

Gerald F. Goodwin

“You’re the same as us”: African-American Soldiers and the Vietnamese

I acquired a secret admiration for the Vietnamese people in general. In many ways the Vietnamese people endured the same harsh problems as the American black population. Both were victims of social and economic inequality.¹-Ed Emanuel

Over 2.5 million American soldiers served in Vietnam. Their stated mission was to defeat the communist insurgency and ensure the preservation of a non-communist Republic of Vietnam (RVN), thereby enhancing American prestige and power during the Cold War. The majority of these soldiers knew little more about Vietnam than what their government had told them; almost no American soldier spoke Vietnamese or had any knowledge or understanding of the culture and history of Vietnam’s 17.5 million inhabitants.²

Albert French of Pittsburgh remembered that “I didn’t understand too much about Vietnam. I knew where it was, I had looked on a map. I didn’t watch TV and really didn’t know what was going on, other than that troops had been sent in we were going to join them.”³ French’s feelings about Vietnam and the amount of research he did about it was not atypical. Bill Bryels also thought very little about Vietnam or the Vietnamese people before he was sent to Vietnam. He stated that “I had no quarrel with the Vietnamese-never even heard of Vietnam until the war. It was not something we were taught in world history. We knew about China, but Vietnam was not-something I knew about.”⁴

Their ignorance was shared by the educated classes. Between 1954 and 1968 there were only two tenured professors at American universities who spoke Vietnamese. During the same period only 22 of 7,615 graduate dissertations in modern history,

¹ Ed Emanuel, *Soul Patrol* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2003), 130.

² Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press), 17-18.

³ Albert French, *Patches of Fire: A Story of War and Redemption* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1997), 18.

⁴ Interview with Bill C. Bryels as found in Robert E. Vadas, *Cultures in Conflict: The Vietnam War* (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 99.

political science, or international relations dealt with Vietnamese issues.⁵ Vietnam was completely foreign to the American experience.

The difficulties faced by American soldiers in interpreting what they saw and experienced were aggravated by their inability to distinguish the Vietnamese who supported the communist resistance from those who supported the government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), or even those who were neutral. Lamont B. Steptoe's poem "Uncle's South Sea China Blue Nightmare" accurately reflects the many roles Americans perceived the Vietnamese as playing and their inability to distinguish who were friends or enemies.

In country
Vietnamese shine boots wash laundry
make love to you
some even try to end your
life with a bang⁶

To the American soldier, a Vietnamese could be a shoe shiner, a sexual partner, or a killer. Despite the confusion, American soldiers did form strong opinions about non-combatant Vietnamese, supporters of the RVN, soldiers in the ARVN, and members of the National Liberation Front (NLF). Unfortunately, historians have not adequately addressed the American soldier's view of the Vietnamese people and their relationship with them.

When examining American attitudes toward the Vietnamese, one must recognize that American soldiers did not have contact with all sectors of Vietnamese society. One historian has claimed that American soldiers primarily "formed their opinions of Vietnamese based upon their impressions of bar girls, pimps, street peddlers, and other figures who worked in the vice districts that catered to soldiers."⁷ While this assessment is accurate in part, American soldiers also interacted with South Vietnamese villagers,

⁵ Gerard J. Degroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 83.

⁶ Lamont B. Steptoe, "Uncle's South Sea China Blue Nightmare" as found in *Soul Soldiers: African-Americans and the Vietnam Era*. Edited by Samuel W. Black (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh Regional History Center, 2006), 181.

⁷ Herman Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 61.

refugees, and civilians who performed menial tasks in American camps. They also had occasional contact with soldiers serving in the ARVN and of course with the NLF.

Considering the circumstances in which most soldiers came into contact with the Vietnamese, one would expect that they would hold a negative view of the Vietnamese. In 1978, the Veteran's Administration commissioned a general study of the soldiers' attitudes and experiences titled *Legacies of Vietnam*. This study is a valuable source for examining American military personnel's attitudes toward numerous issues raised by the Vietnam War. When asked about their general feelings toward the Vietnamese, without distinguishing which side they supported, 48% of black veterans reported positive feelings, while only 27% of white veterans reported the same thing. Perhaps even more striking, 32% of white veterans held negative feelings toward the Vietnamese, while only 9% of blacks reported these same feelings.⁸ While the *Legacies* study clearly shows that African-American soldiers had a much more positive impression of the general Vietnamese population than white soldiers, it tells us little about their feelings toward particular groups. To gain a more nuanced understanding of African-American views of Vietnamese civilians, the ARVN, and the NLF, one must examine African-American testimonies.

African-American soldiers had the most interaction with South Vietnamese civilians. While it is likely that many civilians supported the NLF or ARVN, soldiers had no way of distinguishing their political affiliation. One of the difficulties many soldiers had with the South Vietnamese they encountered was that they did not know if they were friend or foe; therefore the South Vietnamese will be defined as non-combatant civilians of no confirmed political affiliation.

According to African-American testimonies, blacks felt a considerable empathy for the Vietnamese. There appear to be many reasons for this. As a minority in America and as persons of color, black soldiers, not surprisingly, were able to identify with members of another non-white minority. While it may seem silly or ridiculous for

⁸ Arthur Egendorf, et al. *Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative of Vietnam Veterans and Their Peers*. prepared for the Veterans' Administration (pursuant to Public Law 95-202, the GI Improvement Act of 1977) ; submitted to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), 392. Joel Brende and Erwin Parson, *Vietnam Veterans: Road To Recovery* (New York City: Plenum Press, 1985) also argues that African-American soldiers were largely more sympathetic to Vietnamese than white soldiers.

African-American soldiers to view the Vietnamese as a minority, given they were the majority in South Vietnam, in the minds of the black soldiers they had subordinate or inferior status according to American standards. They were just as subject to discrimination from whites as any other non-white person in the world.

Knowing nothing about the Vietnamese or Vietnam, African-American soldiers interpreted their experiences in the Vietnam War from a perspective shaped almost entirely by their experiences back in the United States. Many African-American soldiers saw a close connection between the poverty that most blacks experienced in the United States and the poverty experienced by the average Vietnamese in South Vietnam. Vietnamese civilians worked primarily in menial positions such as cleaners or cooks, positions normally held by blacks in the United States. The assumption was that whites had forced Vietnamese into servitude just as they had blacks back in the United States. This comparison influenced the way many blacks viewed and treated the Vietnamese. Dwyte Brown from Washington, D.C articulated this perception when he stated “(m)e, myself, as a person, knowing from the experience that I had with whites back here in America, I could not go over there and degrade another human being. I see a little Vietnamese in trouble, I even bend over and help him out.”⁹

A clear majority of African-American soldiers believed that they had a better overall relationship with the Vietnamese than did white soldiers. Many claimed that they were able to relate to the Vietnamese because they were both people of color who had experienced poverty and discrimination. Don Jernigan observed that “you certainly felt the kinship with the people of color that you were combating and in the villages and the hamlets, sometimes you felt that brotherhood in terms of reaching out and the warmth that you got from certain papasans and certain mamasans.”¹⁰ Similarly, Alexander White

⁹Dwyte Brown’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 265.

¹⁰ Interview with Don Jernigan as found in Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986), 94. “Mamasan” and “Papasans” were colloquial terms used by American soldiers in Vietnam when referring to older women and older men.

claimed that he had great difficulty viewing Vietnamese people as the enemy as they were people of color and more like him than different.¹¹

Jernigan and White both pointed to color as the explanation for African-Americans ability to relate to Vietnamese civilians, but the majority of African-American soldiers testimonies revealed other reasons. Christian G. Appy's *Working Class War* has pointed out that African-American soldiers overwhelmingly came from working class backgrounds and that many African-American soldiers grew up in relative poverty.¹²

However, even the poorest African-American soldier had likely not experienced the level of poverty that almost all Vietnamese experienced. While South Vietnam did have wealthy peasant landowners, an urban elite, and a middle class, American soldiers did not have much contact with these groups. African-American soldiers were much more likely to come in contact with the rural poor and refugees. The majority of rural Vietnamese were poor tenant farmers who worked small plots of land or rice paddies. They lived in thatched houses with dirt floors and without toilets, running water, refrigeration, or electricity. Vietnamese refugees did not fare much better. It is estimated that the Vietnam War caused the displacement of at least 5 million South Vietnamese, more than one fourth of the population. Refugees lived in makeshift shantytowns or camps and the majority of their dwellings were made from discarded American garbage.¹³ While few if any African-American soldiers experienced the level of poverty that many rural and refugee Vietnamese were experiencing, they were able to relate the poverty of the Vietnamese to their own poverty and that of other African-Americans.

For some African-Americans the poverty they witnessed was shocking. David Parks stated that "the villages we passed through were really poverty-stricken. People go to the bathroom in the streets, and the kids ran alongside the convoy begging for food."¹⁴ James Daly was initially surprised by the level of poverty in Vietnam, noting that "the people here are about a hundred years behind the American and I feel sorry for them."¹⁵

¹¹ Interview with Alexander White as found in Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986)124.

¹² Appy, 25.

¹³ Ibid, 288-289.

¹⁴ David Parks, *GI Diary* (Washington D.C: Howard University Press, 1984), 49.

¹⁵ James Daly, *Black Prisoner of War: A Conscientious Objector's Vietnam Memoir* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000),52.

Yet, Daly was able to relate what he saw to his own experiences growing up in a housing project in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn.¹⁶

Similarly, Samuel Vance could relate the poverty of his African-American community to the poverty he saw in South Vietnam. He “often looked at the poor, deprived children and thought of my own people back home and how little they had...I often prayed that other people could look at my people and other minority groups and feel this compassion.”¹⁷ Vance related the struggles of the Vietnamese to those of black Americans and quite compellingly observed that all oppressed minorities are equally deserving of notice and assistance.

Emmanuel J. Holloman observed that “blacks got along better with the Vietnamese people, because they knew the hardships the Vietnamese went through.”¹⁸ While Holloman maintained that the majority of white soldiers looked down on the Vietnamese and believed them to be stupid and generally worthless, blacks were able to relate to them because of their poverty. In Holloman’s words “I had five brothers and three sisters. My mother worked, still works in an old folks home. An attendant changing beds and stuff...I had to leave school after the eighth grade to work in North Carolina.”¹⁹ In Holloman’s estimation his own poverty allowed him to see the Vietnamese in a more sympathetic light. However, he also implied that only black people were truly able to relate to the Vietnamese and whites, poor or not, were largely unsympathetic.²⁰ To Holloman blacks were able to relate to Vietnamese civilians because they had experienced both economic and social inequality. While some whites were poor, they had never experienced the social inequalities that a person of color faced. Ed Emanuel agreed “I acquired a secret admiration for the Vietnamese people in general. In many ways Vietnamese people endured the same harsh problems as the American black population. Both were victims of social and economic inequality.”²¹

When discussing the poverty of the Vietnamese, a number of African-American soldiers focused on the only Vietnamese they had daily contact with, the civilians

¹⁶ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁷ Samuel Vance, *The Courageous and Proud* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1979), 159.

¹⁸ Emmanuel J. Holloman’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 83.

¹⁹ Ibid., 83.

²⁰ Ibid., 82-83.

²¹ Emanuel, 130.

employed by the American military. The economy of the RVN became almost entirely dependent on American expenditures and Vietnamese refugees and poor urbanites became more and more dependent on the American military for employment as the war went on. The military officially employed roughly 100,000 Vietnamese civilians, but it is likely that an even higher number worked unofficially. These workers, mostly young women, typically worked on American bases in such menial positions as cleaners, launderers, or maids. American soldiers could hire Vietnamese women, colloquially referred to as “hootch maids,” to make their beds, shine their boots, clean their floors, and wash and iron their clothes for about five dollars a month. While American soldiers were by no means rich, as the lowest ranking soldier made between \$150 and \$200 a month, all of them could afford the services of a “hootch maid” if they wanted one. While the majority of white soldiers felt they were providing much needed employment to the Vietnamese, many black soldiers felt differently.²² They saw the Vietnamese holding these positions as victims of white exploitation. White American society had forced American blacks into a subservient position and was now doing the same thing to the South Vietnamese.

Even before arriving in Vietnam, David Parks predicted that the southern whites with whom he went through training would “probably treat the Vietnamese civilians like they treated the black people back where they came from.”²³ Other black soldiers found his predictions to be true.

Bill Bryels immediately noticed that “they had a number of Vietnamese people doing the kind of things I was accustomed to seeing African-Americans do—laundry, sweeping, cleaning, garbage details, and those kinds of things.”²⁴ Bryels clearly perceived that the Vietnamese were occupying the subordinate place that African-Americans held in America, but in Vietnam. He confessed “the thought occurred to me, which was later made very popular by Richard Pryor: They were the new ‘niggers.’”²⁵

Richard Guidry, a Marine from Texas, made similar observations about the Vietnamese who worked in his military camp. While eating lunch at the military base in

²² Appy, 289-291.

²³ Parks, 31.

²⁴ Interview with Bill C. Bryels as found in *Cultures in Conflict*, 99.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

Da Nang, Guidry noticed that all the people washing dishes were Vietnamese. He mentioned to his white friend Ciantar “isn’t that just like Americans, always have to have someone cleaning up after them?” Ciantar disagreed completely with Guidry countering with “before you start branding anyone an ugly American, Who do you think is going to wash the damn pots, a bunch of pot washers from Kansas? Besides, these guys probably make more money than they ever dreamed of.” Guidry remained unconvinced by Ciantar’s reasoning.²⁶

Guidry and Ciantar’s statements are revealing. The men clearly interpreted differently the significance of the Vietnamese dishwashers. Guidry was able both to sympathize with the plight of the Vietnamese dishwashers and perceive that they have been put in this subservient position by American whites. Ciantar reflected a much more paternalistic view of the Vietnamese and believed that the American military was actually helping them. Judging from his comments he also appeared to believe that washing pots was appropriate for Vietnamese civilians. It wouldn’t make any sense to hire Americans to clean the pots. Guidry’s choice of language- “isn’t it just like the Americans”- implied that he was not an American or at least not the same sort as Ciantar. Clearly Guidry did not want to be seen as someone forcing the Vietnamese into subservience.

This was not the only occasion when Guidry observed Vietnamese civilians being placed in a subservient position. Walking through a village, Guidry’s platoon spotted an elderly couple. The other members of the platoon were initially suspicious, and when the old woman ran inside her hut, they raised their weapons in anticipation. However, a few minutes later “the old woman emerged from the hut with a pot and several tin cups, wearing a smile that I had often seen southern blacks put on for white bosses.”²⁷ Again Guidry created an image of the Vietnamese as the African-Americans of Vietnam. Although, African-American soldiers’ experiences with Vietnamese civilians were extremely limited; anytime they saw Vietnamese civilians they were subordinate to Americans. It was an easy step to compare that relationship to their own with whites back in the United States.

²⁶ Richard Guidry, *The War in I Corps*. (Raleigh, NC: Ivy Books, 1997), 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

Sympathetic to the plight of the Vietnamese, many African-American soldiers tried to assist them. Samuel Vance stated “I found my real aim was to help those poor, struggling people.”²⁸ While Vance did not say how he actually helped the Vietnamese, a number of African-American were more explicit.

McArthur Moore of Paducah, Kentucky, described numerous instances of hungry Vietnamese civilians asking him for food. Despite being told by officers not to give any food to the Vietnamese, Moore rationalized that “anybody with a heart wouldn’t turn people down like that” and he gave his food away. Moore’s experience with these civilians and their living conditions had a profound effect on his outlook on life. Moore remembered that “I saw those conditions and I saw the conditions that the people lived under, and I resolved that I was not going to be a complainer.”²⁹ James Daly gave food to Vietnamese civilians and in a letter home asked his family to send him candy to hand out to children. Robert Holcomb made a considerable effort to provide Vietnamese civilians with whatever they needed.³⁰ Holcomb claimed he gave away “big cans of beans, peaches, carrots, poncho liners, blankets, boots, socks, t-shirts” to the numerous Vietnamese he befriended.³¹

A number of African-Americans were in positions that allowed them to help Vietnamese people in a more substantial way. Luther C. Benton III of Portsmouth, Virginia, worked in hospital assistance in Hoi An. Since he was responsible for providing medicines and drugs to small villages, he had many opportunities to help Vietnamese civilians. He made sure the provincial hospital had a working x-ray, ambulances, and the latest drugs. However, according to his own account, he went far beyond his normal duties to provide whatever assistance village leaders requested. He made sure local villages were provided with rice and livestock, and when he wasn’t working, he went into the city and bought shoes, food, and soap for local orphans.³² He clearly felt considerable sympathy for the Vietnamese community and did his best to help them.

²⁸ Vance, 158.

²⁹ McArthur Moore, interview by Terry L. Birdwhistell, June 25, 1985, University of Kentucky Libraries Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project, King Library, Lexington, KY, 21-22.

³⁰ Daly, 52.

³¹ Robert Holcomb’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 209.

³² Luther C. Benton III’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 65-68.

Perhaps the most compelling story of an African-American soldier helping Vietnamese civilians involves Emanuel Holloman, who worked as an interpreter for four tours. One of Holloman's responsibilities was to report when his unit accidentally killed a civilian or destroyed someone's home. Holloman stated that his unit was "destroying quite a bit of stuff. Without me, they would make payments only once in a while. But I would go out of my way to let the division hear about anything the Cav did. I would tell them we destroyed this or we killed that, so we must pay it."³³ The majority of soldiers in his unit felt that the American military owed the Vietnamese nothing. His desire to compensate the Vietnamese led many whites in his unit to claim he was a traitor and cared more about the enemy than his own men. Nonetheless, Holloman continued to do his best to help the Vietnamese both on and off the job. He collected food in the cafeteria and took it to orphanages or gave it to refugees. On one occasion his sergeant reproached Holloman with "give them gooks everything. Make em fat. Raise em' up so my kid will have to grow up and come over here to fight em' too." Luckily, the sergeant's superior overruled him and allowed Holloman to continue collecting food for the orphans and refugees.³⁴ Through his interactions with the Vietnamese Holloman became

real close to the people. I taught English to the orphans. If a house was destroyed someplace, me and my driver and some Vietnamese would rebuild the building. People got hurt, we'd go there and sit and eat and drink with them. If somebody got killed, it would be real tough. I would go to the wake or funeral, and they would all be looking at me. And they're sad...I would try to make the payment as quickly as possible.³⁵

Holloman became so committed to his extracurricular activities that he passed up on a promotion three times and extended his tour four times by six months each. His commitment to Vietnamese civilians was so great that he was willing to extend his tour again and again and risk being killed in the line of fire; and he developed close relationships with Vietnamese communities who were grateful for his help.³⁶

Holloman was not the only African-American soldier to develop a relationship with an individual Vietnamese. These relationships often proved to be valuable for

³³ Emmanuel J. Holloman's account as found in *Bloods*, 80.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

African-American soldiers as Vietnamese civilians sometimes provided them with important information or even protection from the NLF.

Luther Benton made a concentrated effort not to make friends with any American soldier because he was afraid of befriending someone who might later be killed, but he developed relationships with numerous Vietnamese. Benton “spent a great deal of time discussing the problems of Vietnam with the Vietnamese people, what they felt, and what they thought about the Americans and their involvement.”³⁷ From these discussions Benton learned that many Vietnamese were ambivalent about the survival of RVN, but were not enthusiastic supporters of the NLF or NVA. The Vietnamese he met supported neither option and had therefore decided to allow both sides to fight it out.³⁸

Benton also developed close relationships with many orphan children who also supplied him with information about Vietnamese views on the war. It was not uncommon for African-American soldiers to develop friendships with the young orphans, who spent their days wandering around villages and American military bases. For example, Richard Ford’s unit became so close to an orphan boy that they planned to adopt him.³⁹ Richard Guidry developed a friendship with two little girls named Mai and Milli who lived at the Dong Ha city dump in Quang Tri Province. He visited the area every time he was in Dong Ha. Lingering memories of his friendship with Mai and Mili remained with Guidry well past his tour of duty, and he reported that “many years later, when I read of the Spring Offensive that rolled over Quang Tri Province in 1972, my thoughts were of Mai and Mili.”⁴⁰

Guidry also befriended a ten-year-old boy in Phong Dien village. While Guidry’s friendship with Mai and Mili mainly consisted of his supplying them with gifts, this boy was not very interested in the gifts Guidry provided. Guidry stated that “he sat with me and told me about his village and family, and I told him about big-city life in the USA, our conversation taking a humorous turn when I mentioned something about snow.”⁴¹ Guidry and the boy also talked about the much more serious topic of the Vietnam War

³⁷ Luther C. Benton’s account as found in *Bloods*, 67.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁹ Richard Ford’s account as found in *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 43.

⁴⁰ Guidry, 99.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

and America's role. Guidry expected the boy to be guarded in his discussions of the war; instead, he openly affirmed his support for the NLF and let Guidry know that there was considerable support for them in the area. While it is difficult to understand why the boy was so unguarded in his praise for the NLF, Guidry suggested that the boy was either too young to know any better or had correctly gauged that Guidry was sympathetic to the Vietnamese.⁴² While Guidry and the boy never discussed race, it is at least plausible that the boy felt that he could be more open with someone who was not white.

The preceding accounts emphasize generosity as the dominant characteristic of African-Americans' with Vietnamese civilians. These soldiers also thought that the Vietnamese responded in kind. A number of African-American soldiers believed their friendships with Vietnamese civilians provided protection from the NLF and NVA soldiers. Luther Benton claimed that his friendship with a number of orphans allowed him to drive through different villages without harassment.⁴³ Similarly, Holloman believed his friendship with the Vietnamese community allowed him to move around freely. He stated "the Americans were amazed, you know, at the way I was able to move around. Like I would go places where you couldn't take a tank."⁴⁴

Friendly Vietnamese civilians also provided black soldiers with information regarding NLF movements or potential attacks. While stationed at Cam Ranh Bay, Eddie Wright developed a friendship with a female maid who worked on the base. One night, at around four in the morning, Wright heard a knock on the door and it was the maid. Wright stated that "she grabbed my arm and said "Papa San Dee Dee" and she risked her life to tell me that the Viet Cong would hit Cam Ranh Bay in two days and she didn't want me to be there."⁴⁵ This incident is significant for a number of reasons. It is clear that the young maid had a close friendship with Wright and that she ran to tell him about the attack as soon as she heard about it. She had come to his door well past curfew, risking death as it was policy to shoot any Vietnamese found on the base after curfew. Lee Ewing reported a similar story. While building a bridge over the Perfume River, Ewing

⁴² Ibid., 99-100.

⁴³ Luther C. Benton's account as found in *Bloods*, 68.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel J. Holloman's account as found in *Bloods*, 81.

⁴⁵ Eddie Wright's account as found in *Thoughts About the Vietnam War*, 68. Although *Thoughts* is primarily made up of interviews Wright has with African-American soldiers, as an African-American veteran of Vietnam, he discusses his own experiences within the interviews as well.

befriended a young Vietnamese woman who sold soft drinks to the soldiers. The woman provided warnings to Ewing and his fellow soldiers: if the NLF was planning an attack, she would either not show up or leave early, signaling to them that they should prepare for an attack.⁴⁶ While the actions of these women might seem to have been motivated by more than simple friendship, there is no evidence of any sexual relationships.

Consensual sexual relationships between African-American men and Vietnamese women did occur, however many soldiers frequented prostitutes. It was not uncommon for a platoon to enter a village and immediately be approached by a young boy offering to arrange sex with his beautiful “sister.”⁴⁷ Most soldiers also had the option of visiting brothels in larger Vietnamese cities like Saigon and Da Nang. While it was not uncommon for black and white soldiers to frequent the same prostitutes, many blacks sought out the services of Cambodian and Senegalese-Asian women who worked in the Khan Alley area of Saigon, which was nicknamed “Soul Alley,” because of its black clientele.⁴⁸ Black soldiers preferred Cambodian and Senegalese women because their darker skin reminded them of African-American women back in the United States.

However, not all African-American soldiers were comfortable visiting a prostitute. Robert Holcomb’s unit paid for the services of a prostitute, but he refused to participate because he felt sorry for her.⁴⁹ He also feared she might have a venereal disease. While Holcomb does not mention the type of venereal disease he was worried about, there was a widespread rumor that Vietnamese prostitutes gave soldiers “black gonorrhea” or “black syphilis.” The other common rumor was that Vietnamese prostitutes hid razor blades in their vaginas in an effort to mutilate unsuspecting American soldiers.⁵⁰ The first time Robert Watters had sex with a Vietnamese woman his superior informed him of the various rumors, and he became so concerned that he poured grain alcohol on

⁴⁶ Lee Sleemons Ewing, Interview by Pat McClain. Veterans History Project, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.,5.

⁴⁷ Graham, 59.

⁴⁸ James E. Westheider, *The African-American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 77. Graham, 110.

⁴⁹ Robert Holcomb’s account as found in *Bloods*, 210.

⁵⁰ Graham, 60.

his genitals in an effort to disinfect the area. The unfortunate result was that Watters was hospitalized and unable to walk for a number of days.⁵¹

While a number of African-American soldiers did visit prostitutes, others formed more serious relationships with Vietnamese women. Holcomb dated a woman who worked at the army base and they would eat together, talk about their lives, and listen to music. While it would be easy to be skeptical about how genuine their relationship was, Holcomb insisted that they were both sincere and neither one was trying to take advantage of the other.⁵² Bob Sanders developed a close relationship with a Vietnamese woman who worked at the army cafeteria. Sanders stayed at her house in Nha Trang, and she even hid him when the NLF came into the town. Like Holcomb, he believed that his relationship with her was genuine. He reflected that “she would take care of me. I hated to leave her, often I think back on her, wonder how she’s doing.”⁵³ Perhaps not surprisingly, Holloman later married a Vietnamese woman named Tran Thi Saly and had two children with her.⁵⁴

While African-Americans identified with Vietnamese civilians and even befriended some, they believed that white soldiers made no attempt to understand Vietnamese civilians and showed little or no sympathy for them. Many African-American soldiers described instances of white soldiers harassing and mistreating the Vietnamese. While some black/white friendship was established in Vietnam, a constant source of friction was whites’ treatment of the Vietnamese. Harold Bryant likely speaks for many black soldiers when he concluded, “I learned that white people weren’t the number one race. I found out that some of them were more animalistic than any black people I knew. I found out that some of them didn’t have their shit together.”⁵⁵

While some of the incidents described by black soldiers are fairly minor, a good majority involve cruel and violent acts committed against seemingly innocent

⁵¹ Robert M. Watters, interview by George C. Herring and Terry L. Birdwhistell, May 16, 1985, University of Kentucky Libraries Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project, King Library, Lexington, Ky, 27.

⁵² Robert Holcomb’s account as found in *Bloods*, 211.

⁵³ Stanley Goff and Robert Sanders with Clark Smith, *Brothers Black Soldiers in the Nam* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1982), 203.

⁵⁴ Emmanuel J. Holloman’s account as found in *Bloods*, 84.

⁵⁵ Harold Bryant’s account as found in *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 23.

Vietnamese civilians. Roosevelt Gore alleged that a number of white soldiers in his unit were abusive towards Vietnamese civilians, including children. The behavior of these soldiers clearly upset Gore:

the biggest thing that bothers me has to do with some of our soldiers who would use their rifle butts to hit Vietnamese kids on the side of the head. The kids was begging the GI's for food, asking for a piece of C-ration candy or whatever, and the guys would just knock them out.⁵⁶

A number of African-American soldiers made an effort to give both food and candy to Vietnamese children, but Gore charges that white soldiers were more interested in beating them up. Robert Holcomb described a similar violent incident. Ordered to transport spoiled milk to a dump, he was walking to his destination when he spotted white members of his company throwing the bottles of milk at civilians riding motorcycles. Holcomb was irate at the white soldiers' behavior and stopped them before they could hurt anyone else.⁵⁷

Dwyte Brown remembered white soldiers always acting like, "I am conqueror. I am supreme. Dirt, that's how they treat the Vietnamese, like dirt."⁵⁸ Brown witnessed incidents in which white soldiers slapped civilians for no reason and even purposely ran into Vietnamese civilians with their cars. In the mess hall one day, a white soldier requested some chicken from a Vietnamese server, but when she only gave him two pieces "the guy grabbed her by the neck and stuck her head in the mashed potatoes."⁵⁹

David Parks alleged that white soldiers in his unit made a game of abusing Vietnamese civilians. As in Gore's account, the victims were often children. Parks remembered "we're riding along and there's a group of hungry kids. Someone throws a piece of bread on the road. The kids go for it like a pack of wolves. Often one of them gets hit by a truck or several get hurt in the scramble." White soldiers were amused by such incidents, but Park maintained that you would "never see a soul doing anything like that."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Interview with Roosevelt Gore as found in James R. Wilson, *Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 84.

⁵⁷ Robert Holcomb's account as found in *Bloods*, 207.

⁵⁸ Dwyte Brown's account as found in *Bloods*, 264.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁶⁰ Parks 71. African-Americans in Vietnam were sometimes called souls both by fellow black soldiers and even the Vietnamese.

Holloman also distinguished between black and white behavior. He remembered that “anything blacks got from the Vietnamese, they would pay for. You hardly didn’t find a black cursing a Vietnamese. And a black would try to learn some of the words. And try to learn a few of their customs so they wouldn’t hurt them.”⁶¹ He believed that most white soldiers looked down on the Vietnamese, and he remembered a number of instances when white soldiers abused Vietnamese civilians. Once while shopping in a village, a white soldier threw tear gas grenades into a crowd of civilians causing a number of them to pass out. He described another incident where a white soldier sat on a bridge shooting people with a slingshot. He also stated that there was an “MP who sat on that bridge all day and shot people going to work with his BB gun. I rode behind him once, and he shot at everybody for 5 miles.”⁶²

These accounts described white soldiers purposely abusing Vietnamese citizens, and a number of African-American soldiers remember incidents involving white soldiers that were even more violent, including rape and murder. Brown claimed that many white soldiers felt they were entitled to sex with Vietnamese women. Even female workers on American military bases were vulnerable to sexual assault or rape. Brown raised a hypothetical situation in which a Vietnamese female comes on base to shine shoes for the soldiers. A black soldier would give a dollar tip, but a white guy would say “You ain’t do it good enough. Maybe smack her or throw her daughter down, pull her clothes up, try to have sex with her. She just thirteen or fourteen. She there tryin’ to sweep the floor.”⁶³ Bryant witnessed a white soldier raping a dead Vietnamese woman.⁶⁴ Holloman claimed that many soldiers raped local women, and superior officers did little to stop the attacks; some even participated.⁶⁵ Holcomb found himself guarding a white sergeant accused of raping a number of Vietnamese women. He told Holcomb that “they were animals and didn’t deserve to be treated like people.”⁶⁶

Holloman described a particularly gruesome murder. Three white soldiers in his unit came upon a young Vietnamese boy riding a water buffalo. They wanted to scare the

⁶¹Emmanuel J. Holloman’s account as found in *Bloods*, 83.

⁶²Ibid., 81-82.

⁶³Dwyte Brown’s account as found in *Bloods*, 265.

⁶⁴Harold Bryant’s account as found in *Bloods*, 27.

⁶⁵Emmanuel J. Holloman’s account as found in *Bloods*, 82.

⁶⁶Robert Holcomb’s account as found in *Bloods*, 206.

boy and fired in his direction. The bullet ricocheted and hit the boy in the back, killing him almost instantly. Holloman argued that this sort of thing happened often.⁶⁷ Bryant saw a drunk white GI kill an elderly Vietnamese man, seemingly for no reason.⁶⁸ Bob Sanders also saw an elderly Vietnamese man killed by American soldiers. Some soldiers tried to justify the killing, claiming that the man was likely a member of the NLF, but Sanders was not convinced.⁶⁹

A number of black soldiers claimed that they refused to kill Vietnamese civilians even when ordered to do so. Reginald Edwards refused to kill civilians on numerous occasions. Once Edwards's unit was moving into a village when an old man ran by them. A white sergeant ordered Edwards to kill the man, but Edwards "missed this old man. Cause I really couldn't shoot him."⁷⁰ Unfortunately, another man in Edward's unit fired his grenade launcher at the man. The old man was running back to his house to protect a group of children. Both the old man and the children were killed. As Edwards continued moving through the village, he came upon a Vietnamese civilian yelling "don't shoot." It was the policy of his unit to shoot first and ask questions later, but he listened to the man and learned that the hut he was in front of was full of women and children. Edwards's refusal to follow orders saved the women and children.⁷¹

Edwards's unit was later involved in a massacre of civilians at Cam Ne, but he refused to be involved. As they approached the village, he grew "afraid that there was going to be shooting people that day, so I just kind of dealt with the animals. You know, shoot the chickens. I mean I just couldn't shoot no people."⁷² Terry Whitmore had a similar experience in his unit. After taking a number of casualties, Whitmore's unit commander ordered his men to destroy a local village and kill everyone in it. Whitmore refused to kill anyone and instead kept busy killing cattle.⁷³

⁶⁷ Emmanuel J. Holloman's account as found in *Bloods*, 82- 83.

⁶⁸ Harold Bryant's account as found in *Bloods*, 26.

⁶⁹ Goff and Sanders 157.

⁷⁰ Reginald Edward's account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷³ Terry Whitmore, *Memphis, Nam, Sweden: The Story of a Black Deserter* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), 62.

White mistreatment of Vietnamese civilians put African-American soldiers in a difficult position. Despite their empathy for the Vietnamese, their options were limited. Donald Jernigan accurately described the situation: “there were guys that brutalized the women, slapped them, shot them-the kids, and the blacks that were there sometimes had to witness it because we weren’t always in command at the level that we, maybe needed.”⁷⁴ Jernigan’s language is interesting as he separated black soldiers from the rest of the military. He also suggested that had blacks held positions with more authority, Vietnamese civilians would not have been mistreated to the same extent.

While black soldiers were rarely in positions of authority, they did occasionally try to protect Vietnamese civilians from mistreatment. While serving in the Central Highlands, Richard Ford and his unit came across a group of Vietnamese. However, Ford quickly recognized that the group were Degar tribesman, known by the Americans as Montagnards, not ethnic Vietnamese. Ford and his fellow black soldiers considered “them brothers because they were dark” and felt they could relate to them because “(T)he people in Vietnam didn’t have anything to do with Montagnards. It was almost like white people in the States didn’t have anything to do with blacks in the ghetto.”⁷⁵ As one of the Montagnards came around the corner, a white soldier whispered that he intended to shoot him. Davis, Ford’s black friend, quickly intervened, telling the white soldier to “get that thought out of your mind, cause I’ll blow your brains out just for thinking it.”⁷⁶

Dwyte A. Brown protected a Vietnamese woman and her daughter from the unwanted sexual advances of a white soldier. While he was showering at a military base, Brown noticed that several Vietnamese maids were starting to clean one of the showers. He kept a towel around his waist out of respect for the women, but a white soldier removed his towel and grabbed the daughter of the maid and tried to assault her sexually. Brown rebuked the man and prevented him from going any further.⁷⁷

Victims of discrimination themselves, many African-American soldiers believed that they were respectful towards Vietnamese civilians; however, black soldiers did not

⁷⁴ Interview with Don Jernigan as found in *Thoughts About*, 94.

⁷⁵ Richard Ford’s account as found in *Bloods*, 40.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷⁷ Dwyte Brown’s account as found in *Bloods*, 265.

hesitate to use such racially offensive terms for the Vietnamese people as “slopes,” “zipperheads,” and “gooks.”⁷⁸

African-American use of these terms is not surprising, given that American soldiers often used racial slurs when referring to each other. When tensions flared between black and white soldiers in the rear lines, the use of racial slurs was common. Many African-Americans referred to white soldiers as “chucks,” “rabbits,” “pigs,” and “foreigners,” while white soldiers referred to blacks with terms such as “spear chucker,” “nigger,” and “spook.”⁷⁹ Even in the front lines of Vietnam, where racial tensions were much lower, black and white soldiers continued to use racist language. However, in the front lines racially derogatory words and statements had a more jocular tone. Terry Whitmore stated that while his unit was fairly harmonious:

[W]e would jive each other about our backgrounds...this polish cat and a brother from New York would always be jiving like that. Dumb nigger. Dirty Pollack. My grandfather used to own your grandfather and whip his ass every day...We even had a Mexican, Durand. We called him wetback and he'd tell us how his boys kicked our asses at the Alamo. This kind of jiving went on all the time. It never got out of hand.⁸⁰

While American troops used racial slurs against each other in times of racial tension, but also in jest, the use of “gook” or “slope” is more significant because it was sanctioned and encouraged by the military hierarchy. Reginald Edwards stated that “the only thing they told us about the Viet Cong was they were gooks. They were to be killed. Nobody sits around and give you their historical and cultural background. They’re the enemy. Kill, kill, Kill.”⁸¹ Haywood Kirkland, from Washington D.C, related a similar experience he had during training. Kirkland claimed that almost immediately “they told us not to call them Vietnamese. Call everybody gooks, dinks.”⁸² Kirkland remembered that “they wouldn’t allow us to talk about them as people.”⁸³ While Edwards and Kirkland noted that the words were meant to apply to the Viet Cong, the term “gook” was

⁷⁸ Evidence of African-American soldiers using these terms can be found in Appy, 225, Goff and Sanders, 25. Richard Ford’s account in *Bloods*, 40.

⁷⁹ Westheider, 82-83.

⁸⁰ Whitmore, 52.

⁸¹ Reginald Edwards account as found in *Bloods*, 6.

⁸² Haywood Kirkland’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 90.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 90.

often used to refer to all Vietnamese, since few were able to decipher who supported whom. African-American soldier Dwight Williams admitted that “We (blacks) called the Vietnamese gooks too. Almost everybody took on some racist feelings, no question.”⁸⁴ Clearly African-American soldiers did not hesitate to use “gook” to refer to any Vietnamese even though the majority of black soldiers were sympathetic to Vietnamese civilians.

Some African-American soldiers also mistreated Vietnamese civilians. A number of African-American soldiers in Harold Bryant’s unit rigged their cigarettes to explode in the face of any Vietnamese civilian who was unfortunate enough to ask them for one.⁸⁵ Other black soldiers were involved in much more serious offences, including rape and murder. While walking through a village, Haywood Kirkland came across black soldiers from another unit raping a Vietnamese woman.⁸⁶ Terry Whitmore witnessed members of his unit kill unarmed Vietnamese civilians; he was particularly disgusted by a black marine who killed an unarmed Buddhist monk.⁸⁷ Arthur E. Woodley Jr. admitted to raping a number of women and murdering several civilians.⁸⁸ Despite this evidence according to African-American accounts black soldiers were much more likely to disapprove of this type of behavior than participate in it.

Most African-American soldiers had a favorable view of Vietnamese civilians, but their assessment of Vietnamese combatants was much more complex. Historians have almost universally described ARVN soldiers as ineffectual and corrupt.⁸⁹ This assessment is identical to the almost universal contempt that American soldiers, including African-Americans, felt toward the ARVN. One should remember, however, that American soldiers had very limited interaction with ARVN units. Therefore most assessments of ARVN soldiers seemed to be based on general impressions, rather than actual relationships or experiences.

⁸⁴ Appy, 225.

⁸⁵ Harold Bryant’s account as found in *Bloods*, 26.

⁸⁶ Haywood Kirkland’s as found in *Bloods*, 93.

⁸⁷ Whitmore, 62.

⁸⁸ Arthur E. Gene Woodley’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 237-253.

⁸⁹ There is very limited scholarship on the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). However, Robert Brigham’s *ARVN: Life And Death in the South Vietnamese Army* is an effective study on the lives of normal ARVN soldiers.

Albert French described the ARVN as disorganized and unprofessional. In his estimation the ARVN “always looked funny; they were very small people but had been given American helmets, which fell down over their faces...They looked like little toy soldiers with big guns.”⁹⁰ While French saw the ARVN as comic figures, other soldiers claimed that the ARVN was composed of cowards whose refusal to fight had brought the United States Army to Vietnam in the first place. Bob Sanders portrayed the ARVN in a particularly unflattering light, claiming that “(w)e never did see the regular South Vietnamese army in the field. They would be guarding the bridges or be hidden away in some compound somewhere...We were fighting for them and they were scared to fight for themselves. They used to pick up and run.”⁹¹ Terry Whitmore, who occasionally went on patrol with ARVN units, claimed that “[A] patrol with ARVN was usually just diddley-bopping along through the jungle...ARVN’s were not too keen on combat. So if they thought that there would be some shooting, they’d be gone.”⁹²

Samuel Vance also portrayed ARVN soldiers as incompetent and unable or unwilling to engage effectively the NLF. However, he took it a step further than Sanders and Whitmore, claiming that the American military would be able to defeat the NLF and NVA if all of the soldiers in ARVN were killed.⁹³ Vance was also very critical of the government of the RVN, believing that they were corrupt and uninterested in the welfare of their own people.⁹⁴ David Parks portrayed ARVN soldiers as good fighters, but also as totally alienated from the Vietnamese population. In his opinion they thought little of human life and didn’t hesitate to kill civilians.⁹⁵

It appears that black soldiers rarely developed friendships or even relationships with members of the ARVN. However, some black soldiers did develop friendships with the Vietnamese scouts that were assigned to their units. Robert Holcomb and John Starr both developed close friendships with their scouts.⁹⁶ Despite these examples, black soldiers overwhelmingly looked down on the soldiers who fought for the government of the RVN.

⁹⁰ French, 113.

⁹¹ Goff and Sanders, 150.

⁹² Whitmore, 55.

⁹³ Vance, 73.

⁹⁴ Vance 70.

⁹⁵ Parks, 83.

⁹⁶ Robert Holcomb’s account as found in *Bloods*, 298. Graham, 55.

However, they viewed those Vietnamese who chose to fight against the American- backed RVN much more favorably. Joseph Anderson, a captain and platoon leader from Topeka, Kansas stated “I had a great deal of respect for the Viet Cong. They were trained and familiar with the jungle. They relied on stealth, on ambush, on their personal skills.”⁹⁷ Sanders attested to the toughness and resiliency of the NLF and NVA believing they had much more support from the people than the RVN.⁹⁸ Agreeing with this characterization, Biggers stated that “the enemy would do anything to win. You had to respect that. They believed in a cause. They had the support of the people.”⁹⁹ Robert Watters went even further than Biggers characterizing the NLF as almost invincible. He stated that they

didn't care about dying. I mean, you would hit them with a 60 caliber right there in the fucking chest, and those sons of bitches keep coming. And they fall dead right on you though...I mean they were as strong mentally as they were strong physically, you know. I mean, oh, it's just like...you just shot down, man, you just kept shooting them, kept shooting them, and they kept coming.¹⁰⁰

The respect they felt for these soldiers can be seen in the condemnation by a few black soldiers of their fellow Americans who mutilated dead Vietnamese soldiers. After a battle, it was not uncommon for American soldiers to collect the ears, teeth, or fingers of dead Vietnamese soldiers as trophies.¹⁰¹ After a brief fire fight, Parks's unit came across a dead NLF soldier. To his disgust, a sergeant in his unit cut off the finger of the dead man.¹⁰² Bryant recalled that “white guys would sometimes take the dogtag chain and fill that up with ears...then when we get back, they would nail em' up on the walls to our hootch, you know, as a trophy.”¹⁰³ According to Bryant the desecration of Vietnamese dead became a point of contention among black and white soldiers in his unit. Bryant thought keeping ears as a trophy was “stupid and spiritually, I was lookin' at it as

⁹⁷ Joseph Anderson's account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 226.

⁹⁸ Goff and Sanders, 147-148.

⁹⁹ Archie Biggers account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 109.

¹⁰⁰ Watters, 11.

¹⁰¹ Graham, 57.

¹⁰² Parks, 85.

¹⁰³ Harold Bryant's account as found in *Bloods*, 24.

damaging a dead body. After a while, I told them, ‘Hey, man, that’s sick. Don’t be around me with the ears hangin’ on you.’”¹⁰⁴ Some black soldiers were also involved in the desecration of dead NLF or NVA soldiers, but clearly some blacks were uncomfortable doing so.¹⁰⁵

While African-American soldiers had considerable respect for the NLF and NVA soldiers they faced, even more interesting is the belief of many black soldiers that NLF and NVA favored them over white soldiers. This belief is reflected in the widespread rumor among black soldiers that Vietnamese communist troops would not shoot or kill a black soldier.

Samuel Vance stated that “the Viet Cong wouldn’t kill or harm a Negro unless a unit was ambushed or attacked and the Negro was a part of it.”¹⁰⁶ Vance believed that a Viet Cong soldier would not kill an African-American soldier unless he was left no other option. Black soldiers were not only safe from NLF soldiers in the jungle but also in the city. Vance remarked that “there are places in Saigon where the Negroes can roam freely and stay out all of the night, and nothing ever happens to them. If a white man dared to travel anywhere alone, he’d be doomed.”¹⁰⁷

Don Browne also argued that “Viet Cong would shoot at a white guy, then let the black guy behind go through, then shoot at the next white guy.”¹⁰⁸ Brown believed this rumor, but he argued that NLF soldiers did this to win black support, thereby increasing tensions within the United States Army, not to express racial solidarity.

Robert Holcomb maintained that the rumor was believed by black and white soldiers alike in his unit. It became so widespread that “white guys would stay close to the black guys in the field because they thought the VC and NVA didn’t shoot at blacks as much as whites.”¹⁰⁹

These soldiers did not claim that they ever witnessed an NLF soldier actually refusing to shoot a black soldier, but other black soldiers did make that claim. Attempting

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁵ For accounts of African-Americans desecrating dead NLF soldiers see Richard Ford’s account as found in *Bloods*, 44, and Gene Woodley’s account as found in *Bloods*, 244.

¹⁰⁶ Vance, 132

¹⁰⁷ Vance, 132-133.

¹⁰⁸ Don Browne’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 167.

¹⁰⁹ Terry, 212.

to save an injured white soldier, Terry Whitmore claimed that he “ran right by Charlie. Right by him! And he just watched me. Didn’t shoot, didn’t move, nothing. He just watched me run by.” What is particularly astonishing about Whitmore’s account is that once he retrieved the white soldier, the NLF soldier shot the white man, but refused to shoot Whitmore.¹¹⁰

Keith Freeman believed that Vietnamese soldiers always made a concentrated effort to avoid killing black soldiers. He alleged that even when African-Americans were delegated to the point man position, NLF forces would not kill them. He also claimed that a number of his friends had been held at gunpoint by an NLF or NVA soldier who quickly let them go. Freeman described his own experience with an NVA soldier. Freeman crept into a village one night and was captured by an NVA soldier. Instead of killing him, the NVA soldier said “Come out soul brother. You’re the same as me, I’m the same as you.”¹¹¹

Thomas Benton reported a similar story to Freeman’s. When Benton was visiting a local brothel, an NLF soldier walked in. Benton was unarmed at the time and he was very fearful that the soldier would kill him. Instead the man sat down to eat with Benton, repeating the phrase “you black you same same, like me, have same problems why you here, you got war at home.”¹¹²

While soldiers such as Freeman and Benton are not necessarily lying about their experiences with Vietnamese communist forces, there is no convincing evidence that NLF or NVA soldiers actively tried to avoid killing African-American soldiers. The 5,570 African-American soldiers who lost their lives in the Vietnam War provide convincing evidence to the contrary.¹¹³ Nonetheless, the rumor was believed by numerous African-American soldiers, and there are a number of reasons why the rumor was so widespread. Oppressed by whites in the United States, African-American soldiers

¹¹⁰ Whitmore, 71.

¹¹¹ Interview with Keith Freeman as found in Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986), 104.

¹¹² Interview with Thomas Belton as found in Eddie Wright, *Thoughts About the Vietnam War: Based on my Personal Experience, Books I have Read and Conversations with Other Veterans* (New York: Carlton Press, 1986), 67-68.

¹¹³ William E. Alt and Betty L. Alt, *Black Soldiers, White Wars: Black Warriors from Antiquity to the Present* (Wesport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 110.

liked to think that their “blackness” gave them an advantage over white soldiers in Vietnam. These rumors gave “black soldiers a sense of symbolic power because they forced white GI’s-who believed that their white skin might have been making them targets of the enemies’ weapons-to experience the anxiety of race.”¹¹⁴ However, the belief that a Vietnamese soldier would not shoot a black soldier reflected their general feelings that a racial solidarity existed between them and the Vietnamese. They believed that Vietnamese civilians favored them over whites; therefore the NLF would act the same way.

The idea that NLF forces were sympathetic to black soldiers and saw them as comrades was reinforced by communist propaganda. This propaganda targeted blacks to persuade them that African-American soldiers should not be fighting against an oppressed minority.

African-American soldiers in Vietnam were not the first black soldiers in the American military to be targeted by enemy propaganda. During the American-Philippines War (1899-1903), Filipino rebels led by Emilio Aguinaldo made numerous appeals to blacks serving in the American military. One Filipino boy is alleged to have used rhetoric similar to that of the Vietnamese communists, asking an African-American soldier “why does the American Negro come from America to fight us when we are much a friend to him and have not done anything to him. He is the same as me and me all the same as you. Why don’t you fight the people in America who burn Negroes?”¹¹⁵

Vietnamese insurgents had used similar propaganda to target minority groups among the British and French colonial forces who were serving in Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, the NVA targeted black soldiers with leaflets and radio broadcasts whose main purpose was to lower morale among black troops. The propaganda used by the Vietnamese communists typically focused on the inferior place African-Americans occupied in American society. The propaganda showed at the very least a rudimentary knowledge of American history. A typical leaflet read “U.S Army Men! You are committing the same ignominious crimes in South Vietnam that the KKK is perpetuating

¹¹⁴ Graham, 118.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

against your family at home.”¹¹⁶ Bob Sanders reported reading leaflets left by Vietnamese sources which directly targeted black soldiers. Sanders stated that “the Vietnamese constantly appealed to blacks to get out of the war. They would leave leaflets laying all over the jungle. In perfectly good English, the leaflet would say, ‘blacks get out, it’s not your fight,’ or, ‘They call us Gooks here and they call you niggers over there. You’re the same as us. Get out, it’s not your fight.’”¹¹⁷ Robert Holcomb reported seeing similar pamphlets in the woods which claimed that Vietnamese and African-Americans were essentially one and the same.¹¹⁸

Hanoi Hannah, a Vietnamese communist broadcaster, used the radio to appeal to black soldiers. Her scripts masterfully manipulated black anxieties about what was happening to blacks at home. Richard Ford remembered a particular radio broadcast in which Hanoi Hannah stated, “Soul brothers, go home. Whitey raping your mothers and your daughters, burning down your homes. What you over here for? This is not your war.”¹¹⁹

Occasionally the North Vietnamese government also sought to appeal directly to African-Americans in the United States. When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Don sent a letter to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) expressing the compassion all Vietnamese felt for “our Afro-American brothers.”¹²⁰ They also made a conscious effort to make connections with black radical groups. In November, 1969, the North Vietnamese government offered to release a number of American prisoners on the condition that the American government agreed to drop felony charges against Black Panther leaders Bobby Seale and Huey Newton.¹²¹

The supposed friendship offered by the North Vietnamese was often reciprocated by black militants in the United States who opposed American involvement in the war. By the mid 1960’s African-American participation in the Vietnam War had become a contentious issue for numerous civil rights organizations. In 1966 the Student Non-

¹¹⁶ Ibid.,117.

¹¹⁷ Goff and Sanders, 148-149.

¹¹⁸ Robert Holcomb’s account as found in *Bloods*, 212.

¹¹⁹ Richard Ford’s account as found in *Bloods*, 39.

¹²⁰ Westheider, 71.

¹²¹ Ibid., 70

Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) drew up an antiwar statement condemning American involvement in the Vietnam War and such black nationalist organizations as the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam similarly argued that the war was unjust. However, radical civil rights organizations were not the only groups to come out in opposition to the war.¹²²

On April 7, 1967, Martin Luther King, against the wishes of many in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), spoke out against the Vietnam War. King's opposition to the war was based on both his own personal pacifist beliefs and his belief that the war was taking away the best and brightest of the black community, who were needed in the civil rights struggle. He also realized that the Vietnam War was taking money that could be spent on social programs.¹²³ While King showed much sympathy for Vietnamese civilians and considerable antipathy for the RVN government, he maintained that that he was not attempting to "make North Vietnam or the National Liberation Front paragons of virtue."¹²⁴ While King was fairly moderate in his critique of the Vietnam War and for the most part refrained from praising either the NLF or the North Vietnamese government, other black leaders were much less circumspect.

Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panther Party pointed out the similarities between the positions of African-Americans and Vietnamese in an article entitled "The Black Man's Stake In Vietnam." Cleaver argued that "the only lasting salvation for the black American is to do all he can to see to it that the African, Asian, and Latin American nations are free and independent."¹²⁵ American blacks must actively help other oppressed peoples by encouraging revolutionary movements and especially by refusing to follow the directives of the American government. Cleaver argued that the United States government was purposely sending large numbers of African-Americans to Vietnam to kill them off, but he also believed that the government was trying to create hostility between African-Americans and Asians. He concluded that "by turning her black troops into the butchers of the Vietnamese people, America is spreading hate against the black

¹²² Ibid., 64-66.

¹²³ Ibid., 67.

¹²⁴ Martin Luther King Jr. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence" April 4 1967. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>

¹²⁵ Eldridge Cleaver, "The Black Man's Stake in Vietnam," 1967. *The Black Panthers Speak* Edited by Phillip S. Foner. New York City: Da Capo Press, 2002.

race throughout Asia.” In order to prevent this hatred, blacks must refuse to fight and support a “free and independent Vietnam, a strong Vietnam which is not the puppet of international white supremacy.”¹²⁶

Cleaver was not the only prominent African-American to oppose the Vietnam War on the grounds that African-Americans had no business fighting Vietnamese people, with whom they had so much in common. After he was declared eligible for military service, boxing legend Muhammad Ali refused to serve, becoming a draft resister. While Ali’s primary reason for not serving in the military was his Muslim faith which taught him that war was not acceptable unless sanctioned by Allah, he also believed that African-Americans should not involve themselves in a war with another people of color. On one memorable occasion he declared that African-Americans should not fight their “Asian brothers” because “they never lynched you, never called you nigger, never put dogs on you, never shot your leaders.”¹²⁷

The ideas expressed by black leaders of various persuasions were definitely not lost on many African-American soldiers. Bob Sanders claimed that when he and his friends heard about the arguments of the Black Panthers and Mohammed Ali’s refusal to serve in the military, they became convinced that they were fighting in an unjust war.¹²⁸ African-American Poet Lamont B. Steptoe’s poem “They Want To Take My Life” develops the idea that blacks and Vietnamese were both victims of white racism. He writes “they the gooks, so named by the white man, want to kill me, a nigger, so named by the white man.”¹²⁹ Steptoe also addresses the idea that black soldiers were agents of the white government

a victim of racism, i now fight a racist war. i, a black man, i am told to
kill a yellow man, a symbol of imperialism , i march about with my fire
stick in my hand, waging death in a land that has been tempered by
death.¹³⁰

However, this did not mean all African-American soldiers were fervent supporters

¹²⁶ Ibid.,

¹²⁷ Graham, 73. *The Brother’s Vietnam War* has a detailed chapter on Muhammad Ali’s draft resistance.

¹²⁸ Goff and Sanders, 149-150.

¹²⁹ Lamont B. Steptoe, “They Want to Take My Life,” as found in *Soul Soldiers: African-Americans and the Vietnam Era*. Edited by Samuel W. Black (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh Regional History Center, 2006), 165.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 165.

of the positions expressed by black nationalists. David Parks reported being confused by the people like Carmichael who argued that blacks shouldn't be fighting in the war. While Parks was not a great fan of the war himself, he believed that people like Carmichael could not understand the experiences of black soldiers until they themselves had fought in Vietnam.¹³¹ Allen Thomas stated that black militants "scared the hell out of me...My heroes were the people in my neighborhood, the local pastor, the Pullman porter."¹³² Even the majority of those soldiers who were receptive to the views of the Black Panther Party continued to fight the NLF and NVA forces to the best of their abilities. Thus, while soldiers like Bob Sanders may have eventually concluded that they shouldn't have gone to Vietnam, they like him "never ran; they fought to the death."¹³³ Soldiers like Sanders may have been influenced by the ideas expressed by black militants in America, but they rarely acted on them.

It is quite likely that many African-American soldiers were turned off by the praise black radicals lavished on the NLF and NVA. It was quite common for the *Black Panther Newspaper* to include an article praising the North Vietnamese and NLF.¹³⁴ When Ho Chi Minh died in September, 1969, the newspaper eulogized Ho as a hero in the struggle to "bring to the world and its people an end to the murderous, stormy winds of capitalism's fascist, aggressive imperialism."¹³⁵

Perhaps even more controversial, many black radicals traveled to North Vietnam at the invitation of North Vietnamese officials. Between 1966 and 1970 Julius Lester, Diane Nash-Bevel, and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC, the Reverend Phillip Lawson of the New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, and Eldridge Cleaver all visited Hanoi. Speaking on Radio Hanoi, Nash-Bevel reportedly advised African-American soldiers that the Vietnam War was a colonialist war and they should not be involved in it. Carmichael claimed that he had organized significant support for the Vietnamese in their common effort against the United States, which he described as the

¹³¹ Parks, 105-106.

¹³² Allen Thomas Interview as found in James E. Westheider, *The African-American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 134.

¹³³ Goff and Sanders, 150.

¹³⁴ Westheider, 70.

¹³⁵ "To The Courageous Vietnamese People, Commemorating the Death of Ho Chi Minh," *Black Panther*, September 3, 1969 as found in James E. Westheider, *The African-American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 135.

greatest destroyer of humanity.¹³⁶ Carmichael also managed to meet Ho Chi Minh, and the two discussed the role of African-American soldiers in the Vietnam War. Ho claimed that North Vietnamese policy “was to try, as far as possible, to avoid killing Africans, preferring to try to show them the contradictions and win them over to the side of justice and history.”¹³⁷ This is an example of “the leader” of North Vietnam spreading the idea that the Vietnamese Communists did not regard African-American soldiers as enemies.

This Vietnamese propaganda supported by both Communist officials and American black nationalists was intended to confirm the belief that African-American soldiers were just like the Vietnamese. However, there is considerable evidence that the majority of Vietnamese, both communist and non-communist, believed very strongly in racial differences and had a clear definition of racial hierarchy.

Nu-Anh Tran’s “South Vietnamese Identity, American Intervention, and the Newspaper Chinh Luan, 1965-1969” focuses on an incident involving an American serviceman named James R. Kipp who on April 4, 1966, wrote to the English-Language *Saigon Daily News* criticizing Vietnamese society and culture. When the article was reprinted in the Vietnamese language version of the same paper, many Vietnamese readers angrily responded. Tran argues that their responses underline “how the American presence generated acute anxiety among the South Vietnamese reading public concerning the maintenance of an authentic, autonomous identity.”¹³⁸ All the letters assert that Americans and Vietnamese are different peoples. A number even claim that Vietnamese are far superior.

Much of Kipp’s original letter criticized Vietnamese women who, in his estimation, were always looking to sleep with American servicemen. A number of Vietnamese letter writers concentrated on this issue, with some claiming that any Vietnamese woman who slept with a foreigner was no longer Vietnamese, but a race traitor. A respectable Vietnamese woman was expected to be loyal to Vietnamese men

¹³⁶ Westheider, 70.

¹³⁷ Stokely Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael* (New York: Scribner Press, 2003), 601.

¹³⁸ Nu-Anh Tran, “South Vietnamese Identity, American Intervention, and the Newspaper Chinh Luan, 1965-1969,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 1. 2006, 170

and ignore American men. This incident suggests that many Vietnamese were against Vietnamese women having sex with someone of another “race.”¹³⁹

Shawn McHale’s “Vietnamese, Black Africans, and North Africans: The First Indochina War (1945-54)” focuses on interactions between Viet Minh troops and French African troops during the First Indochina War. It also provides valuable insights into communist Vietnamese views on race before American intervention. McHale finds that most Vietnamese believed that certain ethnic minorities, including Africans, were inferior. Even Marxist intellectuals were not exempt from thinking in terms of racial hierarchies. Dao Duy Anh, a well known Vietnamese Marxist from the 1930’s declared that “the culture of the American and European peoples is high, while the culture of the savage people of Africa and Australia, just like that of the Muong, Man, and Moi(Vietnamese tribal groups) in our country is deficient.”¹⁴⁰

Viet Minh troops had appealed to French African colonial troops to stay out of the war. However, they also had used racist fear-mongering to try and unite Vietnamese civilians against the French colonial forces. This fear-mongering often took the form of tracts and pamphlets which claimed that French soldiers were coming to Vietnam in order to turn Vietnamese people black. In December, 1951, Viet Minh soldiers had circulated a tract stating that

(t)he barbaric act of the French
Turning Vietnamese soldiers into black soldiers
The French are bringing one hundred youths to the cape
To the electric ovens, transforming them to blacks.¹⁴¹

Another tract, from January 1952, had claimed that French forces were “seizing people and cooking them black, distending their lips and twisting their hair-it’s truly savage.” Another tract from October, 1951 had claimed that General de Lattre de Tassigny, a French commander, was bringing “black French cannibals so that they can

¹³⁹ Ibid., 186-194.

¹⁴⁰ Shawn McHale, “Vietnamese, Black Africans, and North Africans: The First Indochina War (1945-54) and the Limits of Third Worldism,” Paper prepared for the 2005 Conference of the Society for the History of American Foreign Relations, June 2005, 7-8.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 24.

devour Vietnamese.”¹⁴² It is clear that Vietnamese communist officials had been quite willing to appeal to offensive racial characterizations if they thought it would translate to greater support for their movement.

While there has been no significant research on the use of racial appeals by Vietnamese communists in either North or South Vietnam during the Second Indochina War, some evidence exists to show that Vietnamese communists did think in racial terms. Norman Alexander McDaniel of Fayetteville, North Carolina, was captured by NVA forces 30 miles outside of Hanoi when the plane transporting him was shot down. Alexander was a prisoner of war from 1966-1973, much of it in the notorious “Hanoi Hilton.” He was repeatedly tortured and when he complained, citing the Geneva Convention, the torturers laughed in his face and said “You’re not qualified to be treated as a prisoner of war. You’re a criminal, black American criminal.” McDaniel stated that they would often taunt him and other black soldiers, referring to them as “the blackest of the black criminals.”¹⁴³

After Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated McDaniel’s captors tried to force him to say something critical about the United States, arguing that the United States government was engaged in genocide against all dark-skinned peoples. When he refused, they would harass him more than white inmates and taunt him “They would call me a lackey and an Uncle Tom and say ‘You suck your brother’s liver. You drink your brother’s blood.’”¹⁴⁴

Fred Cherry, of Suffolk, Virginia, was a prisoner in the same prison as McDaniel, and he reported similar treatment. Cherry was injured when his plane went down in North Vietnam, but the officials of the camp refused even to provide him with bandages. When he eventually became so sick that they were forced to operate on his leg, they refused to give him any anesthetic.¹⁴⁵ Cherry was also given the name Xu, Vietnamese for copper coin, by his captors because of his color. Vietnamese officials also attempted to convince

¹⁴² Ibid.,25.

¹⁴³ Norman McDaniel’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 134. For more information on McDaniel consult his autobiography *Yet Another Voice*.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 137.

¹⁴⁵ Fred Cherry’s account as found in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1984), 281. Cherry was the forty-third American captured in North Vietnam, but the first African-American.

Cherry to sign documents critical of the U.S government.¹⁴⁶ When he refused, he was beaten. McDaniel's and Cherry's accounts confirm that African-Americans were hardly treated favorably by their Vietnamese captors. If anything they faced more mistreatment from officials who wanted African-American soldiers to speak out against the government. It seems clear that preference for African-Americans did not extend to those unwilling to provide support for the Vietnamese communist cause.¹⁴⁷ It is also interesting that in both cases the Vietnamese guards made a point of constantly pointing out the two soldiers' skin color.

The racial views of Vietnamese communists can also be measured by looking at the experiences of Amerasian children in Vietnam after the fall of South Vietnam. Amerasians, children of American GI fathers and Vietnamese mothers, and their mistreatment have been largely overlooked by historians. Relying on interviews with individual Amerasians Robert S. McKelvey in *The Dust of Life: America's Children Abandoned in Vietnam* has found that Amerasians, of both black and white descent, typically grew up as "outcasts on the fringes of Vietnamese society. Discriminated against for their mixed race and obvious connection to the American enemy, Amerasians were often denied educational and employment opportunities."¹⁴⁸ McKelvey argues that black Amerasians generally experienced greater prejudice, harassment, and discrimination than white Amerasians because while white skin is considered attractive by many Vietnamese, black skin is not.¹⁴⁹ McKelvey interviewed numerous Amerasians who claimed that their dark skin opened them up to mistreatment at the hands of Vietnamese. Tuan, a young black Amerasian, was forced to drop out of school after incessant teasing. When asked if he was married, he replied "Vietnamese girls don't like me because of my skin color. They say, 'you're too black.'¹⁵⁰ Numerous black Amerasians report constant taunts of my-den(black-American). White Amerasians were

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 283-284.

¹⁴⁷ James A. Daly *Black Prisoner of War: A Conscientious Objector's Vietnam Memoir*. Daly was captured by the NLF and imprisoned in Hanoi Hilton. He believed that he was treated better by the Vietnamese because he was black. However, his treatment was likely more a result of his willingness to sign numerous documents critical of the American government, than because he was black.

¹⁴⁸ McKelvey, Robert S. *The Dust of Life: America's Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 3.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

taunted as well, but the taunts focused on the nationality of their fathers, while the taunts that black Amerasians faced referred to the color of their skin. Many black Amerasians tend to agree with their tormentors and want to leave Vietnam and live in the United States where there are more black people.¹⁵¹

The mistreatment of black Amerasians is also discussed in Kien Nguyen's memoir *The Unwanted: A Memoir of a Childhood*. While the RVN was in power, Kien's family lived a life of luxury, but when the communist takeover occurred their possessions were seized and they were forced to live in dire poverty. A white Amerasian, Kien was repeatedly mistreated by the government, his family, his school, and other children. However, one scene suggests that black Amerasians had it much worse than white Amerasians. A street merchant remarks to Kien's mother that "your children are lucky that they are white. At least they have a chance to live. The burnt-rice have only bad luck."¹⁵² It is clear that postwar Vietnamese society often did not live up to the communist credo that African-Americans and Vietnamese were the "same."

In conclusion a number of black soldiers believed they had a closer connection to the Vietnamese because they were both people of color, while others maintained they related to the Vietnamese because both groups had experienced poverty. Yet, the reasons are more complex. Perceiving the position of the Vietnamese as similar to their own position in the United States, many black soldiers concluded that Vietnamese poverty was the result of white American mistreatment. They sympathized with the situation of the Vietnamese not just because they were poor, but because they were being treated by whites as an "inferior race." Black soldiers attempted to help Vietnamese civilians but claimed that the majority of white soldiers had little sympathy for them. Many accounts portray white soldiers as far more abusive towards Vietnamese civilians, mistreatment which angered black soldiers. Many black soldiers claim that they either prevented the unwarranted mistreatment or killing of Vietnamese civilians or at the very least refused to be involved. The truth is that some individual black soldiers were involved in raping or killing Vietnamese civilians. It is also true that some whites likely did sympathize with

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 23, 93.

¹⁵² Kien Nguyen *The Unwanted: A Memoir of a Childhood* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 179.

the Vietnamese, but the accounts of African-American soldiers argue that they were far less predisposed to do so.

While African-Americans had a sympathetic view of Vietnamese civilians, they generally had quite negative feelings about the soldiers in ARVN. They regarded the ARVN as cowardly and the South Vietnamese government as incompetent and corrupt.

On the other hand, they developed a deep admiration and respect for the NLF and its fighting ability. Rumors persisted that NLF troops would not shoot at African-American troops because they considered them brothers and not enemies. African-American soldiers believed that the NLF identified with them just as they identified with South Vietnamese civilians. Vietnamese communist propaganda encouraged African-Americans to believe that they and the Vietnamese were both victims of white mistreatment. The goal was to lower morale among African-American troops, but its most significant effect was to confirm the belief of African-Americans that the Vietnamese they were fighting sympathized with them. Such black nationalists as Stokely Carmichael and Cleveland Sellers added to this belief by broadcasting the idea that white America had instigated the Vietnam War to create animosities between two peoples of color.

While many African-American soldiers believed that the NLF would not shoot black soldiers, only on the very rarest occasions did this have any effect on the way they fought the NLF and NVA. Nearly all African-American soldiers were determined to defeat the NLF, and all were willing to kill the same NLF soldiers they believed would not kill them. This point is best described by Willie Reed of Tampa, Florida. Reed declared that his most memorable experience in Vietnam was when he came face to face with a NLF soldier. Reed alleged that the soldier hesitated to kill him when he saw he was black. However, Reed did not repay the favor; taking advantage of the NLF soldier's hesitancy, he killed him.¹⁵³

Finally, while NLF propaganda suggests that Vietnamese society was free of racism, most Vietnamese, communist or not, believed strongly in racial hierarchies and racial differences. While Vietnamese communists proclaimed racial equality between

¹⁵³ Willie Reed Interview with Crystal Reed, February 22, 2004. Veterans History Project, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., 4.

American blacks and the Vietnamese, the treatment given black prisoners of war and the fate of Amerasian children in the post-war world confirms that they held no such elevated views.