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From the Battlefield to the Motor City: Exploring the Post-War Experiences of Black Vietnam War Veterans Living in Metropolitan Detroit

By

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Abstract:

American troops experienced the Vietnam War as a fully integrated military, where, for one of the first times, white and Black soldiers fought side by side together. As a result, the Vietnam War is often described as the most racially integrated conflict in United States history. However, African American soldiers faced significant inequalities in Vietnam and upon their return home. Drawing on local narratives from African American Vietnam War veterans in the Metropolitan Detroit area who served between 1966 and 1971, this study challenges the dominant narratives of military service by examining their post-war experiences through the lens of discrimination. Due to discrimination, Black veterans residing in Detroit encountered additional challenges in their socio-economic and psychological lives, including limited access to GI Bill benefits, high unemployment rates, inadequate mental health care for PTSD treatment, and the social stigma associated with both their race and their status as Vietnam veterans.

Introduction:

In the summer of 1968, Michael Chunn, a nineteen-year-old African American man, graduated from high school and began working as a janitor at Oakland Community College (OCC) in Pontiac, Michigan. Michael chose not to attend college, as he did not see the value of pursuing further education, which ultimately led to the Vietnam War. Upon receiving his draft letter, Michael packed his belongings, said goodbye to his family, and left Pontiac for basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Basic training was a challenging adjustment, particularly due to the separation from home and undergoing a commanding schedule to "prepare" him for the things he may face in Vietnam. However, basic training did not adequately equip Michael for the face-to-face combat experiences he encountered in the hot, rainy jungles of Vietnam.

Almost two years later, on April 4, 1970, a helicopter arrived in Da Nang to transfer Michael from Bien Hoa Air Base to Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon, where he would begin the process of returning home. Upon arriving in Michigan, Michael landed in Oakland, California, still wearing his army fatigues, which made the public aware of his service and him aware of the anti-war protests occurring throughout the country. Not even 24 hours after serving as a combat soldier, Michael arrived at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, grateful to be home and eager to put the Vietnam War in his rearview. However, Vietnam became a place where Michael experienced fear, paranoia, death, and racism that would haunt him for the rest of his life. From one draft letter, Michael's life trajectory changed beyond serving in one of the most aggressive wars of the twentieth century, now facing a new normal of what it means to not only be African American but also a Vietnam War veteran. Michael Chunn is my grandfather.[1]

Although the confrontation in Vietnam began in the early stages of the Cold War during the 1940s, the United States did not officially enter the war until the mid-1960s, when it

[1] Michael Chunn, interview by Kayla Gray, February 2025.

deployed 15,000 American troops to South Vietnam.[2] By December 1965, there would be about 184,000 American troops in Vietnam, with African Americans making up 15 percent of the armed forces. At the height of the war in 1968, there were 543,000 troops, with African Americans making up 10 percent.[3] Before the end of United States involvement in 1973, more than 300,000 African Americans served in the Vietnam War.[4] Of the 300,000 Black troops who served, about 50,000 returned home from the war each year, especially in the late 1960s.[5] As a result, the Vietnam War became the first American war where the United States achieved "complete integration" and provided "equal opportunities" within the armed forces.[6] The Johnson administration even bragged about the Vietnam War being the "most integrated war" in U.S. history.[7]

Despite this notion that the military was often seen as the least racist institution in American society because of its efforts toward integration, African American soldiers still faced inequitable treatment during their service. Those who survived the war bore the consequences of integration by carrying physical, mental, and racial scars that led to even greater challenges and

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[2] James Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), xii.

[3] Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, xii.

[4] Will Elsbury, "Research Guides: American Minority Groups in the Vietnam War: A Resource Guide," *Introduction - American Minority Groups in the Vietnam War: A Resource Guide - Research Guides at Library of Congress*, September 12, 2022, https://guides.loc.gov/racial-ethnic-and-religious-minorities-in-the-vietnam-war.

[5] Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietna*m, 106.

[6] Natalie Kimbrough, *Equality or Discrimination?: African Americans in the U.S. military during the Vietnam War* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2007), 3.

[7] Kimberley L. Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For?: Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 198.

hardships upon returning to civilian life.[8] The racism that African Americans faced in Vietnam followed them home as veterans, as their status provided little protection against the discrimination that continued to persist throughout American society.[9]

Black veterans faced racial inequalities through multiple outlets, such as denial of basic veteran benefits, high unemployment rates, and inadequate healthcare.[10] African American veterans often felt as though they had two strikes against them– being Black and a Vietnam War veteran.[11] Erwin Parson, one of the more prolific writers of African American veterans, argued that Black veterans had three strikes against them that complicated their readjustment, known as the *tripartite dilemma*: "(a) undergoing the additional maturation burden of acquiring a dual African American and American identity; (b) surviving as a member of a kinship of men and women who are slave descendants, and as such are despised and discriminated against; and (c) surviving the trauma of the Vietnam War."[12] This thesis argues that African American Vietnam veterans who encountered both institutional and individual racism in Vietnam experienced further discrimination upon returning home– not only due to their identity as Black Vietnam veterans, as highlighted in existing scholarship, but also through acts of infliction that impacted their physical and mental health, financial stability, and social standing. Specifically, this study

[8] Daniel S. Lucks, "African American soldiers and the Vietnam War: no more Vietnams," *The Sixties* 10 (2017): 199.

[9] Gerald F. Goodwin, *Race in the Crucible of War: African American Servicemen and the War in Vietnam* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2023), 202.

[10] Benjamin Fleury-Steiner, *Disposable Heroes: The Betrayal of African-American Veterans* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 8.

[11] Daniel S. Lucks, *Selma to Saigon: The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 251.

[12] Irving M. Allen, "PTSD among African Americans," *Ethnocultural aspects of posttraumatic stress disorder: Issues, research, and clinical applications* (1996): 214, https://doi.org/10.1037/10555-008.

focuses on local narratives of Black Army veterans currently living in Michigan's prominent suburban and urban areas to examine how these intersecting burdens shaped their post war lives.

From August 1964 to May 1975, it is estimated that 322,000 Michiganders served in the armed forces during the Vietnam War, with most residing in the Detroit Metropolitan area, totaling 295,000.[13] Considering that from these statistics, approximately 14,000 were African Americans, this research focuses on the specific experiences of African American Vietnam War veterans from the Detroit Metropolitan area (Metro Detroit) or those who relocated to the area after the war, particularly in cities such as Pontiac, Flint, and Detroit, and who served between 1966 and 1971.[14]

Those who served between 1966 and 1971 provided a wide range of experiences during the Vietnam War that would later influence their livelihoods once home. Veterans who began their service in 1966 have different experiences compared to veterans who began their service in 1968. Specifically, veterans who served between 1966 and 1967 did not experience the heightened racial tensions and violence between their white counterparts as Black veterans faced in 1968, which persisted until the end of the war in 1973.[15] African American veterans from, or currently residing in, Metro Detroit have continued to experience discrimination upon returning home, particularly in accessing benefits promised through military service. Underlying discrimination affected Black veterans' ability to receive proper GI Bill benefits, secure employment, obtain sufficient mental health care services for conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and gain the deserved recognition for their service from both civilians

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[13] "April 28, 1985 (Page 75 of 450)," *Detroit Free Press*, April 28, 1985; Flower of the Dragon, "Flower of the Dragon Records" box 1, no. 1 (1973-1979).

[14] "April 28, 1985 (Page 75 of 450)," *Detroit Free Press*.

[15] Gerald F. Goodwin, "Black and White in Vietnam," *New York Times*, July 18, 2017.

and the United States military. In Metro Detroit, these challenges, combined with the broader stigma associated with being a Vietnam veteran, further compromised the supposed promise of equality that military service was intended to provide after the war.

On a broader scale, exploring the experiences of Black Vietnam War veterans from Metro Detroit showcases the challenges faced while connecting their local narratives to a national context of American oppression. Their experiences reveal how the U.S. military, which claimed to offer opportunity and equality, often used Black men as instruments to perpetuate racialized violence beyond America under the disguise of spreading democracy. The narratives of Black veterans expose the military's role in reinforcing global systems of oppression, as they deployed Black men to suppress other communities of color abroad while Black men continued to endure racial discrimination at home. These accounts serve as a broader critique of the United States military, particularly regarding its use of Black bodies to uphold unjust structures both domestically and internationally.

Literature Review:

The Vietnam War highlights the limitations of formal desegregation within the Armed Forces, as African American soldiers continued to face persistent aspects of racism despite serving under the same conditions as their white counterparts. James Westheider noted that military officials were reluctant to participate in desegregation efforts, often hanging onto racist attitudes that undermined true equality.[16] Similarly, Samuel Black reiterated this point that although Black soldiers served in an officially integrated military, their experiences in Vietnam were shaped by inequalities– showcasing that desegregation policies did not translate into

[16] James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York Univ Press, 1999), 4-5.

equality in practice.[17] Natalie Kimbrough expanded on this critique by examining the continued use of policy to create a nondiscriminatory military, yet, the minds of military personnel remained unchanged.[18] Kimbrough acknowledged that the United States military recognized racism as a problem and implemented new reforms and training initiatives in an effort to change racial biases.[19]

The Civil Rights Movement helped transform the Vietnam War into an antiwar movement. Christian Appy argued that without the public notices created by civil rights and antiwar movements, the racial issues faced by African Americans might have been unknown.[20] He added that civil rights leaders, specifically Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., brought attention to the war by addressing the institutionalized racism perpetuated by the United States military.[21] Jeremy Maxwell furthered this argument by noting that African American civil rights activists and organizations protested against the war, especially regarding unfair practices toward African Americans within the military.[22] Daniel Lucks also highlighted the importance of civil rights leaders, pointing out that the hardships and racial strife faced by Black soldiers were a significant

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[17] Samuel W. Black, *Soul Soldiers: African Americans and the Vietnam Era* (Pittsburgh, PA: Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, 2006), xi).

[18] Natalie Kimbrough, *Equality or Discrimination?*, 3.

[19] Kimbrough, *Equality or Discrimination?*, 152.

[20] Christian G. Appy, *Working-class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 19.

[21] Appy, *Working-class War*, 19-20.

[22] Jeremy P Maxwell, *Brotherhood in Combat: How African Americans Found Equality in Korea and Vietnam* (First edition. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 12.

concern for the civil rights movement, prompting leaders to speak out against the war and the involvement of African Americans.[23]

When veterans served overseas, racism manifested in various ways, prompting U.S. military leaders to address racial conflict. Gerald F. Goodwin argued that African Americans could not escape the racial landscape back home in the United States, as these issues perpetuated themselves in Vietnam, resulting in events back home influencing relationships between Black and white servicemen.[24] Kimberly Phillips slightly challenged this notion by stating that the root of racial problems stemmed from Black soldiers observing symbols and practices of white supremacy fueling war combat.[25] Beth Bailey added that the Army ignored racial problems by enacting ideals of "color blindness," hiding behind Executive Order 9981 and the President's Committee on Equal Opportunity in the Armed Forces.[26] As a consequence, the United States Army had to initiate reform in 1968 to address the severity of racial problems as it would disrupt combat effectiveness in Vietnam.[27]

While historians have recently disagreed over the extent to which veterans have struggled to reorient themselves to everyday life, the transition to civilian life proved to be a difficult task for African American veterans.[28] From a survey, James Fendrich found that African American

[23] Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 6.

[24] Goodwin, *Race in the Crucible of War*, 3.

[25] Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For?*, 224.

[26] Beth L. Bailey, *An Army Afire: How the US Army Confronted Its Racial Crisis in the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 9.

[27] Bailey, *An Army Afire*, 3.

[28] For those who argue veterans had a relatively easy transition, see John A. Wood, *Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016), 76; Eric T. Dean, “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” *Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1992): 60, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27555590. For a challenge to

veterans suffered financial difficulties due to high unemployment rates, while also encountering other societal problems, such as not receiving post-service schooling and home loans.[29] Fendrich emphasized that the benefits available to veterans did not adequately help Black veterans, making it difficult for African Americans to find employment and support their families and themselves.[30] Similarly, Kathleen Frydl highlighted the deficiency of the GI Bill, where many African American veterans did not experience the same benefits compared to white veterans, especially regarding education, training, home loans, unemployment benefits, or medical care at Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals.[31] Mark Boulton furthered this notion by arguing the GI Bill failed to provide adequate benefits in terms of economic advancement and educational costs for African American veterans.[32] Also, Boulton noted the discriminatory practices associated with the GI Bill.[33]

Scholars have pointed out that the disparity in post-war experiences extended beyond socio-economic challenges, as African American veterans also faced emotional and mental health struggles. Thomas Johnson examined the emotional turmoil many African American

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this view, see Christian G. Appy, *Working-class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 8-9; Joel Osler Brende and Erwin Randolph Parson, *Vietnam Veterans: The Road to Recovery* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), xvii.

[29] James M. Fendrich, "The Returning Black Vietnam-Era Veteran," *Social Service Review* 46, no. 1 (1972): 64, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30021869.

[30] Fendrich, "The Returning Black Vietnam-Era Veteran," 72.

[31] Kathleen J. Frydl, *The GI Bill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 222.

[32] Mark Boulton, *Failing Our Veterans: The G.I. Bill and the Vietnam Generation* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 109,111.

[33] Mark Boulton, "How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 58 (2007): 60, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25073828.

veterans faced once home, as many felt ashamed, angry, and bitter about their experiences in Vietnam.[34] Daniel Lucks expanded on the emotional impacts of the Vietnam War, where many African American veterans returned home frustrated, angry, and more race-conscious.[35] Robert Laufer, M.S. Gallops, and Ellen Frey-Wounters further explored the emotional toll, striving to understand the war-induced trauma experienced by white and Black Vietnam veterans. While their studies focus on both Black and white veterans, their findings indicate that traumatic experiences impacted Black and white veterans differently..[36] Irving Allen expounded more on war-induced trauma, using the term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), where African American veterans, especially combat veterans, suffered higher PTSD rates.[37] The magnitude of PTSD's effects on African American veterans has led to heightened psychological distress, high unemployment rates, and social isolation.[38]

The works gathered lay the groundwork for understanding the experiences of African American Vietnam War veterans; however, they lack the localized narratives that connect to the broader conversation surrounding discrimination shaping post-war experiences. Much of the scholarship is saturated with exploring racial dynamics during the Vietnam War, focusing on African American soldiers enduring institutionalized and personal racism. While this is a crucial

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[34] Thomas A. Johnson, "Negro Veteran Is Confused and Bitter: Negro Veteran Is Confused and Bitter Upon Return to Many of the Old Difficulties," *New York Times*, July 29, 1968.

[35] Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 136.

[36] Robert S. Laufer, M. S. Gallops, and Ellen Frey-Wouters, "War Stress and Trauma: The Vietnam Veteran Experience," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 25, no. 1 (1984): 78, https://doi.org/10.2307/2136705.

[37] Irving M. Allen, "PTSD among African Americans," *Ethnocultural Aspects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues, Research, and Clinical Applications*, 211, Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, 1996, https://doi.org/10.1037/10555-008.

[38] Irving M. Allen, "PTSD among African Americans."

aspect of understanding Black veterans' military service, it does not fully address the long-term influence of their war experiences as they returned home. Other existing works discuss the aftermath of the Vietnam War, examining the broader disparities in post-war benefits between Black and white veterans. Although these works reflect the generalized experiences of Black Vietnam veterans, who endured additional socio-economic and psychological challenges compared to their white counterparts, further research is needed to explore how national experiences specifically relate to the local economic and social conditions of Black veterans.

My project builds upon existing literature by narrowing the focus to African American veterans in Metro Detroit– an area with its own racial and economic history influenced by the automobile industry, housing segregation, and police surveillance. By centering on Metro Detroit, my research provides a localized study that reveals how federal programs and policies, such as the GI Bill and VA healthcare, were influenced by local institutions that often reproduced racial inequalities. This perspective uncovers how African American veterans experienced national neglect and also community-specific experiences of systemic discrimination. By analyzing the intersection of national policy and local implementation, this research highlights how African American veterans endured discrimination from both sides, locally and nationally, which influenced their socio-economic and psychological lives in Metro Detroit.

Returning Home: Post Military Service Emotions

Many veterans describe their journey home from Vietnam as beginning with intense anticipation, followed by shock due to sadness from the change of environment, then a sense of slowed time, and feelings of depression and isolation until they began the process of

reconstructing their new civilian lives.[39] With the Vietnam War being considered an unpopular war, Vietnam veterans were not welcome home to parades, dances, or grateful kisses for their service.[40] Their experiences would be different from those who served in previous wars, as they would have flown home alone without the support of fellow returning soldiers and the lack of public notice, awareness, or attention.[41] Although veterans received no victory parades, most veterans did not focus on such celebrations, as they transitioned straight from the war zone—where survival meant killing or being killed—to civilian life of sitting in an airport lobby in army fatigues all within seventy-two hours.[42] While all Vietnam veterans experienced a similar process of returning home, not all veterans experienced the same challenges and emotions within the early stages of readjustment—especially African American veterans.

Ideally, the end of service for African Americans meant returning to a new America that addressed the hostile racial climate before their service.[43] Black veterans believed that the significant racial changes within the military—such as the creation of the Defense Race Relations Institute (DRRI), which required all military branches and the Department of Defense to address racial tensions and promote equal opportunity—would lead to similar reforms and

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[39] Paul Starr, Ralph Nader, James F. Henry, and Raymond P. Bonner, *The Discarded Army: Veterans After Vietnam; the Nader Report on Vietnam Veterans and the Veterans Administration* (New York: Charterhouse, 1973), 29.

[40] Gordon Burnside, "The Discarded Army: Veterans After Vietnam," *New York Times*, March 31, 1974.

[41] Starr, *The Discarded Army*, 30.

[42] Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietna*m, 106.

[43] Goodwin, *Race in the Crucible of War*, 203.

policies being adopted throughout American society.[44] They were hopeful that changes would occur back at home– imagining integration as their new way of life.[45] However, Black veterans who had fought for equality and freedom abroad returned home to the same racial prejudice environment as before.[46] With or without knowledge of their military service status, the public continued to perpetuate the same racist insults at Black veterans.[47] They would soon come to realize that they were not being treated equally to white veterans and that their efforts were nearly not as recognized.[48]

When Black veterans understood they returned to an unforgiving civilian world with little use for them, many began to express their frustrations and develop unfavorable sentiments regarding the war.[49] *The Louisville Defender* claimed that once acclimated to civilian life, Black veterans felt cheated, as they were in the same place they started before entering the war: Black and living in poor urban areas.[50] Other emotions, such as unhappiness, would arise, as *New York Amsterdam News* reported that many felt "deprived of their patriotism, pride, and a sense of

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[44] Johnson, "Negro Veteran Is Confused and Bitter"; "History: Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute," Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, accessed April 1, 2025, https://www.deomi.mil/About-DEOMI/History/.

[45] Ponchitta Pierce and Peter Bailey, "The Returning Vet," *Ebony*, August 1968, 146.

[46] "Headlines Tell a Story Of Negro GIs in Viet 'Most Integrated' War," *Michigan Chronicle*, July 16, 1966.

[47] Sol Stern, "When the Black G.I. Comes Back From Vietnam," *New York Times*, March 24, 1968.

[48] "Are African-American soldiers and war veterans being treated differently?," *Mississippi Link*, November 12, 2003.

[49] Fleury-Steiner, *Disposable Heroes*, 6.

[50] Lewis C. Olive, "Duty, Honor, Country, But No Reward," *The Louisville Defender*, May 10, 1973.

worth as Black men in America."[51] The combination of unhappiness and disappointment caused animosity, where, according to a survey conducted by the United States Congress Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Black veterans had strong feelings of bitterness that were often linked to their negative experiences with race relations in the military.[52] These feelings of bitterness coincided with Black veterans feeling used and abandoned by the United States, resulting in many not supporting the war and claiming that they would never serve for the United States again.[53]

The negative emotions and experiences associated with the war led to more radicalized thinking and race consciousness among Black veterans.[54] A survey conducted by the United States Congress Committee on Veterans' Affairs found that military service likely increased the sense of marginalization experienced by many Black Vietnam veterans.[55] As a result, many Black veterans came home more militant; where Harper's Magazine, "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home," observed that African Americans were unafraid to use their guerrilla warfare skills, along with their disillusionment and anger, to push for societal change in America.[56] The need for change prompted African American veterans to carry the training

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[51] Angela Jones, "For Black vets Vietnam still on," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 25, 1982.

[52]Arthur Edgendorf, United States, Congress House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, United States, Veterans Administration, Center for Policy Research, and Vietnam Era Research Project, *Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative Adjustment of Veterans and Their Peers: A Study*, 290.

[53] Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 171; Johnson, "Negro Veteran Is Confused and Bitter."

[54] Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 136.

[55] Edgendorf, *Legacies of Vietnam*, 91.

[56] Whitney Young, "When the Negroes in Vietnam Come Home," Harper's Magazine 234 (June 1967): 65.

learned from their military service to Black radical groups, such as the Black Panther Party.[57] In addition to their own militant beliefs, veterans returned home to a Black community with an expanding black consciousness, believing the same militant ideals of separatism and a demand for immediate radical social change.[58] All of these factors led Black veterans to commit themselves to transforming the civil rights movement into an antiwar movement.[59]

The antiwar movement became a platform for African American veterans to voice their opinions, with some viewing the war as a racist war that used minorities to do the "dirty work" on the front lines.[60] While racial discrimination and racist attitudes persisted within the United States military, other veterans did not view the war as racist but rather as a working-class war, as 80 percent of all Vietnam veterans came from working-class families or poor backgrounds.[61] Black veterans' understanding of the Vietnam War as a colonial power conflict stimulated additional opposing opinions.[62] Specifically, in Metro Detroit, as reported by the *Michigan Chronicle*, Black veterans viewed the war as America supporting dominant white European powers, such as France and Great Britain, rather than endorsing liberation forces against colonization in Vietnam. The report further explains that upon returning home, African American veterans witnessed apparent contradictions in the United States, which supported white

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[57] Wallace Terry, "Bringing the War Home," *The Black Scholar* 2, no. 3 (1970): 10, 15, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41202864.

[58] Fendrich, "The Returning Black Vietnam-Era Veteran," 60.

[59] Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 136.

[60] Stern, "When the Black G.I. Comes Back From Vietnam."

[61] Appy, *Working-class War*, 6, 22.

[62] Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 136.

domination and oppressive systems through its involvement in the Vietnam War, while claiming to uphold ideals of freedom and independence back at home.[63]

Michael Chunn, like many other Black veterans in Metro Detroit, came to realize the oppressive structures that existed during the Vietnam War. Chunn did not outwardly express his frustration about the war once he returned home, as he knew his service was not socially supported; yet, he internally hold grievances about being forced to fight in a war over eight thousand miles away against an unknown enemy, in a country he could care less about, to return home to a nation where racial discrimination and unrest continued to persist. While he did not expect to come home to meaningful celebrations or warm welcomes, he did hope for someone to recognize his service. With the lack of support for his service, he was in the exact same place he had started before his service: a Black man living in an urban area, a part of the working class.[64]

Black veterans endured the physical scars of Vietnam, such as the loss of limb(s), recurring diseases, severe burns, wounds that refused to heal, and horrible side effects, such as cancer, caused by Agent Orange– a potent chemical defoliant used to wipe out tropical jungles.[65] Those who sustained injuries in Vietnam, like Earl Polk, would formulate additional emotions regarding the war. Earl Polk, an African American man born and raised in Pontiac, Michigan, was working for General Motors (GM) when he received his draft letter for the United States Army in 1969 at eighteen. After completing basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, the military shipped Polk off to Vietnam as a "point man," where he bore the brunt of encountering potential enemy fire. A year in Vietnam led to commanders ordering Polk and his platoon to fight in

[63] Charles G. Adams, "In My Opinion: Racist War In Vietnam," *Michigan Chronicle*, May 10, 1975.

[64] Michael Chunn, interview by Kayla Gray, February 2025.

[65] Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam*, 106.

Cambodia, where he would be shot in the leg by enemy fire and medevacked to a hospital in Vietnam. A couple of weeks later, after recovering from his wound, Polk returned home to Pontiac. As a wounded veteran, Polk continued to encounter additional complications, such as loss of movement and blood clots. The traumatic experience of sustaining an injury during combat adds a new perspective on the emotions of Black veterans returning home. Polk, like many others, felt misused by the United States military, as he returned to the same societal conditions as before, while also enduring additional suffering through physical pain that further complicated his livelihood post-service.[66]

Across the country and throughout Metro Detroit, African American Vietnam veterans faced a dual burden once home from the war: returning not only from a physically and psychologically demanding war, but to a society that did not recognize their service. While all veterans were denied positive reception from the general public that were given to soldiers of previous wars, Black veterans experienced an additional layer of rejection due to the racial climate remaining unchanged in America. Their expectations of an integrated America, as reflected in the military, was not reality as they encountered the same socioeconomic conditions as before. The illusion of integration within American society led to many Black veterans expressing their frustrations and resentment toward both the war and the United States, as a whole. The experiences upon returning home not only contributed to Black veterans' bitterness but also radicalized their perspective of the war regarding ideals of racial justice. The Vietnam War, thought to have served as a pathway to greater mobility and inclusion, reinforced for Black veterans the reality that their service does not change the fact that they are Black men living in America, where racial unrest, especially in Metro Detroit, remained prevalent.

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[66] Earl Polk, interview by Kayla Gray, March 2025.

Returning Home: Effects of PTSD

The initial emotions that Black veterans experienced upon returning home were only the beginning of their struggles, as many grappled with post-traumatic stress disorder without the needed mental health support. Born in Detroit, Michigan, Sergeant Dwight "Skip" Johnson was drafted into the United States Army in July of 1966, just a couple of months after his high school graduation.[67] Johnson completed basic training at Fort Knox and was later deployed to Vietnam as his platoon's only person of color.[68] While in Vietnam, Johnson served two years on tank duty, surviving everyday combat situations. Eight days before the end of his duty, on January 14, 1968, in Dak To, Vietnam, Johnson endured a heavy combat situation where his tank and two others took direct hits, resulting in him having to escape a burning tank with only a .45 caliber pistol into ongoing crossfire. Running through the jungle, he comes into direct contact with a Vietcong soldier who held a rifle to his chest. The rifle would misfire and result in Johnson killing his would have been killer. On that day, Johnson killed about five to twenty men and returned back home to Detroit six days later.[69]

Once back home in Detroit, Johnson returned to living with his mother, Joyce Alves, and appeared unaffected and sociable, even telling his friends that nothing had happened during the war. He seemed to easily readjust to civilian life, as Johnson continued to be a friendly, funny, and outgoing man.[70] A few months after the end of his service, on November 19, 1968, Johnson

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[67] Allen Mikaelian and Mike Wallace, *Medal of Honor: Profiles of America's Military Heroes from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), 242.

[68] Jon Nordheimer, “From Dakto to Detroit: Death of a Troubled Hero: From Dakto to Detroit: The Life and Death of a Troubled Vietnam Hero,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1971.

[69] Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 249-250.

[70] Nordheimer, “From Dakto to Detroit”; Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 242.

received a phone call from the Pentagon, stating that he would be a recipient of the Medal of Honor from President Lyndon B. Johnson, being Detroit's only and Michigan's first Black Vietnam war Medal of Honor winner.[71]

After receiving the medal, Johnson's life appeared to return back to normal. He got married in 1969, signed a three-year contract with the United States Army as a recruiter, bought a house in Detroit, and started a family.[72] However, Johnson carried a significant psychological burden, as no one knew he was having nightmares or had feelings of being helpless, out of control, a fool, used by the United States military, and unable to trust others.[73] Johnson suffered a mental breakdown, leading to him receiving inpatient psychiatric treatment at Valley Forge Army Hospital in Pennsylvania, where he was diagnosed with depression as a cause of post-Vietnam adjustment problem, later deemed as PTSD.[74] On March 28, 1971, Johnson left Valley Forge Army Hospital on a three-day leave but would never return again. During those three days, he returned back home to Detroit, where, a month later, he would ultimately be shot and killed for trying to rob a party store.[75]

The public held many opinions as to what caused the robbery; some saying "that the pressures of the medal may have driven Johnson to a state of mental unbalance," others saying that he may have "been taking narcotics in the last few months of his life and the demands of drugs had sent him into the grocery store with a gun," while the Veterans Administration Board

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[71] Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 243; Thomas C. Post, "Robbery Try By Viet Hero Laid to Illness," *The Washington Post*, March 22, 1977.

[72] Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 245-247.

[73] Nordheimer, "From Dakto to Detroit"; Post, "Robbery Try By Viet Hero Laid to Illness."

[74] Post, "Robbery Try By Viet Hero Laid to Illness"; Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 250.

[75] Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 253.

stated that "Johnson at the time of the robbery attempt…was 'completely confused, bitter, distrustful, and depressed, and his feelings of inadequacy and helplessness were so overwhelming that he could no longer make a rational decision.'"[76] While many argued about the cause of the robbery leading to Johnson's death, it is apparent that while the physical wounds of the Vietnam War may heal, the psychological trauma continued to influence African Americans in Metro Detroit as they returned home. His journey from a decorated war hero to a man overwhelmed by mental distress underscores the failure of both the government and society to provide mental health care for Black veterans.

The failure of both the government and society to provide the needed care for Black veterans persisted throughout the country as more African Americans began to experience PTSD within the first few years upon their return home. PTSD is a mental health condition triggered by catastrophic events, such as combat situations, cause Vietnam veterans and other patients to experience physical and psychological symptoms, including nightmares, insomnia, an excessive startle reaction to loud noises, outbursts of anger, nervousness, anxiety, flashbacks, and depression.[77] Psychologist, especially in the early 1970s, referred to PTSD as post-Vietnam era veteran syndrome, where veterans would be described as aggressive, hostile, lacking motivation, substance abusers, and suicidal, with low self-esteem.[78] Other commonly reported symptoms of post-Vietnam era veteran syndrome include feelings of shame and guilt for their actions during their service and a distrust in the United States government that veterans believed had

[76] "Got Doors Slammed in Face, GI Hero Killed in Hold-Up," *Jet*, May 20, 1971, 17; Nordheimer, "From Dakto to Detroit"; Post, "Robbery Try By Viet Hero Laid to Illness."

[77] Herbert Hendin and Ann Pollinger Haas, *Wounds of War: The Psychological Aftermath of Combat in Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 5; Westheider, *African American Experience,* 107.

[78] Flower of the Dragon, "Flower of the Dragon Records" box 1, no. 1 (1973-1979).

manipulated them.[79] Whether considered as PTSD or post-Vietnam era veteran syndrome, in totality, more than 500,000 veterans suffered from the disorder and would not experience severe symptoms until five to ten years after their service.[80] As PTSD symptoms began to emerge, African American veterans would be a highly susceptible population; a study conducted by the Veterans Administration found that 40 percent of Black Vietnam veterans experience some form of PTSD compared to 20 percent of their white counterparts.[81]

It is not surprising that African Americans have a higher percentage of being diagnosed with PTSD compared to white veterans, as many served in combat units in Vietnam. A psychological study found that combat exposure and its association with stress were more prevalent among veterans who served on the front lines and declined as individuals moved further away. The study concluded that troops who were closer to the front lines and faced high combat exposure and war stress were more likely to experience PTSD.[82] African Americans were the primary individuals a part of combat platoons, where, according to military statistics, in 1965, African American men made up 12 percent of the United States population, yet comprised 31 percent of combat battalions in Vietnam.[83] By 1967, African American army combat troops outnumbered whites by more than double, as 23 percent of African Americans made up combat platoons compared to 11 percent of whites.[84]

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[79] Boyce Rensberger, "DELAYED TRAUMA IN VETERANS CITED: Psychiatrists Find Vietnam Produces Guilt and Shame," *New York Times*, May 3, 1972.

[80] Appy, *Working-class War*, 310.

[81] Edgendorf, *Legacies of Vietnam*, 477.

[82] Laufer, Gallops, and Frey-Wouters, "War Stress and Trauma," 66.

[83] Micheal Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1995), n.p.

[84] "Armed Forces: Democracy in the Foxhole," *Time Magazine*, May 26, 1967.

The Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) and other exams assessed new inductees' potential for specialized training, increasing the likelihood of African Americans being assigned to combat units. The army divided its scores into five categories, requiring specific scores for induction in some branches.[85] Due to educational disadvantages, many African Americans failed the AFQT; from July 1964 to December 1965, almost 67.5% of 18-year-old African Americans who took the AFQT failed.[86] In terms of inductees, African Americans tended to have the lowest test scores, scoring between the last three categories, in which 40% of African Americans taking the test scored in the lowest category.[87] Due to lower AFQT scores, military authorities frequently assigned African Americans to combat units, where the Department of Defense found that African Americans made up 31 percent of U.S. combat infantry, compared to 18 percent of airborne units and 13 percent of other Army units.[88]

The stress of combat followed African Americans home, as seen by the symptoms of PTSD. A 1981 study found that 70 percent of African Americans who experienced heavy combat remained stressed several years after the Vietnam War. About ten years later, researchers conducted another study and found that 20.6 percent of African Americans had PTSD, compared to 13.7 percent of white Americans.[89] In Detroit, the most significant number of those treated for PTSD were those who served in the Army and were most likely to engage in combat, at 61.2 percent.[90] The *New York Amsterdam News* reported that African Americans were "far more likely

[85] Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For?*, 79.

[86] Richard Eder, "67.5% of Negroes Fail Draft Test," *New York Times*, October 2, 1966.

[87] Westheider, *African American Experience,* 50.

[88] Westheider, *African American Experience,* 48.

[89] Allen, “PTSD among African Americans,” 211-212.

[90] Flower of the Dragon, “Flower of the Dragon Records” box 1, no. 1 (1973-1979).

to have been afflicted by a variety of serious problems with jobs, their families, and personal stress" as a result of their combat experiences.[91]

The burdens associated with combat experiences causing PTSD led to a majority of veterans relying on negative coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse.[92] In the aftermath of the war, due to heavy exposure to combat, there became heavier use of marijuana and alcohol, and more run-ins with the law amongst Black veterans.[93] There would be an alarming increase in alcoholism, as many believed it would help reduce negative feelings about the war, such as inadequacy, pessimism, and uncontrollable rage.[94] A study organized by the United States Committee on Veterans' Affairs found that non-white veterans' usage of marijuana was at significantly higher levels compared to the total numbers of veterans surveyed.[95] Outside of substance abuse, specifically in Detroit, veterans coped with their experiences through thoughts or attempts of suicide, where an article published by the *Detroit Free Press* found that 54 percent of 7,000 veterans coming to VA hospitals in the Metro Detroit area sought treatment for thoughts of suicide and 27 percent for attempting suicide.[96]

Like many Black veterans across the nation, Earl Polk relied on substances to combat symptoms of PTSD. Within the first couple of years after his service, Polk knew the issues he

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[91] "Black Vietnam Veterans Suffer More Stress," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 11, 1985.

[92] Hendin and Haas, *Wounds of War*, 194.

[93] "Black Vietnam Veterans Suffer More Stress," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[94] James H. Carter, "Alcoholism in Black Vietnam Veterans," 655.

[95] Louis Harris and Associates and the United States Congress, Senate, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans on Their Readjustment to Civilian Life* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1972), 176.

[96] Flower of the Dragon, "Flower of the Dragon Records" box 1, no. 1 (1973-1979).

was dealing with were not only physical due to his wound but also mental. While in Vietnam, to manage the acts of violence that surrounded him, Polk would partake in drugs and alcohol, which turned into substance abuse when he returned to Pontiac. Polk knew his issues of alcoholism and drug abuse but decided to seek treatment at a local hospital due to other mental health problems, such as nightmares, flashbacks, and depression. He received medication to treat his symptoms, yet the medication had substantial side effects, resulting in him "walking around like a zombie" as his mother would say. After two weeks of taking the medication, Polk would go "cold turkey," causing him to experience tremors, which took a month to subside. He continued to engage in alcoholism and drug abuse to reduce his symptoms.

While Polk hoped that the VA would provide him with adequate care, his expectation was never fully met. Although mental health treatment through the VA was technically available, it remained out of reach for Polk for many years. Without the assistance of the VA, Polk took matters into his own hands, where he began attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and discussing his issues with other veterans. Eventually, he was diagnosed with PTSD only after enduring years of pursuing suitable medical assistance. It took more than 25 years for the VA to formally recognize his PTSD, grant compensation for his mental health struggles, and offer additional treatment for his substance abuse.[97]

Polk and many other Black veterans sought psychiatric care, while others dealt with the shame associated with their mental health issues arising from the war. African American veterans would frequently minimize their involvement in the war and the harmful coping skills that derived from the war. Instead of stating that their substance abuse stemmed from newly arising psychological problems, Black veterans explained that their problems stemmed from racism, job

[97] Earl Polk, interview by Kayla Gray, March 2025.

discrimination, unequal housing, and unequal education opportunities. A reason for this is the stigma associated with mental health care within the African American community, as veterans did not want to be perceived as seeking sympathy.[98]

Although African Americans dismissed the war's impact on their mental health, Black veterans seeking care encountered mental health professionals who struggled to find appropriate treatments for PTSD. Mental health care professionals based treatment solely on the experiences of soldiers in Vietnam, rather than considering the unique challenges faced by African American veterans.[99] Black veteran's development of PTSD extended past the war, as their PTSD also resulted from their dissatisfaction with post-military conditions and greater exposure to societal stressors, such as lack of economic resources, institutional racism, and prejudice.[100]

African American veterans faced two battles by having to combat the psychological scars of the Vietnam War and the persistent nature of racial discrimination, which limited their opportunities for proper recovery. Veterans had to not only readjust to civil life but also encounter systematic barriers, as evident in the ways they were forced to cope with PTSD and the lack of adequate treatment, that heightened their struggles. Their experiences highlight the interaction of racial and military trauma, demonstrating that the Vietnam War impacted African Americans far beyond the front lines. Ultimately, wartime experiences, racial discrimination, socioeconomic barriers, and societal stigmas surrounding mental health care shaped the mental health struggles of Black Vietnam veterans in Metro Detroit and beyond, all of which highlights

[98] Carter, "Alcoholism in Black Vietnam Veterans," 656-660.

[99] Carter, "Alcoholism in Black Vietnam Veterans," 656-660.

[100] David Zamon Williams, "Examining the Relationship between Race-Related Stressors and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among African American Male Vietnam Veterans" (Ph.D., United States -- Washington, Washington State University, 2007), 215, https://www.proquest.com/docview/304796680/abstract/B31E65DC2B894811PQ/1; Allen, "PTSD among African Americans," 215.

the expectations of African Americans to serve their country without receiving proper care in return.

Returning Home: GI Bill Benefits

The readjustment struggles, outside of physical and mental health, for African American veterans continued through the lack of receiving GI Bill benefits. Throughout the country, many veterans, especially Black veterans, struggled to obtain their promised benefits granted by the GI Bill; however, in Michigan, about 63 percent of veterans were able to take advantage of the bill, veterans such as Michael Chunn, Maxie Patterson, and Joe Churchwell.[101] Within the first couple of years of returning home in 1973, Chunn had the opportunity to advance his career through an apprenticeship. Chunn's family did not have the provisions to pay for his schooling, so he took advantage of the GI Bill to assist with his payments. Every month, while enrolled in school, Chunn received a stipend covering the cost of his classes. With his tuition covered, Chunn completed an apprenticeship in painting and carpentry, allowing him secure a position at General Motors after his completion.[102]

In terms of the additional benefits provided by the GI Bill, such as home loans, Chunn never gave it a thought or went through the process of acquiring a loan during the latter half of his life. He purchased a home in Pontiac without the bill's assistance, even though he knew loan benefits were available, as he considered the loans unnecessary. Although Chunn did not take full advantage of every aspect of the GI Bill, he did find a way for it to assist him in some capacity through economic advancement.[103]

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[101] "April 28, 1985 (Page 75 of 450)," *Detroit Free Press*.

[102] Michael Chunn, interview by Kayla Gray, February 2025.

[103] Michael Chunn, interview by Kayla Gray, February 2025.

Like Michael Chunn, Joe Churchwell also received assistance through the GI Bill for his education. Born and raised in Pontiac, Michigan, Churchwell attended Ferris State University before dropping out to work for General Motors. In 1969, at nineteen years old, Churchwell received his draft notice from the Army and he traveled to Fort Knox for basic training. While in Vietnam, he fought on the front lines, experiencing daily combat and a squad ambush. A bullet struck Churchwell in his right lower leg during the ambush, and medics evacuated him to a field hospital on the outskirts of Vietnam. Churchwell's leg became infected at the hospital, as the hospital did not have the correct equipment needed to treat his wound. He returned to the United States for proper treatment and received care in Philadelphia for six weeks.[104]

After healing from his wound and the completion of his tour in 1971, Churchwell returned home to Pontiac. However, Churchwell did not want to be confined to Pontiac, which led him to devise a plan: to stop working for GM, save money, return to school, and become a teacher. After six months of being home, Churchwell executed his plan, where he saved enough funds to attend Flint Junior College, now Mott Community College, in Flint, Michigan. Once enrolled in school, Churchwell received educational benefits under the GI Bill, which covered the cost for all of his schooling. After two years at Flint Junior College, Churchwell transferred to Western Michigan University, majoring in Education. While at Western Michigan, he learned about disability benefits from a fellow Vietnam veteran. On a random autumn day walking to class, a white Vietnam veteran stopped Churchwell, due to him wearing his Army jacket, and they discussed their experiences in Vietnam. Through their conversation, Churchwell discovered information about disability benefits that the VA had not clearly communicated were available to veterans. After their conversation, Churchwell applied for and received disability benefits. While

[104] Joe Churchwell, interview by Kayla Gray, March 2025.

Churchwell did not know about disability benefits, he did know that the GI Bill offered educational benefits and housing loans, which he took advantage of.[105]

Similarly, Maxie Patterson took advantage of the GI Bill to help cover his college expenses; however, the stipend did not fully cover all costs. Born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, Patterson graduated from Mumford High School in 1962 and began working for Ford Motor Company while enrolled at Ferris State University. After attending Ferris State for two years, Patterson dropped out due to his father's death and enlisted in the Army in 1966 as a counterintelligence officer. He trained in Baltimore, Maryland, and El Paso, Texas, learning to speak Vietnamese, typing, and interrogation techniques. In 1969, while in Vietnam, Patterson worked on the Phoenix Program, a program created to target the Vietcong's organizational infrastructure.[106]

In 1970, Patterson returned to Michigan and enrolled at Michigan State University to study public administration. While attending Michigan State, Patterson received his GI Bill stipend to support his education; however, the stipend did not cover all of Patterson's needs, resulting in him running out of money. Patterson did not want to drop out of school, but he also did not have enough money to pay for it, resulting in obtaining a job with the Michigan State University's police department. While at Michigan State, Patterson was friends with a former local Federal Bureau of Investigation agent whom he knew from his service. The connection with the former FBI agent assisted Patterson in getting a job with the University's police force. While the GI Bill did not cover all of his educational fees, with some assistance granted by the

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[105] Joe Churchwell, interview by Kayla Gray, March 2025.

[106] *The HistoryMakers Video Oral History with Maxie L. Patterson* (Chicago, Illinois: The HistoryMakers, 2016), http://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/A2007.060.

bill, Patterson graduated from Michigan State and continued with his educational career by enrolling in graduate school.[107]

Although some veterans living in Metro Detroit benefited from the GI Bill, especially regarding educational advancements, others did not. After the Vietnam War, many veterans, especially those of color, did not seek financial assistance in terms of attending school.[108] For instance, Earl Polk did not pursue financial assistance for school because they could not pay for school. Even if Polk had received assistance from the GI Bill, he couldn't afford school and he also wasn't fully aware of all the benefits the GI Bill offered. The only benefits Polk inquired about and knew about were disability benefits. Throughout trying to obtain disability benefits, Polk experienced discrimination from the VA located in Downtown Detroit in terms of receiving his compensation despite being wounded in Vietnam. He witnessed white veterans, who experienced very little to no combat, go to the VA and have their disability claims approved. However, Polk, as a Black veteran, was frequently met with VA employees who dismissed his claims and needs for disability benefits. Polk's experience shows that whether a veteran is approved for benefits often depends on which official handled their claim and whether that person judged the veteran to be in need.[109]

Polk represents a more common experience among Black veterans across the country who sought assistance through the GI Bill. To understand the challenges that Polk and other African Americans faced, it is important to examine what the GI Bill promised on paper. In

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[107] *The HistoryMakers Video Oral History with Maxie L. Patterson* (Chicago, Illinois: The HistoryMakers, 2016), http://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/A2007.060.

[108] Peterson, "Most Veterans of Vietnam Fail To Seek Aid Under the G.I. Bill: Most Vietnam Veterans, Even Neediest, Fail to Seek G.I. Bill's Education Aid."

[109] Earl Polk, interview by Kayla Gray, March 2025.

1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, or the GI Bill of Rights, which offered veterans an "unprecedented slew of benefits" for education, vocational training, and home and business loans to improve their lives after their service.[110] Once home, World War II veterans had their college tuition covered and received an additional $50 a month for living expenses. Similar benefits continued for Korean War veterans, as they received $110 a month to cover all expenses.[111] The funds given to World War II and Korean veterans allowed them to complete any academic endeavors of their choosing. By the Vietnam War era, the benefits offered under the GI Bills of 1966, 1972, and 1974 were lower than those offered to previous veterans in terms of dollar amounts and the ability to pay for additional education.[112]

One of the main reasons for the shortcomings of the Vietnam-era GI Bills were that the bills were no longer being geared only toward combat veterans, as all Cold War veterans were now eligible for benefits.[113] Legislators who passed the bill did not make any distinctions between the benefits given to Cold War veterans and those who served on the front lines in Vietnam, especially due to many conservative politicians hoping to keep the overall cost of the GI Bill low as an additional number of veterans were now covered.[114] Vietnam veterans were never granted legislation that considered their specific needs and sacrifices, in which under the GI Bill of 1966, all veterans only received $100 per month to cover tuition and living expenses.

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[110] Boulton, *Failing Our Veterans*, 4.

[111] Iver Peterson, "Most Veterans of Vietnam Fail To Seek Aid Under the G.I. Bill: Most Vietnam Veterans, Even Neediest, Fail to Seek G.I. Bill's Education Aid," *New York Times*, April 9, 1972.

[112] Boulton, "How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans," 58.

[113] Boulton, *Failing Our Veterans*, 4,9.

[114] Boulton, *Failing Our Veterans*, 9; Boulton, "How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans," 58.

By 1972, monthly allowance from the GI Bill raised to $220 a month, and $340 a month in 1974; yet, due to the increase in tuition cost and inflation during the mid-1960s, many veterans could not afford to attend school and continued to struggle financially.[115] If veterans did enroll in school, the GI Bill provided additional living stipends of $130 a month for those who were single and $155 a month for those who were married.[116] Despite additional stipends, the GI Bill never provided full tuition coverage or the generous allowances that were once offered by the original 1944 bill.

All Vietnam veterans came to understand that the government would not provide them with the same post-service benefits compared to veterans before; however, for Black Vietnam veterans, GI Bill benefits were even more limited. While the initial signing of the GI Bill bestowed benefits to all men and women in the armed forces and did not explicitly exclude people based on race, its implementations and racism ingrained in state and local policies excluded African Americans from receiving their proper benefits.[117] Despite the creation of non-discrimination policies under the GI Bill, Black veterans did not experience the same GI Bill as their white counterparts, especially in terms of receiving the same opportunities of education, training, home loans, unemployment benefits, and medical care from VA hospitals.[118]

One significant difference in how the GI Bill worked for Black veterans compared to white veterans is that government and medical institutions often denied African Americans

[115] Boulton, "How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans," 58.

[116] Pierce and Bailey, "The Returning Vet," 147.

[117] "A Homecoming without the Home: How the GI Bill Left out a Million Black Veterans," *MLPP* (blog), July 28, 2020, https://mlpp.org/a-homecoming-without-the-home-how-the-gi-bill-left-out-a-million-black-veterans/.

[118] Frydl, *The GI Bill*, 253; "Paradox of the Black Soldier," *Ebony*, August 1968, 142.

benefits for medical treatment, as many were unable to receive disability. The VA denied many African Americans basic disability claims while fulfilling similar requests from their white counterparts.[119] With Black veterans being consistently denied their benefits at a higher rate than white vets, later studies found that the Department of Veterans Affairs unlawfully turned away thousands of vulnerable veterans and discriminated against veterans of color.[120]

Additionally, Black veterans frequently struggled to obtain educational and housing benefits.[121] In terms of education, many African American veterans were not able to attend college under the GI Bill. Approximately 90 percent of Black Vietnam veteran's families were working-class or underprivileged, where the median income for most African American families remained low compared to white veterans throughout the Vietnam era. The families of Black veterans could not afford college without assistance, like the GI Bill; however, with the GI Bill not supplying adequate funds, many African Americans were not using their education benefits. For example, in 1973, only 25 percent of African American veterans were using their education benefits compared to 46 percent of white veterans. By 1980, 36.4 percent of African Americans claimed their college benefits compared to 60.2 percent of white veterans.[122] Regarding housing, there were often racial disparities, where Black veterans were unable to take advantage of the GI

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[119] Andrew R. Chow and Josiah Bates, "Black Vietnam Veterans Recall the Injustices They Faced," TIME, June 12, 2020, https://time.com/5852476/da-5-bloods-black-vietnam-veterans/.

[120] Quil Lawrence, "A Black Vietnam Veteran Is Suing the VA for Discrimination," *NPR*, November 28, 2022, sec. Race, https://www.npr.org/2022/11/28/1139539765/a-black-vietnam-veteran-is-suing-the-va-for-discrimination; Chow and Bates, "Black Vietnam Veterans Recall the Injustices They Faced."

[121] Frydl, *The GI Bill*, 222, 237.

[122] Boulton, "How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans," 57.

Bill's homeownership incentives. Since Black veterans could not acquire loans through the GI Bill, they often were forced to reside in rough neighborhoods and deal with bad landlords.[123]

While African American veterans residing in Metro Detroit, like Michael Chunn, Joe Churchwell, and Maxie Patterson, received benefits and others, like Earl Polk, fought for theirs, all of them were honorably discharged, which qualified them for all available veterans assistance programs. However, throughout the United States, Black veterans who received a dishonorable discharge were disqualified from receiving benefits. In the armed forces, five types of discharge are granted to men at the end of their service: 1. Honorable, 2. General, 3. Undesirable, 4. Bad Conduct, and 5. Dishonorable. By the end of the Vietnam War, more than 175,00 veterans received either undesirable, bad conduct, or dishonorable discharge. The VA excludes veterans with “less than honorable” discharges from receiving hospital care, educational allowances, and other benefits.[124] Other consequences of an "other than honorable" discharge include veterans finding it difficult to secure medical insurance, mortgages, home improvement loans, welfare support, bonds, or credit.[125]

Throughout the Vietnam War, African Americans received "other than honorable" discharges at a disproportionately higher proportion than the number of Black veterans in the service.[126] Between 1968 and 1972, African Americans would account for 10 percent of the Army, yet, in 1970, they made up 18.4 percent of "other than honorable" discharges.[127] In 1971,

[123] “A Homecoming without the Home,” *MLPP*.

[124] Starr, *The Discarded Army*, 167-168.

[125] Peter Bailey, “Black Veterans: The Forgotten Victims of Vietnam,” *Ebony*, September 1974, 39.

[126] Olive, “Duty, Honor, Country, But No Reward.”

[127] Boulton, “How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans,” 60.

25.4 percent of African American veterans received either "bad conduct" or "dishonorable discharge," despite African Americans only constituting 15.1 percent of the military.[128] The Crisis magazine, the official publication of the NAACP, reported that in 1972, Black veterans "received 32.6 percent of the Dishonorable Discharges; 20.7 percent of the Bad Conduct Discharges; 16.1 percent of the Undesirable Discharges; 20 percent of the General Discharges."[129]

One of the main reasons for the disproportionate number of Black veterans receiving "less than honorable" discharges is due to racial misunderstandings. During their service, many Black veterans spoke out against racial biases within the Army, especially those who saw active combat, as they no longer accepted derogatory treatment from their white peers or commanding officers.[130] As a result of confronting the institutional and individual racism embedded in their military experience, many commanding officers cited "disorderly conduct," "bad attitude," or "won't work" on their discharge papers in addition to receiving "less than honorable" discharge.[131]

African American veterans with "less than honorable" discharge had multiple strikes against them, in addition to the already stated consequences. For the military, administrative discharge is a powerful weapon, as it can "rid itself of people it doesn't want or to discipline those it considered troublemakers."[132] As a result, if the military assigned a "less than honorable"

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[128] Olive, “Duty, Honor, Country, But No Reward.”

[129] June A. Willenz, “Other-Than-Honorable Discharges,” *The Crisis*, October 1974, 275.

[130] Ted Stewart, “What Now for Black Vietnam Veterans?,” *Sepia* (Fort Worth, United States: Sepia Publishing Co, April 1, 1973), 22; Olive, “Duty, Honor, Country, But No Reward.”

[131] Olive, “Duty, Honor, Country, But No Reward.”

[132] Peter Bailey, “Black Veterans: The Forgotten Victims of Vietnam.”

discharge, veterans would be ineligible for their benefits, resulting in millions of dollars saved in education, medical, and housing assistance.[133] While the United States military benefited financially from these discriminatory practices by prohibiting African Americans from receiving their benefits, Black veterans with a "bad" discharge had an additional stigma of being a "troublemaker." Due to this stigma, not only were African Americans prohibited from receiving their benefits, but they were also blocked from employment and training opportunities, reemployment rights promised once they completed their service, and civil service preference.[134] The negative effects of "other than honorable" discharge papers for African Americans, especially the inability to receive benefits and employment, caused an ad hoc hearing at the University of Chicago Law School, which traced the problem to "to the white racism, calloused and insensitive persons and procedures and injustices throughout the United States military system."[135]

In later years, the VA recognized the problems associated with the GI Bill and established a special task force called Operation Outreach, which sponsored lectures on available benefits. Nevertheless, for African Americans veterans, the GI Bill, which once promised social mobility and economic advancement, did not meet all of their expectations and needs.[136] Even when African Americans did receive access, like those in Metropolitan Detroit, benefits were often underfunded educational stipends. Also, the lack of knowledge surrounding the availability of

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[133] Peter Bailey, “Black Veterans: The Forgotten Victims of Vietnam.”

[134] Willenz, “Other-Than-Honorable Discharges.”

[135] “Blacks Warn Nixon on Effects Of Dishonorable Discharges,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 1971.

[136] Peterson, “Most Veterans of Vietnam Fail To Seek Aid Under the G.I. Bill: Most Vietnam Veterans, Even Neediest, Fail to Seek G.I. Bill’s Education Aid.”

benefits, even though white veterans knew of such benefits, further reveals the deeply racialized issue within the allocation of GI Bill benefits. The racial problem surrounding GI Bill benefits was worse for African American soldiers with "less than honorable" as their discharge functioned as a silent but effective way of exclusion, barring them from receiving benefits and also stigmatizing them. The experiences of African American veterans showcase the limited function of the GI Bill, a policy created to produce opportunities but consequently perpetuated racial inequalities. Hence, as African American veterans returned home, historian Mark Boulton noted that "a communication of low benefits and discriminatory discharge made their post-service life far less rewarding than they might have anticipated."[137]

Returning Home: Employment Opportunities

More problems for African American veterans during their transition from military to civil life arose from lack of employment opportunities. Unemployment was an issue for all Vietnam veterans, with at least a third of all veterans experiencing two consecutive months of unemployment at some point after their service.[138] For all veterans, unemployment went from 4 percent in 1969 to 11 percent in 1971, almost double the nationwide rate.[139] However, unemployment was worse off for all African Americans, especially Black veterans. During the 1960s and 1970s, the overall unemployment rate for African Americans was double compared to whites.[140] Although unemployment was high for African Americans who had not served in the

[137] Boulton, "How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans," 60.

[138] Starr, *The Discarded Army*, 201.

[139] Starr, *The Discarded Army*, 201; B. Drummond Ayres Jr.,"Job Outlook Is Bleak for Vietnam Veterans: Vietnam Veterans' Job Outlook Bleak," *New York Times*, June 5, 1971.

[140] Fleury-Steiner, *Disposable Heroes*, 10.

armed forces, Black veterans came home to an unemployment rate three times the national average.[141] According to a study by the Committee of Veterans' Affairs, Black veterans experienced the worst aspects of unemployment as they had an overall unemployment rate of 21.5 percent.[142] In 1969, unemployment amongst Black veterans was 8.5 percent and would increase to 14 percent by the end of the year.[143] By 1971, about 300,000 Black veterans between the ages of 20 and 29 were unemployed, and by 1972, 16 percent would still be jobless and at the end of the year would rise to 22.4 percent.[144] Unemployment rates in 1973 dropped for African American veterans to 9.2 percent.[145] In an overall analysis, in comparison to white veterans, nearly 30 percent of African Americans were out of work compared to less than 6 percent of whites. [146]

In Metro Detroit, some African American veterans experienced the same unemployment issues as reflected throughout the country. In 1973, 25 percent of Black veterans residing in Detroit were jobless for at least six months after their service.[147] A report by the *Detroit Free Press* in 1976 found that in Detroit, unemployment among Vietnam veterans was 20.3 percent, and for Black veterans, the rate was even higher.[148] Sergeant Dwight Johnson was one of many

[141] Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietna*m, 108.

[142] Edgendorf, *Legacies of Vietnam*, 288.

[143] Starr, *The Discarded Army*, 201.

[144] Hamilton Bims, "The Black Veteran: Battle on the Home Front" *Ebony*, November 1971, 35; Starr, *The Discarded Army*, 201.

[145] "Unemployment Of Black Vietnam Veterans Lower Than Year Ago," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 9, 1973.

[146] Boulton, "How the G.I. Bill Failed African-American Vietnam War Veterans," 59.

[147] Flower of the Dragon, "Flower of the Dragon Records" box 1, no. 1 (1973-1979).

[148] "April 25, 1976 (Page 29 of 322)," *Detroit Free Press*, April 25, 1976.

Black veterans who struggled to find employment after the war in Detroit. Before Johnson won the Medal of Honor, he struggled to find a job. According to his cousin, Thomas Tillman, when he tried to find a job, “He’d just sit and mumble a few words when they’d ask him questions. It was like he felt inferior.” Employers continuously denied Johnson, even though he searched for jobs with minimal qualifications. For two months, Johnson searched for a job before the Army would give him a call, asking him to be a military recruiter.[149] Although Johnson came home and could not find a job, according to his family members, he took it with stride and consciously searched for jobs that fit his qualifications.[150]

Although Johnson initially struggled to find employment, after receiving the Medal of Honor, he was approached by multiple companies in Detroit for employment.[151] As reported by the *New York Times*, "Companies that had not been interested in a diffident ex-GI, named Johnson suddenly found openings for Medal of Honor Winner Johnson."[152] Multiple job recruiters approached Johnson in Detroit; however, he ultimately chose to re-enlist as a recruiter with the United States Army.[153] To Johnson, the job offer presented by the Army seemed too hard to pass up, especially compared to the months of unemployment and other job offers.[154] However, the job as an Army recruiter had underlying conditions, which, according to an Army employee who worked with Johnson stated that "The brass (high ranking officers) wanted him in

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[149] Nordheimer, “From Dakto to Detroit”; Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 242-245.

[150] Nordheimer, “From Dakto to Detroit.”

[151] Nordheimer, “From Dakto to Detroit.”

[152] Nordheimer, “From Dakto to Detroit.”

[153] Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 245; Post, “Robbery Try By Viet Hero Laid to Illness.”

[154] Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 245.

the Detroit recruiting office because– let's face it– here was a black, Medal of Honor winner, and blacks are our biggest manpower pool in Detroit."[155] Despite the Army only hiring Johnson as Black representation, Johnson did reach out to young Black men in Detroit in a way that white recruiters could not.[156]

Even though unemployment affected many Black veterans throughout Metro Detroit, some, like Michael Chunn, Joe Churchwell, and Earl Polk, returned to work for the same employers they had before their service. All three veterans received honorable discharges, qualifying them for reemployment. For Chunn, he resumed his job as a janitor at Oakland Community College and, after completing his apprenticeship, began a career with General Motors. Chunn worked for GM at the Truck and Bus Plant in Pontiac for the remainder of his career, accumulating 31 years with the company before retiring.[157] Joe Churchwell continued working in the automobile industry as an employee of General Motors at Pontiac Motors before leaving and starting a career as an educator. After receiving the proper education to become a teacher, Churchwell moved to Benton Harbor, Michigan, and began teaching for the Benton Harbor area schools..[158] Polk's experience with reemployment was slightly different due to the wound he acquired during the service. While Polk continued working as a foreman for General Motors at the Fisher Body Plant in Pontiac, he often struggled to complete everyday duties associated with the job due to his leg injury and lack of accommodation provisions. Despite

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[155] Nordheimer, "From Dakto to Detroit."

[156] Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor*, 246.

[157] Michael Chunn, interview by Kayla Gray, February 2025.

[158] Joe Churchwell, interview by Kayla Gray, March 2025.

being unable to complete every job duty, Polk remained employed with GM, where he worked for over 35 years before retiring.[159]

Other African American veterans, like John Holmes, moved to Michigan because there were more employment opportunities available compared to other states. Originally from Alexandria, Louisiana, Holmes received his draft papers for the Army in 1966 while attending Grambling State University. Granted deferment by his local draft board, Holmes completed his college degree in business administration and did not begin his military service until 1969. Six months after his college graduation, at 22 years old, Holmes was sent to Vietnam to work as an aviation specialist from 1969 to 1971. Upon his return home, Holmes moved to Savannah, Georgia, to work for the Army as a record keeper. By 1972, Holmes had ended his military career and had moved back to Louisiana with his wife and son. Jobs were limited in Louisiana, and for Holmes, jobs that specifically catered to his business administration degree were either low pay or did not hire him. As a result, Holmes moved his family to Flint, Michigan, where jobs were more accessible due to the automobile industry. Once in Michigan, Holmes found employment relatively quickly, mainly due to his qualifications of holding a college degree, and began working for General Motors in labor relations. Holmes worked for GM for 33 years, accumulating multiple promotions from supervisor of labor relations and processing to a director position, representing GM throughout the country. [160]

Although the Black veterans from Metro Detroit highlighted in this study received honorable discharges, many veterans across the country who were given “less than honorable” discharges faced exceptionally high unemployment rates. African American veterans with "other

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[159] Earl Polk, interview by Kayla Gray, March 2025.

[160] John Holmes, interview by Kayla Gray, February 2025.

than honorable" discharges were entering a tight job market and, compounded with their "bad" papers, meant that many potential employers were hesitant to hire them.[161] Employers had more than enough jobless veterans to choose from who received honorable discharge, resulting in employers considering those with "less than honorable" either last or not at all.[162] As a result, the unemployment rate was minimally 21 percent.[163] Essentially, Black veterans with "less than honorable" discharges were entering the job market at the worst time, as the character of their discharge determined their ability to access employment once they returned.[164]

Discharge papers were not the main determining factor for the high unemployment rates among Black veterans, as unemployment stemmed from multiple causes, including economic conditions and discriminatory hiring practices. When African American veterans returned home, the economy was marked by a 6 percent unemployment rate, soaring inflation, and a wage freeze.[165] Therefore, there was a shortage of jobs, especially a shortage of good jobs for African American veterans that offered decent working conditions, fair pay, and opportunities for self-direction and promotions.[166] Also, Black veterans did not qualify for specific jobs due to a lack of training and education not provided during their service.[167] If veterans met the

[161] "Attack Raw Deal Black Veterans Get After Discharge From Army," *Jet*, October 28, 1971, 27.

[162] Starr, *The Discarded Army*, 167.

[163] "Attack Raw Deal Black Veterans Get After Discharge From Army," *Jet*, 27; This statistic includes Black veterans with an honorable discharge.

[164] Martin Louis, "THE BIG PARADE: Many Veterans Are Doomed by Record," *New Pittsburgh Courier,* April 20, 1974.

[165] Harris, *A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans*, 53; Bims, "The Black Veteran: Battle on the Home Front," 35.

[166] Starr, *The Discarded Army*, 37.

[167] Olive, "Duty, Honor, Country, But No Reward."

requirements of the job, Black veterans faced employers who did not want to hire them, as being a Black Vietnam veteran was simply enough of a reason not to hire them for the position.[168] Black veterans were stuck in every direction they turned in terms of employment, as they were underqualified or faced with discrimination.

Despite having served their country, Black veterans returned home to an unfavorable job market influenced by unemployment, inflation, and wage stagnation. While all veterans faced employment hardships, Black veterans, especially, were vulnerable and disproportionately affected. For African Americans, employers were often hesitant to hire them, regardless of their discharge standing, and yet were even more reluctant to consider Black veterans with "less than honorable" discharge. In Metro Detroit, some Black soldiers overcame employment barriers, often due to their honorable discharge status, prior employment, ability to obtain higher education, or relocation to an economically stronger city. Regardless, even with these relative success stories, challenges remained for all Black veterans, who encountered structural racism in hiring practices and an economic downturn. Returning African American veterans faced discrimination within the workforce, whether from employer's implicit biases, the stigmatization associated with their military service, or structural economic inequalities.

Conclusion

The post-war experiences of African American Vietnam veterans in Metro Detroit reveal a conflict between the expectations they held before serving in the United States Army and the unforgiving reality of returning home. Many African American veterans saw the military as a path to greater opportunities and social mobility; however, a discriminatory society denied them

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[168] Stewart, "What Now for Black Vietnam Veterans?," 20.

the recognition, benefits, and equality. Despite their service, African American veterans returned home to face the inability to receive GI Bill benefits, proper treatment for mental health disorders, such as PTSD, and joblessness. Their experiences upon returning home reveal that their service did not protect them from the racial discrimination prevalent in American society, ultimately shaping their post-service lives.

One of the more prominent ways discriminatory practices affected African American veterans was through the denial of benefits provided by the GI Bill, which displays the limitations and racial inequalities associated with the implementation of the GI Bill. African American veterans in Metro Detroit and throughout the country often found that the GI Bill did not always provide a pathway to success, as many were either denied or never in the know of available benefits. While a few African American veterans, such as Michael Chunn, Joe Churchwell, and Maxie Patterson, managed to secure benefits, often Black veterans faced underfunded, insufficient, and inaccessible programs that provided little to no financial support. The GI Bill became a mechanism of exclusion for many African Americans. Being unable to secure proper funding for education, housing, and medical care showcases how policies can turn into additional struggles of equality, adding additional racial disparities for African American veterans.

Racial and economic inequalities compounded with the denial of benefits and shaped their transition back into civilian life. All veterans returned home to face an economy of high unemployment, inflation, and wage stagnation; however, Black veterans were disproportionately impacted as they faced additional economic barriers stemming from systemic racism and discharge-related stigmas. In Metro Detroit, the unemployment crisis mirrored national trends, yet some veterans managed to find reemployment due to prior jobs before the war, education,

and relocation. The differences in their experiences demonstrate that while individual determination to seek employment matters, discrimination entrenched in the workforce played a notable role in shaping the financial aspect of Black veterans' post-war lives.

Furthermore, many returning Black soldiers not only cope with physical scars and an inability to obtain benefits or employment but also experience post-traumatic stress disorder. Most Vietnam veterans struggled with PTSD, yet African American veterans were often unable to seek or receive adequate care. The VA failed to provide sufficient services, such as suitable treatment, to address the unique needs of African Americans. The stories of Black veterans highlight how trauma caused by the war, combined with discrimination, resulted in inadequate treatment for PTSD. The struggles of enduring PTSD lead to prolonged suffering and difficulties for Black veterans during their adjustment to civilian life, in which their experiences reflect the actual cost of war and the result of systemic neglect.

Discrimination heavily impacted African American Vietnam veterans, especially veterans who returned home to Metro Detroit. Focusing on African American veterans from Metro Detroit examines the legacy of racial inequality within American society, showcasing that although military service may have been a path to equality, it failed to some extent in assisting Black soldiers from not experiencing racial discrimination back home. By highlighting African American veterans who endured specific regional and racial dynamics, we can see the history of racial struggles in the United States, challenge the dominant narratives surrounding military service, and contribute to the ongoing discussion surrounding discriminatory practices experienced throughout the Vietnam War era. The experiences of Black veterans from Detroit highlight both personal and regional struggles, showing that their fight for equality and recognition continues long after their military service ends.

Epilogue: Reshaping the Legacy of the Vietnam War

The legacy of the Vietnam War often evokes pain and defeat in American history. Public memory of the war often reflects disillusionment, stereotypes, unfulfilled promises, unresolved trauma, and societal alienation. Specifically, for African American veterans, their service in Vietnam has been marked by additional burdens, such as racial discrimination and the inability to receive proper benefits for their service. In Metro Detroit, as this study discusses, newspapers and local memory have recorded these injustices: the war has left a stain on the nation's conscience; Black veterans were not appropriately honored for their service; and Black veterans have experienced defeat both on the battlefield and upon returning home, as still poor and Black men in Metro Detroit.[169]

These accounts of the Vietnam War are true, and African American veterans did experience injustices throughout their military service. These realities can not be erased from the historical discourse. However, defining the Vietnam War experience solely through the lens of discrimination and disappointment does a disservice to the lives of African American veterans, who laid their lives on the line to fight for their country. This becomes clear in the oral histories I collected of the Black Vietnam veterans residing in Metro Detroit, as I asked each of them: "What do you want people to remember about Vietnam War veterans?" Here is what they had to say:

> “I want people to remember the great sacrifice associated with being a Vietnam veteran, especially if they were drafted, served for their country in Vietnam, and

[169] “Who Says It’s Hypocritical to Support the Troops and Condemn the War?,” *Michigan Chronicle*, January 30, 1991; Lucks, “African American soldiers and the Vietnam War,” 211; Sam Riddle, “Black Veterans Shafted by America - Again,” *Michigan Citizen*, April 7, 2013; Bill Black, “How The Black, Poor ‘Lost’ Vietnam War,” *Michigan Chronicle*, March 3, 1973.

received honorable discharge. Within the last ten to fifteen years, people have been recognizing me for my service, often saying 'thank you for your service.' Now, when I wear my vest and I put my emblems on it, which states my unit and my service in Vietnam, I receive positive recognition and appreciation."

-Michael Chunn

"I want people to continue to recognize my service and to understand that we fought overseas to ensure the war would not be fought in the United States. I want people to continue to be grateful for the veterans who laid their life on the line for them and America."

-Earl Polk

"I want Americans to continue knowing the experiences of Vietnam veterans. I think people have more of a positive outlook of the war and I want them to continue to view the war in that sense. People are now better educated and have more of an understanding of what took place in Vietnam. I want the education system to continue producing curriculum or giving freedom to students to explore political systems, the United States military, and the experiences of veterans."

-Joe Churchwell

"I want people to remember to give respect and honor to Vietnam War veterans. The same respect and remembrance given to other veterans from different wars needs to be given to Vietnam veterans. Veterans should continue to be recognized

> in a positive light and more books should be written about the good that was done during the war, not just the negative. I want people to remember that veterans made a big sacrifice and deserve to be recognized."
>
> -John Holmes

These statements do not ignore the reality of injustices they endured, but they highlight how Black veterans want to be remembered. All of their responses mark a significant shift regarding the narratives and memory of the Vietnam War, as they strive away from victimhood and toward a sense of pride, sacrifice, dignity, and recognition. Rather than invoking radial antiwar rhetoric, these veterans use language that differs from the scholarship and public media, in which they use language to shape a positive legacy of the war— a legacy on their own terms.

The post-war experiences of African American veterans and how they want others to remember their experiences move beyond the long-standing reputation of the Vietnam War being an unpopular and isolating conflict. Rather than defining the war as a painful experience or a political controversy, they call for a memory that honors sacrifice, while also acknowledging the forms of exclusion perpetuated by the military. Reshaping the legacy of the Vietnam War is not to erase the pain associated with the war but to ensure that the whole story is told– that African American veterans are not just victims of war, but proud servicemen who deserve a place in the broader narratives of military history.

Appendix: Oral History Collection Methodology

I conducted five oral histories of four Black Vietnam veterans and one white Vietnam veteran who were drafted into the Army and are currently residing throughout Metro Detroit.[170] These oral histories serve to provide personal accounts of experiences during and after the Vietnam War particularly concerning combat, PTSD, feelings of betrayal, efforts to challenge racism, and the emotional and mental toll of fighting for a country that failed to honor their service. The interviews began with introductory questions regarding background information, such as name and place of birth. Other questions explored military experiences, initial training and services, life after their service, experiences of PTSD, and GI Bill benefits. Sample questions include:

- How did you perceive military service? (As a pathway to equality? Did your thoughts change during or after your service? If so, how?)
- How did you view the Vietnam War?
- Once home, how were you received by your family and the community? What was your experience returning to Metro Detroit after the Vietnam War?
- What were the specific challenges you faced as an African American veteran in accessing mental health care?
- What do you wish more people knew about Vietnam War veterans?

Participants were permitted to skip any questions that made them uncomfortable or that triggered PTSD symptoms.

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[170] According to the Oral History Association, the collection of oral histories is excluded from IRB approval as long as it falls under the category of scholarly activities that collect and use information about specific individuals. According to my discipline, IRB approval will not be necessary for oral history collection.

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