "signaling immense self-discipline." In times of danger, he is "hard and tough and cool" (173).

Although Johnson has been cited as an example of the stereotyped Black in Vietnam narratives (Mitchell 120), I believe he represents the "magical realism" O'Brien uses throughout *Cacciato*. In this imaginative narrative, nothing save the war's destructiveness is quite what it seems, so Johnson has an address in Bangor, Maine, but looks and talks like "Detroit city." In other words, he plays on a street-tough image to make himself appear more violent, more threatening, thus controlling everyone and everything around him. As O'Brien suggests, whether Johnson is truly menacing or not is "always hard to tell, and this gave him power." Oscar also draws strength from having survived more than nine months in combat—in a war where, for many of the soldiers, survival has become the main goal.

Because of his powerful image, Johnson is the squad's unquestioned combat leader. He walks just behind the point man, triggers ambushes, and assigns all tasks, deferring only ceremonially to the platoon commander. Whenever the squad encounters a field problem, Johnson works up the battle plan. One instance shows his machine-like precision in the face of danger: "Cool and calm, Oscar had power. He had class. He had killed people. He had preserved the rules. Now he worked swiftly, drawing tactics onto a piece of yellow paper. When it was done he stood up and called for quiet and explained how it would be carried out" (167). Oscar Johnson is the epitome of black power and manhood; he seems to overcome death and fear through absolute courage, unfettered by any sort of emotion or indecision.

According to Tim O'Brien, the success of a leader like Oscar Johnson stems from his self-containment and concentration on the machinery of war. Johnson's goal is self-preservation, and he achieves it through personal control of his environment. Similar methods drive Tyrone Washington, a black drug peddler turned Marine in *The Boys in Company C*, a film released in 1977 and placed in videotape distribution during 1981. Washington believes completely in his own ability to survive, based on having done so for years as a street tough. He responds to none of the harassment in basic training and stands aloof from other members of his unit. In fact, he tells others to stay clear of him, because they're "a bunch of fuckups" who are all going to die in Vietnam. Only by threatening Washington's own safety can his drill instructor convince him to join the other men in the kind of teamwork they'll need to come out of Vietnam alive. The instructor tells him that he must help the others become the kind of platoon Washington can depend on; otherwise, he'll be stuck with "a maggoty-ass crew that will get you killed during your first week in country." When Washington understands that his life may eventually depend on transferring some of his knowledge about violence and surviving to others, he becomes the physical and spiritual leader of these recruits.

In Vietnam, Washington's natural aggressiveness and contempt for anyone trying to kill him are enough to make him the platoon's best combat soldier. Like many other black soldiers, he carries the M-60 machine gun, which provides key firepower for the unit. On their first engagement with the Viet Cong, he charges an enemy sniper position and wipes it out, thus solidifying his informal leadership of the troops. Together with the platoon's seasoned lieutenant, Washington alternates between killing the enemy and attempting to resist killing their incompetent company commander, whose blunders constantly threaten their lives. At one point he even turns his machine gun on the captain during an enemy attack. But he misses, and the lieutenant convinces him that fragging commanders is "bullshit, just like everything else" in this war. Their job is to protect themselves and each other—to survive—and to obey the rules that matter while disregarding the rest.

The lieutenant's counsel leads Washington to dedicate himself to combat and group survival, rejecting his former —life of drug peddling and deal making. In a key scene, he meets with a corrupt Vietnamese district chief to consummate a deal that would send heroin and opium back to the States in empty body bags. But the chief's venality and the debasement of body bags in which Washington has seen fellow soldiers carried away turn him from his original purpose to a higher commitment. Thus, *The Boys in Company C* depicts in Tyrone Washington the mean, bad street black who finds in soldiering a natural outlet for his violence and an opportunity to enhance his worth as a man.

Often, this sense of increased worth caused black soldiers to volunteer for difficult duty, even though they believed they were being used as fodder in the "white man's war." Two excellent accounts of street-wise young men who distinguish themselves in Vietnam are in *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam*. The authors, Stanley Goff and Robert Sanders, were drafted and sent to combat units in 1967. As Stan Goff puts it: "We'd been inducted; we were in the armed forces. It felt so cold and lifeless. It was like we were programmed to die, just going out there to die, that's all" (Goff and Sanders 2). Goff goes on to explain that, although he wasn't politically oriented, he understood the Blacks who felt they were being used. He was aware that disproportionate numbers of Blacks were in his combat unit, where many of them were being killed and "most of the whites depended on the brothers to fight." Despite this awareness, however, Goff eventually accepts the responsibility of carrying the platoon's M-60 machine gun. This weapon's twenty-four pounds add hardship to 10-kilometer marches through the jungle and danger from enemy fire trying to knock out the platoon's main firepower.

In the same way, Robert Sanders served with distinction despite personal misgivings about the war in Vietnam. Sanders explains his misgivings clearly when he says:

> We felt that the American Dream didn't really serve us. What we experienced was the American Nightmare. Black people were fighting with honor in Vietnam just like they did in other American wars. They never ran; they fought to the death. We felt that they put us in the front lines abroad and in the back lines at home. Most of the brothers felt the same, even though we fought right along. . . . We had unity and harmony because we wanted to live. But we wanted no part of the war. (132)

Yet, Sanders did more than was necessary to get through the war. He also took on "the pig"—as the M-60 machine gun was called—after two months in the field. Toward the end of his tour he walked point and carried an M-79 grenade launcher for his company. In combat, Sanders was therefore "hard core," but he insisted that his devotion to remaining in the front line came from a feeling of obligation to friends—his "partners"—rather than to the war effort.

Goff and Sanders admit that they took over the machine gun and its attendant dangers for less altruistic reasons, however. Carrying the M-60 gave them special power and status. Goff's description clearly shows why many Blacks felt more powerful carrying this weapon in the field:

> The pig belonged to the guy with experience, the guy who could keep cool in a fire fight, a guy that knew what he was doing, and not to a guy that was green. It was the only major firepower in our entire platoon. . . . A lot of guys didn't want to carry it because it was very heavy and it was lethal—meaning it was lethal to both you and Charlie. . . . Obviously, Charlie tried to knock you out first. (64)

The additional danger, as well as the knowledge that a platoon relies on the man with "the pig," fortified Goff's reputation. After his first real fire fight, he was "like a new man to the guys," because they respected a person who could handle this weapon.

Eventually, the special power Goff felt in being able to direct heavy fire on the enemy led to his winning the Distinguished Service Cross for a three-hour battle against a North Vietnamese regiment. In the same way, Sanders gained respect by continuing to carry the M-60 when he was twice wounded by stepping on pungi sticks at landing zones. His toughness and alertness in battle recommended him for company point duty, but Sanders went well beyond requirements by taking the position every other day. He claims that self-preservation was his motive because people who "didn't know what was happening" on point could get him killed. But he admits he felt a special pride in knowing that "everybody in the company depended on the point man to keep his head together and get us there" (138). Thus, combat challenged both Stan Goff and Bob Sanders to become exceptional soldiers, based primarily on their skill in directing and controlling violence.

Frequently, however, tough black combat soldiers in popular literature and film harbor a gentleness that belies their menacing exterior, making them particularly accessible to whites in combat units. The resulting trans-racial friendships further enhance the black soldier's sense of self-worth; he is not only respected and admired by black brothers but also held in unusually high regard by the southern whites who appear to despise him "back in the World." For example, Stan Goff and Bob Sanders comment on the close relationships that transcended race in Vietnam, exposing minorities to the possibilities of a society without prejudice. Goff remarks:

> You couldn't think just white or just black—you had to think for everybody. That was one of the things the war did for me. It started me thinking about men in general, instead of whites or blacks—even though a lot of the whites forgot about that after they got back to the states. It taught them a lot of lessons. Some whites never forgot it. And a lot of blacks never forgot it either. (123)

Sanders also recognized the unifying effects of combat experience as a significant departure from the disenfranchisement and alienation he had felt in American society:

> For the first time in my life, I saw total unity and harmony. In the states, even in the rear in Nam, blacks and whites fought each other. But in the Nam, man, out in the field we were just a force of unity and harmony. We became just

> one person. . . . That was the only thing good about Vietnam, as far as I'm concerned. For the first time in my life, I saw people as people. (131)

These remarks add an ethical dimension to the black soldier as effective killing machine; they document a more profound growth into "manhood"—a maturity stemming from commitment to others, empathy, and understanding that surpasses artificial boundaries of color and social position.

Several accounts of the Vietnam war flesh out this image of powerful but empathetic black soldiers. One thinks immediately of "Day Tripper" in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, a book constructed as a kind of novelized journalism. Day Tripper is "a big Negro with a full mustache that drooped over the corners of his mouth, a mean, signifying mustache that would have worked if only there had been the smallest trace of meanness anywhere on his face." He wears his nickname and "Detroit City" on his helmet, and he fears only the night: "There wasn't anything he wouldn't do during daylight.. . .He was always volunteering for the more dangerous daylight patrols, just to make sure he got in by dusk" (125). Day Tripper tells Herr that brothers are taking parts of mortars back to Detroit to reassemble and use them against the police if necessary. His comments echo those of Oscar Johnson in *Going After Cacciato*, as well as those of many actual black veterans who speculated about using their combat skills in the racial war on America's streets. For example, one black GI told the *New York Times*: "The big question is whether the black cat can walk like a dragon here in South Vietnam and like a fairy back in the land of the big PX" (quoted in DeRose 47).

As Herr puts it, however, Day Tripper is "a big bad spade gone wrong somehow, and no matter how mean he tried to look something constantly gentle showed" (125). Herman Beavers interprets this line to mean that Herr believes "anger or hardness is the emotional state of most black men" (10)—a stereotyping from the white perspective. But Herr's point of view throughout *Dispatches* is that of a correspondent who routinely observes disparities between appearance and reality. In this case, he sees a complexity of emotions in Day Tripper that controverts the macho image the character himself tries to create. In other words, Herr considers Day Tripper's gentleness an extra dimension of his humanity, thus working *against* any possible stereotyping.

Day Tripper's gentleness is especially evident in his relationship with a diminuitive white Marine named Mayhew, whom he calls "a crazy, tough little fucker." Their relationship is based on mutual respect and the need to survive in the violent world of Vietnam—a world created by a power structure into which neither is fully integrated. Thus, when Mayhew extends his tour in Vietnam to get out of the Marine Corps early, Day Tripper is furious. Day Tripper says Mayhew is just "another dumb grunt" who never listens to a word he says. He tells Mayhew to run out to the perimeter wire and let the Viet Cong gun him down and get it over with—or just take a grenade, pull the pin, and lie down on it. To Mayhew's objection that it's only four months, he says: "Four months? Baby, four *seconds* in this whorehouse'll get you greased. . . . You're the *sorriest* grunt mother I ever seen. No, man, but the sorriest! Fuckin' Mayhew, man. I feel sorry for you" (139). It's not difficult to see the caring that comes through these words, and Day Tripper's fierce friendship and commitment to the friend's survival are typical of black soldiers in Vietnam narratives.

We could multiply Herr's portrayal by numerous cases, but some characters stand out from the rest. Two are in Oliver Stone's film, *Platoon*. The filmscript and Pat Dye's direct adaptation into a best-selling novel do include a black character named Francis who is "cowardly and unprincipled" (Mitchell 120), but they feature two sympathetic black characters: Big Harold and Kingpin. The massive publicity surrounding this film emphasized its "realistic treatment" of Vietnam, so this depiction of black soldiers may receive special attention in American popular culture.

Big Harold is the lesser developed of the two characters. He's a large, quiet, Southern black, who protects and "babies" the white protagonist, Chris Taylor, when the latter is wounded. Big Harold rejects the radical example of another black man, Junior, and is a competent soldier. King Pin, usually called King, is a huge black man with ten months of experience in Vietnam when the film opens. Born and reared in Alabama, he clearly recognizes and abhors white prejudice, but he sets aside these concerns in combat. He carries "the pig" and often walks point because he's one of the most reliable fighters in the platoon. Thus, his credentials as a tough soldier are impeccable. Still, he is the only person to talk kindly to Chris Taylor before the latter's first night ambush. King tells Taylor to stick close to him and he'll help him get through it. Later, when a white man is maimed by enemy fire, King says it doesn't matter what color he is now, because he "done paid his dues and qualified to become a brothuh" (Dye 59). And concerning Taylor's failure to perform as well as he wished in his first combat action, King assures him there's no such thing as a coward in Vietnam, that next time Taylor will do better.

Because *Platoon's* moral landscape ranges dope smokers on the side of good, King also introduces Taylor to the "Heads" and the dope-smoking den at base camp, called ''the Underworld.'' These soldiers are ''good'' because they refuse to give themselves over completely to warfare, choosing instead to survive by fighting hard when they must, avoiding violence as much as possible, and ''dropping out'' when they're safe—to escape their memories of the war. For example, King and a friend walk away from the platoon and hide to smoke marijuana as other soldiers burn down a village. King says: ''Let's just do the dope. It beats the shit out of burnin' hootches.'' And his friend replies: ''There it is, man. You got to fight a war, stoned is the way to be'' (Dye 141). But when King senses later that danger is near, he stays alert, and he warns Taylor that doing too much dope will bring him down. This balance of concentration and caring works in the fictional world of *Platoon*, for King leaves on his chopper to the ''freedom bird'' before a devastating enemy attack, and key members of the Heads survive it. However we may view the morality or appropriateness of smoking marijuana while in uniform, King is portrayed as a highly effective black combat soldier who maintains his humanity in the face of violence and devastation.

Donald Bodey develops a similar character and friendship in his Vietnam novel, *F.N.G.* (1985). Bodey's narrator is a white man, Gabriel Sauers, who becomes friends with a black man soon after arriving in Vietnam. Sauers knows the man at first only as a fellow recruit, with a ''hard-ass look . . . that is scary all by itself, like his head comes off and just floats in front of your face, defiant-like'' (287). But the latter distinguishes himself quickly through a confrontation with a second lieutenant. When the black man refuses to come to attention in the barracks, the lieutenant calls him a ''dumb black'' and asks his name. He says: ''Dumb black is pretty close, *sir* Smart-ass White. Just call me Black'' (15). He's restrained from punching the lieutenant by his barracks-mates, and from that time on goes by the nickname of Callmeblack or, simply, Callme. In this scene, Bodey emphatically establishes Callme's race and unwillingness to defer to white prejudice. Consequently, the black man's developing relationship with the white narrator is based on mutual respect and need, rather than on social expectations of inferiority.

Two scenes reinforce this point, occurring after the men have shared hard work, long marches, and initial battle. Because of Callme's physical strength and ability, he carries a heavy M-79 grenade launcher and extra grenades, which makes his inability to swim particularly treacherous during deep-river crossings. In one case, he falls into a deep pool, and Sauers saves him from drowning. Callme returns the favor during what will become Sauers' last combat action, when he takes the white man's place on point to crawl into vicious sniper fire. Although Callme survives this part of the mission, he steps onto a mine and loses his legs in the explosion. Sauers' reaction is so intense that he "freaks out" and is removed permanently from the war because of battle fatigue. A tough, unremitting narrative of suffering, friendship, and compassion, *F.N.G.* clearly illustrates the esteem which many Vietnam veterans share for the black combat soldier.

The preceding works hint at the ambivalent position of black soldiers in Vietnam. Initially, Blacks often found a special pride in being "the meanest, baddest motherfuckers in the valley. As Wallace Terry points out, before the Tet offensive most Blacks were volunteers, and their high proportion of fatalities stemmed more from their own courage, aggressiveness, and desire to carry an extra burden in combat than from prejudicial actions by commanders (Terry, *Florida Times* 3). In the later years of the war, however, many more black soldiers were discontented with being drafted and having to fight a war against their brown brothers of the Third World. As Erwin Parson points out in an article on black Vietnam veterans, these men frequently identified with the Vietnamese people, whom they viewed as remarkable survivors of poverty and war—much like Blacks who had survived an economic and class war at home (365-66). Thus, in narratives set after the 1968 Tet offensive, relationships with white soldiers become more complex and often, more costly to the black soldier's psyche.

James Webb's *Fields of Fire* introduces a character, Cannonball, who is aware of this ambivalence and is therefore typical of the post-Tet black soldier. Of mixed blood and brought up in a rural area, Cannonball is confused about the high principles yet violent actions of the civil rights movement. But, after joining the Marines to avoid an Army that had given his brother a bad conduct discharge, Cannonball doesn't suffer from indecision in the field. Like Callmeblack in Bodey's *F.N.G.*, Cannonball carries the M-79 grenade launcher and more than 100 pounds of ammunition, often pacing ahead of his platoon and bringing his "portable artillery" to bear on the enemy. Again, he's a powerful, effective soldier, who maintains a ferocious loyalty to others in his squad and an especially strong friendship with Bagger, a white man from Georgia. Cannonball and Bagger share foxholes, cover one another in combat, and save each other's life several times throughout the narrative.

In the rear areas, issues and friendships aren't so clear, however. Instead, Cannonball finds "group reactions to discipline. Group hates. Group concessions. The merry-go-round was spinning full speed. Be a Brother or face the risk of being alone, rejected by both groups" (277). At one point, he corrects a black shirker, Cornbread, who insists that white soldiers won't save Blacks when the latter are injured. Cannonball says: "You got it wrong, man. You ain' been out here long enough. Rest of us, we *tight* out here. Ain' nobody goan' treat you different. Ain' nobody goan' let you die'' (271). But the contrast between his own light skin and Cornbread's ebony black reminds Cannonball ''that in this war within a war, he himself was his own battleground'' (271). The black soldiers think Cannonball is trying to be white because he refuses to embrace their radical views, even though in this case he knows from his own experience that whites have often saved Blacks (and vice versa) in combat.

These difficulties come to a head when Cannonball and Bagger go to visit a black friend at the ''Black Shack''—a rear-area Black Panther and Muslim headquarters, which James Webb describes as ''the place to come and rap about the horrors of racism and prejudice'' (194). To keep Bagger from starting a race riot in an effort to see their black friend, Homocide, Cannonball must take sides and enter the Black Shack, telling Bagger that he has to ''rap with a brother'' alone. Although Bagger feels temporarily alienated by Cannonball's decision, they reconcile their differences when back in the bush and remain close until a firefight sends them out of Vietnam for good: Cannonball seriously wounded and burned, and Bagger blinded by a phosphorous grenade.

Webb clearly sees the race issue as divisive and counterproductive to combat goals in *Fields of Fire*, so his treatment of it isn't particularly sensitive. Yet, he does try to show how the issue weighs on black soldiers who must balance race and duty to country. And Webb believes that most Blacks resolved it as Cannonball does—by conceding to some radical demands at base camps while committing themselves to ''getting the job done'' in combat.

Although most black soldiers must reconcile divided loyalties to function in a white-dominated military, black noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and officers face an even more complex dilemma. By virtue of rank or years of service, they are poised between identification with their minority heritage and the need to support and implement the demands of a white power structure. In many cases, these black leaders have come from backgrounds and economic strata similar to those of basic enlistees but are separated from the latter largely because they have decided to make a career of military service. First Lieutenant Archie Biggers comments on this division in *Bloods*:

> 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 a part of the establishment. Because I am an officer. . . . You see, blacks are not supposed to be officers. Blacks are supposed to be those guys that take orders, and not necessarily those that give them. If you give orders, it means that you had to kiss somebody's rear end to get into that position. (117)

Vietnam tested the effectiveness of these black "lifers" and, at least in popular culture, usually showed them to be highly capable soldiers.

A most sentimental and obvious treatment of this theme occurs in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Two black characters, Chief Phillips and Clean, operate a Navy patrol boat which takes Captain Willard up river in search of the crazed Colonel Kurtz, who has "gone native." Clean, a good-natured boy, is the first to be killed by the Viet Cong as the boat approaches Kurtz' hideout. But Coppola turns this death into an anti-establishment statement by having the noncommissioned officer, Phillips, discover Clean's inert body and then cradle it in a sorrowful tableau. The lighting and framing make them a pietistic picture of racial oneness and brotherly unity, as though they symbolize the wrongs committed by the white establishment (Adair 160), which has wrenched the Afro-Americans into the technological violence of modern warfare.

On one level, by naming his senior black character Chief Phillips, Coppola simply refers to the naval rank of chief petty officer. At the same time, however, "Chief" suggests the American Indian, the African native, and perhaps even the Vietnamese or Montagnard chief. Thus, Phillips represents a bonding of several oppressed peoples. Moreover, he is a black man "sinning against himself," for he commands a river warship and its modern firepower against the primitive Montagnards under Kurtz' command. In this context, Coppola must find it particularly fitting that Phillips dies from a wound inflicted by a wooden spear; his character of African ancestry falls victim to the jungle weapon, forging another deadly bond between two "non-American" societies (Adair 161). Of course, Phillips and Clean are unaware of these implications. They fight valiantly in the "white man's war," just as black soldiers do in the books and films already discussed.

Eloquent but more realistic testimony to the dilemma of black NCOs in Vietnam appears in the oral histories of Wallace Terry's *Bloods*. For example, Air Force sergeant Don Browne was particularly hurt by the assassination of Martin Luther King. He wrote President Lyndon Johnson a letter pointing out that he was protecting foreigners in their country at the risk of losing his own life, whereas in his own country a personal hero—King—couldn't even walk the streets safely (167). Still, Browne commanded a squad of security policemen who conducted search and destroy raids on Viet Cong encampments near Tuy Hoa during 1968. And he took part in clearing the American Embassy of Viet Cong infiltrators during the Tet offensive.

Browne points out that duty in Saigon was truly combat duty, because many people were killed by grenades and booby traps in populated areas. After the war, Browne obtained a commission and eventually retired as an officer. His comments and career show him to be an effective leader despite deep feelings of resentment over racial prejudice in America.

Another compelling story emerges from the narrative of Sergeant Major Edgar Huff, a 30-year Marine veteran who served with the Third Marine Amphibious Force in Vietnam from 1970 to 1971. Upon his retirement in 1972, Huff heard from many active-duty generals, received the key to his home city of Gadsden, Alabama, and got a phone call from Governor George Wallace telling him that his career was an example for others to follow. As Huff says: ''That's a long way to come for a boy who come into the Marines so poor he had just a quarter in his pocket, had pasteboard in his shoes to cover the holes, and one pair of drawers with a knot tied in the damn seat to keep them from flappin' around like a dress'' (144). By 1972, Huff represented the opinion of black people in military service as a whole—that the military was more egalitarian and a more likely avenue of self-advancement than the civilian sector (Moskos 118). Thus, a strong ''pull'' encouraged black soldiers toward military service, in which rank replaced race as a measure of social equality.

Huff shows that the road to career advancement was lined with pitfalls, however, because the military was also a locus of institutional racism in which competence directly challenged prejudice. For example, Huff was arrested in Atlanta, Georgia, while attempting to get to Alabama for Christmas leave and a visit to his ailing mother. The charge was impersonating a Marine, for Huff was unable to convince anyone that he was truly in the Corps. The Navy chaplain even refused to talk to him while administering Christmas prayers to the prisoners. Fortunately, his commander in North Carolina was able to get Huff released, but this incident was one of many examples of prejudice and bad treatment Huff suffered during his career. Even after his retirement, four white Marines attacked Huff's home with white phosphorous hand grenades. The Marine Corps transferred or discharged these four white men in order to avoid bringing them up for criminal prosecution.

Sergeant Major Huff points out that if there were ever a man who "should be prejudiced as far as the white man is concerned," it would be he, because the officers and some of the sergeants kicked him "every way but loose" (148). Yet, Huff refused to allow their slurs to make him prejudiced in return, believing it was his job to take care of all his men—black and white. In fact, he received a Bronze Star at the age of 48 for saving a white radio operator from hostile fire in Vietnam, taking shrapnel in his own shoulder and arm in the process. Thus, an image of professionalism and combat effectiveness emerges from Sergeant Huff's oral history, typically marking him off from the petty or malicious actions of his white "superiors."

Although fictional black NCOs and officers don't appear as frequently as their lower ranking counterparts in Vietnam narratives, positive portrayals certainly exist. In many cases, however, these black career soldiers put aside the racial dilemma, preferring instead to pour their efforts into top performance. For example, Platoon Sergeant Sadler in *Fields of Fire* has no patience for the Black Shack and its inhabitants' radical views. His number-one rule is that "people ain't never goan' forget you're a nigger" or believe that "niggers an' honkies are the same." The only thing he can do is to be so good that it doesn't matter, whereas the people in the Black Shack "want everybody to say they ain' *bad*, no matter what kind o' shit they put down, just because they're niggers'' (344). Because he has heard, and fully believes, that the best NCOs in the Marine Corps are black, Sergeant Sadler helps the top sergeant dismantle the Black Shack and scatter those who undermine their professionalism. In James Webb's fictional world, Sadler's own bravery in battle and prowess as a leader legitimize this black sergeant's views.

In some cases, however, black NCOs and officers cannot resolve the conflict between their military and racial positions so clearly or positively. One that comes to mind is a black staff sergeant in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. After Martin Luther King's death, this black sergeant who ''had all but decided on a career in the Army,'' doesn't know what to do. As a potential ''lifer,'' he foresees the possibility of having to turn his gun on his own people. But he also recognizes that going home to Alabama will only be a hassle and that his best opportunity lies in a military career. As Herr writes, ''there was hardly a black NCO anywhere who wasn't having to deal with that'' (169). The sergeant sits crying silently, and the reader senses several meanings when he gets up to leave and says: ''This war gets old.'' A battle raging on a nearby hill mirrors the one within him, as well as the racial strife back home.

For another example, we might look briefly to Roscoe Jackson, the protagonist of Thomas Taylor's novel, *A Piece of This Country*. Taylor derives his title from an epigraph by Tom Still: ''What the Negro wants—and all the Negro wants—is a piece of what everyone else has. All they want is a piece of this country; all they want is to see it work for them as it does for everyone else'' (8). Taylor's main character, Jackson, holds a Silver Star for heroism and a formidable combat reputation as a soldier with ''transhuman perception'' (11). His white officers call him ''Black

Power'' and deeply respect his abilities. Back in the United States, Jackson's prospects are far more limited, however. With four children and a wife who has sickle-cell anemia, Jackson can look forward only to taking back his job as a bartender when he rotates back to Maryland. Previously, the white bar owner paid him half the wage of a white bartender, and the customers told racial jokes and looked through him as though he weren't there. With bills mounting up and the loss of combat pay and income tax exclusions facing him, a third tour in Vietnam beckons Jackson as a solution to economic and racial limitations.

Because of these conditions at home, Jackson is easily persuaded to become an advisor to a South Vietnamese company near the Laotian border. There, he learns that the North Vietnamese regular army has entered South Vietnam, beginning a new phase of the war, and he must find a way to eliminate the threat of the enemy regiment. In the action that follows, Jackson demonstrates the military tactics and bravery that recommend him for continued service in the Army. Unfortunately, an attack by the North Vietnamese regiment on the fort where he is an advisor makes that service impossible. Jackson dies when he purposely attracts a retaliatory strike by American Crusader aircraft onto his machine gun position, which is about to be overrun by the enemy.

Taylor doesn't kill off his protagonist to show us Jackson's courageous sacrifice, however. Jackson's decision to remain and die, rather than escaping through a tunnel prepared for that purpose, stems from despair, not heroic impulse. This despair emerges from the last letter he has received from his wife, and which he reads quickly during a brief lull in the fighting. It describes his 10-year-old daughter's harrassment by white children at an integrated school, which she has begun to attend after Jackson left for Vietnam. Jackson had come to see the integrated school, where Blacks and whites could learn and live together, as a symbol of hope for Blacks in America. But now the white children call his daughter names, say she smells bad, and throw wads of school papers at her—an example of ingrained prejudice that, in Jackson's mind, typifies what he will be coming home to. At least, Jackson thinks, his serviceman's insurance will provide his family some economic stability, and his death in Vietnam will give his son a 'hero' to remember, instead of a poor, essentially invisible black man. Although this ending is melodramatic, *A Piece of This Country* nevertheless illustrates the too real tension between "opportunities" of combat service for Blacks and the dead ends of a racist society. In this instance, Roscoe Jackson's combat prowess, bravery, and record of performance are not enough to sustain him against the hopelessness of a blighted future for himself and his family.

This tension of conflicting values is also at the heart of Loyd Little's novel, *Parthian Shot*, which depicts a black staff sergeant who is the business brains of a Special Forces "A" Team in the Mekong delta. The team has been stranded in Vietnam through an Army personnel bungle and must now fend for themselves. Staff Sergeant Leroy Santee puts his supply experience to work by managing Hoa Hao Unlimited Ltd., a diversified manufacturing operation that supplies non-combatant goods to armies on both sides of the war. Playing on the issue of brotherhood between black soldiers and the Vietnamese, Little says Santee actually thinks he is an Oriental, whose economically oriented imagination melds perfectly with the Vietnamese peasants' approach to industry. In responding to questions of race and politics, Santee subscribes to the philosophy of Major Lam Than Choi, their Vietnamese camp commander: "If you don't use the words 'Viet Cong' or 'American' or 'South Vietnamese,' it all pretty much sounds the same''(282). In fact, Santee shows his resourcefulness by employing an ex-Viet Cong as a salesman, thus using the equivalent of a double agent to market Hoa Hao's products. Santee's political orientation and competence help to explain why he is able to laugh at the racist jokes of Top Sergeant O'Hara, ''as if both men were playing the last act of the Old South. . . . as if they both knew it and were somehow deeply trapped in the mysticism of it all'' (20).

Little makes it clear, however, that Santee's laughter masks a deeper conflict based on his family history. The son of a black garbage collector from Augusta, Georgia, Santee had joined the Army because of a promise to his father that the latter would not have to labor through his old age. But Santee's father dies prematurely, leaving Santee with no other motivation than making money for its own sake—regardless of the consequences to others. Eventually, through his enterprises in Vietnam, Santee understands that money isn't just something ''you could con somebody out of'' but a ''symbol representing your work.'' Because he has also created a company that allows the Vietnamese to trade their skills for a better way of life, for the first time he is ''doing more than carrying things,'' which is all he would ever be allowed to do back in Augusta (262). Consequently, Santee asks to remain in Vietnam, and the team agrees to report him lost on patrol and suspected captured.

Underneath the satire, then, Loyd Little presents a sympathetic treatment of Santee's racial identification with the Vietnamese people, as well as his blighted opportunity for self-actualizing work in the United States. Santee's organization and intelligence make it possible for the team, as well as the local people, to survive and prosper. Yet, just as Roscoe Jackson's record of performance could not assure him of full equality in American society, so Leroy Santee's achievements as a noncommissioned officer cannot secure him a "piece of his country" back home. Instead, he must make a new home for himself in a land that allows him to transcend the perceived limitations of race, a land that echoes his own aspirations.

The most complex black military leader I have discovered in Vietnam fiction or film is Lieutenant Rufus Brooks, in John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*. Brooks represents how an analytical thinker might respond to the black soldier's experience in Vietnam. During his initial assignment to the 101st Airborne Division staff, Brooks establishes a reputation for being critical of his commanders. With a master's degree in philosophy, he knows he is better educated and probably more intelligent than they. He chafes especially against their treatment of him as a "token nigger" and their foolish rationalizing of policies that send disproportionate numbers of black soldiers to combat units. Once he becomes commander of a reconnaissance platoon, however, Brooks discovers a flair for combat leadership that extends from his ability to think carefully through each battle situation. His successes have made him a company commander at the book's opening, the only lieutenant to hold such a position. Yet, he doesn't really like the army and he hopes "never again to wear anything green" (38).

In fact, Brooks had never "joined" anything before discovering—and nurturing—the close brotherhood of a combat unit. In high school "he was accepted by everyone, yet he accepted no one," and in college he "always maintained a distance" (207). This aloofness is actually a strength when dealing with his soldiers, however, for it allows him to entertain all opinions openly and to treat each soldier's ideas with respect. Brooks believes that no one is truly stupid, that all people are capable of careful thought if properly encouraged. Thus, *The 13th Valley* alternates between "manic moments" of combat action and contemplative discussions to work out conflicts. Brooks preserves racial harmony in particular through regular "councils," so the black soldiers don't feel "Uncle Tommed" and the white soldiers don't feel usurped by black authority. This atmosphere supports the militant views of Blacks like Jax and Doc, as well as the white progressive views of Sergeant Daniel Egan, while welding the men together into a formidable combat team.

Within his own mind, Brooks is more concerned with the erosion of black culture and its consequences—the larger conflicts between peoples. Gradually, he draws together his observations into a treatise, which he calls "An Inquiry into Personal, Racial and International Conflict." He believes that "the causes of war are very deeply seated in white American culture and black America is being assimilated by that culture," thus making the Vietnam War impossible for black Americans to understand (149). In particular, Brooks sees a unity in black culture and language that has been "dichotomized" by Western thought, which expresses itself in thesis and antithesis. In turn, this expression by opposites leads to racial (and other) conflict. Brooks' ultimate hope is that societies will learn to "treat all people as individuals and all individuals fairly. Let us each believe and teach our young. . . before all, I am a human individual supporting myself and the unity of humanity" (564). Thus, Brooks combines racial awareness, combat prowess, and authoritative leadership in a single character.

Del Vecchio makes Brooks' conclusions more poignant in light of the outcome of a final raging action against North Vietnamese regulars. Brooks and a radical black medic, Doc, lose their lives while shielding the wounded white sergeant, Daniel Egan, from a hailstorm of enemy bullets. And Jax, the black soldier most given over to militant racial views in their company councils, has his shirt burned off his back while trying to bring Egan out to the rescue helicopters that hover nearby. Jax must pull back from the flames, leaving Egan still alive under the huddled bodies of Doc and Brooks. Tears stream from Jax' eyes, as he screams: '''We left em there. . . . We left em there. Egan woant dead''' (636). Brooks, Doc, and Jax therefore carry out Brooks' ''ultimate hope'' by supporting the unity and sanctity of humanity, regardless of color. Again, Del Vecchio shows black soldiers responding with heroism and selflessness in combat, despite their deep misgivings about racial conflict in ''the World.''

By emphasizing sympathetic treatments of black soldiers in Vietnam materials, I am not suggesting that negative characters are entirely absent or that we should dismiss racist portrayals where they exist. Readers and scholars alike should continue to question works that allow stereotypes to dominate. Yet, stereotypical depictions do not overwhelm those representing the special bonding and courage of individuals in combat. In fact, because most Vietnam narratives work very close to the grain of combat experience, they often illustrate the black man's prowess in battle and powerful loyalty in relationships—with Blacks or whites. Many films and novels also take seriously the special trauma of black soldiers who must reconcile their combat service with the lack of basic freedoms in their own society. Finally, a number of popular works deal honestly with the particular difficulties of black career soldiers, whose commitment to service and aspirations for advancement conflict with their racial awareness. Together, these portrayals move toward giving black soldiers their due while offering added insight into the Vietnam experience.

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