

A Summary of My Dissertation on - The African American Experience in the Vietnam War

The study into the African American soldier's experience in the Vietnam war, is significant to any previous American war with it being the first conflict with integrated units of black and white soldiers. The emergence of the war in Vietnam exposed that black soldiers were doing more than their fair share of fighting, with prominent black leaders questioning the methods that favoured white recruits over black ones. This came at a time when the nation was intermittently torn by internal divisions. This had a significant effect, the burden of racial discrimination that was experienced domestically characterised their experience over in Vietnam such as treatment, rank, and job role. However, the racial integration in the armed forces exposed class privilege and racial injustices throughout the military structure. Since the Vietnam War was the first conflict that white and African American unites served together in desegregated unites, it is was also important to look at the race relations between white and African American servicemen. The purpose of the dissertation was to reject the top down view and instead capture a ground up perspective on the African American experience in Vietnam. For much of America's history Africans Americans have been frozen into one position compared to the white population due to their lack of social mobility and political clout. The experience of the African American GI in Vietnam was significant, this was due to the divisions among the civilian population slowly translated into the Armed forces.

The early attitudes of the draft and military service saw the majority of African Americans believe that the armed forces offered a new opportunity such as financial stability in which was not available in American society. However, there was a shift in attitudes due to the racial imbalances of the selective service system which discriminated based on class, education, and race. This resulted in young African American men being overrepresented in combat roles in Vietnam compared to the white population. This was demonstrated by the high fatality rates that was the result of high concentration of low skilled African American soldiers in combat roles. The response to this saw extensive draft resistance. The most significant and high profile of these was the case of Muhammad Ali, which played role of defiance and solidarity for young African American GIs. Once placed in the military environment it became evident that there was extensive institutional racism throughout the military structure. This was seen through the ranking and job assignments with the majority of African American servicemen remaining in low ranking and high-risk positions throughout the Vietnam war, it is apparent that the structure of civilian life was being slowly translated within the armed forces.

The outbreak of racial violence was apparent throughout the different military sectors. This was due to the pre-existing racial attitudes being implemented throughout the military. The existing racial tensions was highted with the assassination of martin Luther King Jr, where there was an increase in anger and discontent among young African American servicemen. However, there cases of interracial friendships across

the front lines of Vietnam. The battlefields challenged the existing prejudices and led to the breakdown of racial barriers resulting in the frontline being de-racialized space. The frustration from the low-ranking black soldiers in which experienced racial discrimination in the armed forces embraced the Black power movement. African American GI's displayed their racial unity and protest culture by self-segregation and rituals such as the dap in which featured prominently in Vietnam. Due to the race consciousness emerging throughout the military, young African American servicemen started to sympathise with the Vietnamese and started to impose their own racial model to understand their version of inequality.