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Blods REVIEWED*

JOHN A. WILLIAMS

Blods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans
Wallace Terry
Random House, 1984

Oral history has always been subjected to revision by later peoples who developed or controlled writing. The Native Americans, for example, say there is nothing in their legends about coming from another land to this continent. Their legends speak of ascent from the ground to the surface of land, or descent from the sky. All Americans, however, are taught that during an ice age, when the level of oceans dropped at least 300 feet, the ancient Asian trekked eastward to become the American Indian.

There are elderly people on some of the islands of the Caribbean, to provide another example of the subversion of oral history to written history, who to this day claim their most ancient fathers sailed westward from Africa to these places where they coexisted with the Arawak Indians, and also all along what is now the Gulf of Mexico. We are taught, and most of us believe, that Africans came westward only as captives to be put into slavery. This was true for most, of course, but not all, as Pre-Columbian art eloquently testifies.

Wallace Terry, as writer, testifies for the oral historians in this fine collection. (One wishes there were more histories, but, given the situation under discussion, they'd only be repeated and repeated). Even if it had been ready, and I do not know that it wasn't in one form or another, the book would not have been published during or soon after the Vietnam war because the official line, hewed to by Government and Press, was that a new democracy was being born in the blasting pits of Southeast Asia. Oh, there was some hedging, and the Navy was the most racist of all the services, but the renditions always ended positively. Even some of the subjects in Terry's book believed that the new democracy had arrived.

But, then, we all thought sports integration would make a

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difference in the body politic, too, if integration indeed occurred with Tarzan Cooper on the Celtics, Jackie Robinson on the Dodgers and Marion Motley on the Cleveland Browns. What both sports and the military provided for the people in charge of these endeavors, however, was cheap labor disguised as brotherhood and the American Way. This is not to deny the obvious fact that in some cases brotherhood did happen; things always slip through the cracks.

Athletes accumulate press clippings and are routinely entered into the record books. The black soldier is almost without a public American history, though historian Benjamin Quarles tells us that black soldiers were there at the beginning (and will undoubtedly be there at the end, despite the pressure from some Europeans who wish him the hell out of their countries).

The military itself is the foremost proponent of the censorship that surrounds the black soldier. A primary example of this was the 1966 publication of the volume, in a series, *US Army in World War 2, Special Studies, The Employment of Negro Troops*, by Ulysses Lee. The series was produced by the Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army. The word around Washington was that the publication of Lee's volume was held up because certain generals did not want it to come out at all. The chief historian, Stetson Conn, acknowledges that most of the book was done by 1951. A revision took place, but "the work was still too long." Conn then "reduced the revised manuscript...in length and reorganized and consolidated certain of the original chapters."

In 1966, "the new democracy" was in place and Lee's book was important to its underpinnings. By the same token, Terry's book arrived on the scene when national reassessment of Vietnam was underway, which seemed to be related to events in Central America.

These considerations aside, *Bloods* takes its place in both general American history and in military history, with its twenty testaments from fifteen enlisted men and five officers who range in rank from PFC. to Lt. Commander and Colonel. Nineteen photos accompany the histories, a wise decision because the reader wants to look at the men who said this or that, to see if the visage matches the statement. Thus, when we check out Marine 1st Lieutenant Archie "Joe" Biggers' history and find him to be about as gung ho as a Marine can be, we flip to his picture. He stands before one of the two artillery guns his platoon captured at Dewey Canyon. They are, naturally, identified as Soviet Weapons. Bigger looks assured, even cocksure. He does not appear to know his history, that black Marines have been around since 1775 in the state militias of Pennsylvania and Connecticut, serving aboard the *Minerva* and the *Oliver Cromwell*. Biggers won the

Silver Star for the action. "We [black people] are a part of America," he says. "Even though there have been some injustices made, there is no reason for us not to be a part of the American system."

One hundred sixty-seven years after the first black Marines, Edgar A. Huff became one of the first group of blacks *allowed* to enlist in the Marines in 1942. When he went on furlough after finishing boot camp, he was promptly arrested by Marine MPs because they believed "There ain't no damn nigger Marines." Huff went on to become the first black Marine sergeant major, serving under nineteen generals. Three weeks after his retirement party in 1972, after pulling duty in Vietnam, four white Marines drove to his house and threw phosphorus grenades into it, his car and his front yard. Although Marine authorities were given the license plate number—by a white Marine friend of Huff—the four were never brought up on charges; they were transferred or discharged. Says Huff, "I've fought for thirty years for the Marine Corps. And I feel like I am part of this ground I walk on every day." Huff's is an open, wise face, overflowing with dignity.

Lt. Commander William S. Norman, who pulled three tours in Vietnam, questions not only the Navy's rampant racism, but the war itself, and the "communist insurgency" clichés that buttressed it, to the extent that he only withdrew his resignation because the new chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, asked him to stay on to improve things. In three years they began 200 new programs. But other brass wanted Norman out and he himself felt that he'd achieved enough to resign once more. Under the Zumwalt-Norman operation, the first black flag officer, Samuel L. Gravely, came topside. (The army had a flag officer in 1942, and the Air Force at least three by the 1960s.) "I don't think," Norman says, "you can call Vietnam a success story for young blacks who served there. A few stayed in service and did very well. But those who experienced racism in a war we lost wear a scar...the black soldier paid a real price."

The sad thing is, though, that every black serviceman paid a price in every war and they number in the millions. They stand in the shadows of Terry's histories and must, like me, mutter: "Nothing's changed."

Terry's May 26, 1967 *Time* cover story is slugged "Democracy in the Foxhole," and is bracketed with photos of black servicemen, their families and white friends. His piece followed by ten months (August 22 1966) *Newsweek's* "Great Society—In Uniform." Both magazines cited the disproportionate numbers of black war dead when compared to the civilian population—roughly 14.6 percent of the battle dead against 11 percent of the population.

The *New York Times* military editor, Hanson Baldwin, on

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November 20, 1966, claimed that "...The Negro has never had it so good in the Army." He pointed out that blacks "in many line outfits...make up between 30 to 60 percent of the personnel," and that "23.5 percent of the Army enlisted men killed during 1965 were Negro...." The price, Commander Norman, was high.

Black troopers seemed to have lost something else in Vietnam, and that is the general reputation for being far kinder to civilians than white troopers. The reputation came from the European theater during World War 2. Now and again it shines through in Terry's histories, but it is always balanced, that kindness, with the overdone machismo of the bigot. But the enemy repaid brutality with brutality, and blacks did not escape. Still, there were instances, some stated in the book, where blacks ranged untouched in areas in Vietnam where white troops were decimated. Experiences in what one might call, with tongue in cheek, "Third World Solidarity" have been noted by black servicemen since World War 2. The Pentagon, undoubtedly, has already taken notice of this.

The oral historians in *Bloods* tend to confirm the conclusions of a number of books now on the market, which criticize commanders from headquarters down to company commanders. There is widespread contempt voiced for officers in the field by Terry's historians.

Terry himself is the cool, practiced journalist here, all ears, and almost nowhere in sight except for the introduction and a photo of himself with two servicemen. Missing from the ranks of the subjects is a black flag officer—missing probably for good reason: Flag officers are not what you'd call outspoken on the issues, especially if they are black. Here and there the stitching within the selections shows, but always briefly and with the purpose of making the necessary transitions. Terry obviously eliminated gossip and litanies of complaints that did not relate to the topic at hand.

Terry has also captured the "range of the rap" from street black rap to the careful military jargon of the upper-level officers. The book echoes with frustration; these men wanted things to be better than they are. In reflection, and for most there is a careful reappraisal of what they were and what they did, they are proud that, when they had to be, they were tough and brave; they are puzzled that so many of them wound up with Bad Conduct discharges and no skills except to kill.

Perhaps Terry's first historian, Pfc. Reginald "Malik" Edwards of the Marines says it all:

Sometimes I think we would have done a lot better by getting them [Viet Cong, North Vietnamese] hooked on our lifestyle

than by trying to do it with guns. Give them credit cards. Make them dependent on television and sugar. Blue jeans work better than bombs. You can take blue jeans and rock'n roll records and win over more countries than you can with soldiers.

Wallace Terry's *Bloods* may be late, but better now than never, and its contents, for some Americans, make for a welcome addition to what all Americans need to know about their military machine and the men who make it what it is.