

Sam: Hello and welcome to today's podcast. In this episode, we will be taking a look at the African American Experience in Vietnam. Today I am joined by Alex, James and Ryan who will be providing their expert knowledge on the subject, so firstly, thank you very much for joining me. On top of learning about a new area of history for me, I will also be narrating the story of Fred V Cherry, a first hand account of the African American Experience taken from the books 'Two Souls Indivisible' by James S. Hirsch and 'Bloods' by Wallace Terry. This is relevant to both the AQA GCSE Vietnam course, but can also enhance students' understanding of the Civil Rights Movement in the US.

Starting off his story, Fred V. Cherry was a Colonel from Suffolk, Virginia. He grew up in a family that he claims were 'respected by whites in that area', they were fine to live next to each other however Fred's family were expected to address the whites as their seniors. Fred's older brother was hit on the head by two white teenagers while he was growing up, and although there were no segregated swimming pools or recreation centres, schools were segregated and the black children didn't have a bus, whereas the white children did.

Alex, I think it's important for the listener as well as myself to gain some knowledge about the context of the African American experience before the Vietnam War? So, can you paint the picture for us?

Alex: Well although the Vietnam war started in the mid 50s, the US officially entered the war in 64 so let's discuss 1950s America. Do try to keep in mind that this was a period before the Civil Rights Act but the 50s saw a rapid growth in black activism. This increase in activism could be due to a few reasons. The 50s saw a large migration period where African Americans moved into cities from rural areas in search of better jobs which led to a higher black population in the major cities. Speaking of, there was also a dramatic rise for African Americans in the general population, covering around 10-11% by this time, making them a significant and powerful minority. And finally, people finally began noticing the gap of rights, opportunities and freedoms between White and Black Americans presented in the Black Press, as can be seen with influential figures such as Simeon Booker, the first Black reporter for The Washington Post. If you're looking for notable examples, looking at government legislation at the time is very telling. The Jim Crow laws are a prominent example of black oppression during this period. Despite appearing a lot earlier, the laws were created to segregate black Americans in public spaces such as schools, hospitals and even drinking fountains. Although there was still maltreatment towards minorities during this decade, the civil rights movement and other significant developments were beginning to take sway during this time. African Americans took to the courts as well as the streets to protest their constitutional given rights. Cases such as Brown v. Board and Browder v. Gayle helped remove segregation in schools as well as on buses for Black Americans. So to sum up, this was a very diverse time for African Americans.

Sam: Thank you very much Alex, I feel transported to 1950s America! From what you have said, it seems as though Fred's experience was mostly in line with the wider experience of African Americans growing up. Now, once Cherry had come of age he volunteered to join the Navy for the Korean War, traveling to Portsmouth where he was told to fill out the application form for enlisted service, and when he informed the recruiter he wanted to be a pilot, he was told 'the individual I would have to talk to was not in the office, and I could stop in some other day'. He eventually made it to Langley Air Force Base, where he was the only

black applicant, however after the mental and physical tests, the white sergeant congratulated him on having the highest score of the group, something Cherry describes as quote 'Something that in that day he certainly didn't have to do'

To come to James now, is Fred's entry into the war standard to the wider African American experience? I'd assume that not all African Americans would have volunteered to fight for a country which discriminated against them as much as we have already heard.

James: No, it definitely wasn't. As you have already said, Fred was already a serviceman when the war started, whilst most African American servicemen in the war were conscripts. Fred joined the air force during the Korean war and actually wanted to stay in Asia for the duration of his service because he thought he was better treated there than at home. This contrasts with the fact that most African Americans were forced to go to Vietnam by conscription. Many hated the idea of fighting for a country that seemed to hate them back. The famous boxer Muhammad Ali summed up the African American attitude to conscription when he remarked that no Vietcong had ever been racist to him, whilst so many Americans had. Many also rightly saw the draft as racist. After all, 64% of eligible African Americans were drafted, which was a much higher proportion than the 31% of eligible whites who were drafted. Overall, Fred's experience was not expressive of the African American original experience, which was one of conscription for a country they did not trust.

Sam: OK, so the war complicated and increased an already tense situation between African Americans and whites back at home. Now, let's turn to Vietnam itself and Fred's experience there. While fighting in Vietnam, he was captured on a bombing run in Operation Rolling Thunder, despite the conditions being potentially dangerous. While captured he was put in a prison cell with a white southerner called Hally, stating that the guards knew Cherry was from the South too and 'figured under those pressures we can't possibly get along' claiming the Vietnamese 'got a long-term game to run'. Hally couldn't believe that Cherry could fly or that he was a major, claiming that blacks couldn't fly in the Navy because they had a 'depth perception problem'. However, Hally seems to have overcome his deep-rooted racism, feeding Cherry parts of his food due to Cherry falling ill, with Cherry stating 'Hally had the opportunity to eat the sugar himself, but he didn't'. Cherry also describes how the Vietnamese wanted him to make tapes and write statements denouncing war, which he believed was because he was a senior black officer and as by that time quote 'our black guys are doing good work, hurtin' 'em down South'

So, handing back to James again if you don't mind, despite segregation at home, were African Americans treated the same as white servicemen in Vietnam, as it seems there perhaps might have been a more disposable view to African American troops compared to white troops?

James: They were definitely not treated the same. Although there was often a deep sense of solidarity between the troops on the ground, with ordinary soldiers having a deep sense of brotherhood through their combat experiences together, officers were usually racist to African Americans. Officers often delegated African Americans the most dangerous tasks, especially early on in the war. From 1965 to 66 African Americans were 20% of casualties but only 11% of the population, a highly disproportionate number. African Americans were

also more likely to be assigned to combat roles than whites. This discriminatory treatment was lessened after it was exposed by the press though. Later in the war, African American casualty numbers began to match their numbers in the army more than before.

Sam: Just to jump in, I also see that when Fred was captured, he was placed in captivity with white servicemen, was this a Vietnamese tactic? Were they aware of the friction between white and black servicemen?

James: They absolutely knew about the racial differences in the army, and tried to exploit them. The host of the English language section of Radio Hanoi, called Hanoi Hannah, used black popular culture to spread division. She often played music of, and made references to black cultural figures from home to make African Americans homesick. A frequent slogan of hers was 'Soul Brothers, what are you dying for?', which was supposed to make African Americans question their role in the war. Rumours were spread by the Vietnamese about Black Lang, a black commander of a Vietcong regiment. This was also supposed to make African Americans question what they were fighting for. Placing Fred with Hally was not the only way the Vietnamese tried to use Fred to stoke racial conflict with soldiers. He was also pressured to make anti-American propaganda since he was the highest African American captured during the whole course of the war. The Vietnamese thought that a high ranking black officer defecting, this would inspire other black servicemen to do the same. Luckily, Fred did not submit, and he instead fought for racial unity. Overall, the Vietnamese definitely were aware of racial conflict and repeatedly tried to use it to their advantage.

Sam: Right, so Fred's experience in Vietnam isn't in line with the wider experience, and racism and segregation was still prominent between soldiers fighting, so prominent that the Vietnamese were able to turn it against the US as an almost war tactic. Now turning to look on Fred's veteran experience, on Fred's return from Vietnam he was awarded the Air Force Cross, two Bronze Stars and two Purple Hearts for resisting the enemy, as well as the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Silver Star for action in combat. However, on his return he found out his wife had been cheating on him while he was a prisoner of war and had spent all of his allotments, So Cherry ended up suing the Air Force for mishandling his money. On a more positive note, he kept touch with Hally, spending time with him after the war as well as Hally giving Cherry a key to his home in Silver Spring, and Cherry gifting him a car.

So, coming to Ryan now, is this account from Fred a shared experience? When African American servicemen returned home, were they treated equally to white veterans, especially considering that by their return, the Civil Rights Act had been recently passed?

Ryan: It's an interesting question. As you say, by this time the civil rights act had recently been passed in 1964 ending segregation. However when we actually look at the statistics we can see that African Americans were suffering far more from the war compared to their white counterparts. For example, about 40% of African Americans suffered from PTSD which is about double that of the 20% of white Americans. Unemployment was also a major issue for many returning veterans with about one-third of them being unemployed and even if they did get a job it was usually menial and low-paying work. When you compare this to White

Americans which had an unemployment rate of about five percent, it's clear that African Americans were in a worse position after the war than white Americans were. This could be due to things like African Americans not having the opportunities to have gained the experience required for higher paying jobs which on average white Americans would have been able to get. There's also the consideration that the civil rights act merely removed legal discrimination and de facto discrimination was still very much a thing and could certainly have had an influence on these statistics. Overall though, African American veterans were not treated equally to white veterans.

Sam: I also wanted to ask, Fred's main issue seems to be economic problems. Did other veterans face such prominent economic issues, and did the government help veterans like Fred expected them to?

Ryan: Fred certainly wasn't alone in his economic struggles. The US government did pass legislation to help veterans like with the GI bill in 1974, however these were largely ineffective in helping African Americans. The 1974 GI bill provided veterans with \$340 per month but had to cover everything including tuition, accommodation, bills, food and other necessities, meaning many struggled. It's worth noting here that this isn't necessarily a racism angle but more a socio-economic angle because the GI bill gave equal amounts of money to all races, however it usually wasn't enough to cover the full expenses of university and so African-Americans often benefited less from it than white veterans who had the funds to supplement the bill. Although the Government did try to help, they certainly should have done more to account for the different positions of veterans.

That's not to say that African-Americans weren't helped though. In his famous book, *The African American Experience in Vietnam : Brothers in Arms*, James Westheider actually mentioned certain groups like the Veterans Affairs Program, or the VAP, which were very successful, having an 80% success rate of getting black veterans into jobs in major cities like New York.

So, veterans faced economic hardships of varying degrees, and although both the government and private groups tried to help veterans, many still struggled financially.

Sam: Thank you very much Ryan, so despite improvements from their pre-war experience, the deep rooted systems of racism still took precedent over new ideas and laws. I think we should turn to look back at sort of the wider African American experience at home during the war, so Alex what did African Americans at home experience and think of the war during the war?

Alex: It really isn't as straightforward as you would first think. Civil Rights groups at first, including the major ones such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or the NAACP, actually supported the war possibly due to its support for anti-communist rhetoric which was popular at the time but this fell short in a few years. It possibly fell short because the disparity of Black soldiers going to fight was now becoming realised and it was clearly disproportionate. Many, including key figures like Martin Luther King Jr, saw the war as further evidence for the overall Black struggle and oppression as the country was sending black Americans to die for a country that didn't treat them as equals. As well,

what's really interesting is that a lot of black soldiers were actually members of black activists groups who had been arrested for rioting and were given the option to serve in the army or serve time in prison. Many of these veterans of the Vietnam war, white or black, supported the civil rights movement which clearly shows an intriguing link between protest groups such as Vietnam Veterans Against the War and the NAACP. Overall, I think this clearly shows that Vietnam accelerated the Civil Rights Movements through further dividing the lives of Black and White Americans and getting more people to notice it. Because it accelerated the Civil Rights Movement, it shows that the war must have been deeply unpopular with African Americans as it shows that black Americans were not in favour of the war, largely due to the racial tensions that it caused.

Sam: Thank you Alex, and thank you James and Ryan as that brings us to the end of today's podcast. To wrap up all this information you guys have provided me, it seems like the experiences of Fred Cherry are really useful to learn about the general African-American experience. He definitely did not have the career of the average African-American conscriptee, but he still faced enormous challenges both at home and abroad that provide a useful analogy when it comes to studying the African-American experience during Vietnam.