The Voices of African Americans Ring Loud and Clear in...

Soul Soldiers
African Americans and the Vietnam Era

By Samuel W. Black
On November 11, 2006, the Heinz History Center opened an exhibit created by its staff with the help of local Pittsburgh-area veterans: Soul Soldiers: African Americans and the Vietnam Era. In developing the idea, I drew upon my family’s experiences as a point of departure for discussing the impact of the Vietnam War on African American life and culture.

From 1965 to 1973, American men and women served in Vietnam (voluntarily and by draft) to combat President Ho Chi Minh’s efforts at unifying the country under the Communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) in the north. The U.S. fought to enforce the 1954 Geneva Agreement, which had divided Vietnam into two parts: Communist north and non-Communist south. The American government supported the South Vietnam government or Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and justified its involvement in the war as a way for America to ensure Democracy in the world by stopping the spread of Communism. When President Lyndon B. Johnson sent troops into combat in 1965, the longest war in U.S. history began. Over 58,000 Americans lost their lives. Even today, MIA’s (missing in action) and KIA’s (killed in action) are unaccounted for.

As years passed and the war expanded, the American government could not ignore the growing anti-war sentiment spreading across the country. For African Americans, Vietnam was just one of the era’s challenges; even before the war, civil rights issues were present in their daily lives. In this new multimedia exhibition, the Heinz History Center tells the story of Vietnam, civil rights, and African American life and culture. Complete with audio systems, video, artifacts, art, and music, Soul Soldiers takes visitors on a journey through an era of conflict, pride, revolution, art, war, rebellion, and overall change in the American landscape.

Among the clatter of automatic weapons, surface-to-air missiles, clamor mines, M16 rifles, “pigs” (M60 machine guns), howitzer canons, mortars, bamboo and other organic booby traps, and the ubiquitous huey helicopter’s unmistakable rhythm, Vietnam left an astonishing audio and visual impression.
upon American memory. For veterans and everyday citizens who experienced the political, social, and economic phenomenon of war and civil rights in the 1960s, Vietnam stands as a social divide that challenged moral convictions.

As visitors enter the Community Gallery, they see a rendition of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall with the names of Western Pennsylvanian African American war casualties posted, followed by an image of Army PFC Jimmy McNeil (US Army 1965-1970), the inspiration for the project. The Hooch Theater offers a 13-minute documentary film that tells the story of African American soldiers—experiences, customs, and details of their tours of duty in Vietnam. The theater, decorated with sandbags and weapons crates, mimics the “hooch” or cabin home to most ground personnel.

After viewing the film, visitors walk toward an outline of a pagoda, or temple, an iconic architectural form that symbolizes Vietnamese native culture and religious systems, which ushers in the next section of the show—a brief history of Vietnam, an introduction to the various factions during the war, and a look at how the Vietnamese citizens viewed African Americans. Interestingly, African Americans were not the first soldiers of African descent the Vietnamese encountered. The French West African forces—militia during the French colonial period—served in the army during the first Indochina War (1945-1954) and were therefore familiar to the Vietnamese. These forces were conscripts from Senegal, Mali, Niger, Guinea, and other Francophone African colonies. Because of this history, the Vietnamese referred to African Americans as “Les Senegalaize.”

The third section of the exhibit combines civil rights and Vietnam—major issues for African Americans in the 1960s—with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the podium in Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967, as the centerpiece. Here, one year to the day before his assassination, King expressed his displeasure with President Johnson’s policies, which escalated the war in Vietnam instead of the war on poverty. King stated, “The war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and die in extraordinary high proportions relative to the rest of the population.” An example of the widening socio/political divide, King received both criticism and acclaim for his views from inside and outside the military and the civil rights arena. King represents the established, non-violent civil rights activists, while images of Julian Bond stand for the new, surging protests of the younger generation. Bond’s story tells of his...
opposition to the war, his denied seat in the Georgia legislature, and his comic book-style pictorial history of African Americans, Vietnam. Written as a response to his denied seat, the book illustrates his commentary on African American views of the war.

Black media outlets grew in these years and presented unique African American perspectives on the Vietnam War. Newspapers such as the Pittsburgh Courier and Muhammad Speaks, and magazines like Ebony, propagated African American opinions, providing a platform for previously unheard voices. Key to this discussion is the work of African American journalist Wallace Terry who toured the Vietnamese War zone, talked to troops, and wrote and reported about the conditions and their experiences—respective and irrespective of race. Terry’s seminal work, Bloods, a powerful volume of oral histories, brings to light African American soldiers’ unique and complex perspectives on race, war, and civil rights; it has been reprinted in at least three foreign languages.

Patriotism was a complicated issue for African Americans during the Vietnam War. Unlike World War I, II, or the Korean War, Vietnam was the first 20th-century conflict fought without court-mandated segregation (Plessy v. Ferguson). Brown versus the Topeka Kansas Board of Education, confirmed in 1954; the Civil Rights Act of 1964; and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave African Americans cause to see differently their Vietnam service. For the first time in U.S. history, they were fighting at a time when laws and presidential orders provided them greater rights as citizens. In the section of the exhibit, “New Definitions of Patriotism?” this distinction is brought into question. Impacted by the draft, McNamara’s Project 100,000, conscientious objectors, and the war's influence on families and communities, African Americans had pause to consider their reasons for fighting. Project 100,000, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s plan to increase the manpower of the armed forces by lowering the standards for draftees and volunteers, brought undereducated and poor men to the front lines of the military in higher percentages—many were African American.

Yet great strides in military appointments and promotions also took place during this war. Air Force General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the highest ranking African American at the time, was soon joined by Frederick Davison and Daniel “Chappie” James. Colonel Colin Powell, Jr., was a commander in Nam before he rose to the Joint Chiefs in the George H. W. Bush administration and Secretary of State in George W. Bush’s cabinet. The appearance of African American freedom was greater during the Vietnam War than any previous, but therein lies the irony. Although civil rights legislation had passed, social and political conditions in the United States remained largely unchanged. Having laws on the books did not immediately alter Americans’ behavior. This discrepancy gave cause for an escalated civil rights movement.
As a result many questioned fighting for a country that denied them access to the freedom and equality promised in its constitution.

After the 1968 Tet Offensive—a massive attack by the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong during the lunar New Year (Tet Nguyen Dan)—and as a result of Project 100,000—a new breed of African American soldier swelled Vietnam’s ranks. Some of these men arrived after Dr. King’s assassination and the subsequent burning of and rioting in many American cities. Racism in the military had already been a major issue, but soon conflicts erupted into violence on the home front, at sea, and in Vietnam. By 1970, due to much criticism of their record, the U.S. Navy issued recruiting posters directed at African Americans. These posters included various visual profiles of men in the African American community—high school students with Afros, college students wearing dashikis. They advertised officer training school and also focused on recruiting women.

Once in the military, some African Americans found a path to mobility that had been denied them in civilian society. Others traveled a rough road where racial pride and racism clashed. The idea of fighting a war to ensure democratic principles in Southeast Asia while being denied those basic rights at home was not lost on African American soldiers. As the civil rights movement coincided with the conflict of race relations in Vietnam, African Americans organized to express their black pride. Various artifacts in Soul Soldiers illustrate stories of the black consciousness movement in Vietnam. Probably the liveliest example is the “dap.” Captured on film and still images in the exhibit, the dap is a stylized greeting—a physical, structured language that confirmed comradeship and brought reassurance—first used in the Korean War and then later popularized by African American Vietnam soldiers. “Brothers” would dap with a series of handshakes, hugs, chest taps, head taps, and sayings such as “right on” and “everything is everything.” Dapping was a language all its own and, like any other, had both formal and informal jargon.

To demonstrate their black consciousness, brothers in Nam fashioned boot laces into wrist bands and bracelets proclaiming their solidarity. One such artifact is the Mau Mau bracelet. Named for the East African revolutionary party of the Kikuyu people of Kenya, the Mau Mau was one of several black nationalist organizations in Vietnam. But artifacts of consciousness in Soul Soldiers go beyond paraphernalia associated with organized groups. A walking stick on loan from Anthony Bell has the names and nicknames of African American men etched in its upper level, near a carved clenched Black Power fist. These names represent men who came into the 49th Scout Dog Platoon of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in 1969. Each new African American soldier signed the walking stick and passed it on. As Bell explains,

In the Winter of 1969, the oldest black soldier in my unit came up with an idea and a tradition for our unit ... Walker, as he was called, brought a cane shape[d] in a black fist, the sign of the times, and carved his name into the fist, and he had each of the black soldiers in the unit carve our names on each rung. It was to be passed to each new black soldier who entered in the unit and each had to sign his name. It represents the unity of black soldiers of the era, the late '60s early '70s.' Marine Jeff Anthony was so taken by the 1968 James Brown hit, “Say It Loud” he had the mantra “black and proud” stitched across his field jacket’s breast pocket. Another unique and revered exhibit artifact is Gunnery Sergeant Donald Harris’s wooden clenched fist-in-shackles statue that he
bought from a Vietnamese woman in 1969. It expresses how the Vietnamese people sympathized with the African American historical condition through a comparison to their own history; the statue expresses the camaraderie of oppressed people of color. Harris, a career Army NCO served for over 20 years and carried this talisman from Vietnam to Germany; he remembers brothers touching the fist for good luck.

Controversy about African American combat experiences in Vietnam results from disparities in the percentages of those who served compared to African Americans in the U.S. population. Over 7,000 African Americans died in Vietnam—12.5% of the total deaths—yet African Americans comprised only 11% of the U.S. population in the late 1960s, an alarming statistic even then, creating cause for concern that these service men were being used as fodder for the war effort.\(^5\) When war correspondent Wallace Terry arrived in Saigon reporting for *Time* magazine, African American combat casualties, at 22%, were higher than whites and double actual African American representation. “The front line soldiers were all brothers,” says Terry, “So much so that between 1965 and 1967 it was called Soulville.”\(^5\)

Artifacts, documents, and personal possessions illustrate these front line soldiers’ tours of duty. Pittsburgher Michael Flournoy, a civil rights worker in Louisiana, was drafted and arrived in Vietnam as a platoon leader in the 101st Airborne Division. His “jungle” boots, ruck sack, bowie knife, canteen, hatchet, sea rations, and duffle bag illustrate his two years of service, 1966-1968. Marine Sergeant John Clark, a 1964 graduate of Fifth Avenue High School, received two Purple Hearts. A booby trap’s metal spike once pulled from his foot gives insight into his combat experience. Photographs of grunts, or combat soldiers, further illustrate the role of African Americans in Vietnam.

Casualties from Western Pennsylvania began as early as 1965 when the body of Norman “Boots” Johnson was returned home to McKeesport for burial. Johnson, one of the first local African Americans to die in combat, had been in Vietnam for only two weeks.

Two months after LeRoy Bernard Mudd’s arrival he was killed, drowned, in what the Navy called an accidental death. A Navy seaman from Homestead, Mudd was sent to Vietnam in 1970. His Navy portrait, official telegrams reporting his death, and a letter written by Mudd to his father—which arrived on the same day as the Navy telegram—help shed light on one Vietnam serviceman’s everyday life and examines the relationship between Mudd and the family he left behind.

A scrapbook called “Letters Home” includes correspondence between servicemen and their families. Hill District native Dennis Hughes kept up with family news by exchanging letters with his grandmother. In another scrapbook,
Home Away From Home images of servicemen at base camp highlight daily life in the rear. Pittsburghers Glenn Mahone and Donald Harris both loaned images of the hooch from their Vietnam tours.

The experiences of African American women in Vietnam are one of the least researched and infrequently told war stories. More than 9,000 females enlisted, and among them were hundreds of African Americans. The Women's Army Corps (WAC) and Army and Navy nurses served valiantly. Women were not subjected to the draft, so most volunteered. Sue Stephens enlisted as clerk from 1967 to 1969 and went on to the rank of Sergeant Major before retiring from the Army in 1991. Nurses became soldiers' lifelines and were aware that their very presence could help recovery periods. Although these women, known as "donut dollies" (a term first used in the Korean War for women volunteers who, then, had machines that made donuts for the men), were not combat troops, they often served in combat zones, aiding men in hospital wards. The impact of military nurses is brought to the fore in Soul Soldiers. Patricia Tucker joined the Army reserves in the early 1970s; the exhibit displays her nurse's uniform, captain bars, and a photograph from the period. In 1973 when the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam, Tucker was stateside working at the Veterans Administration Hospital. She retired as a lieutenant colonel in 1997.

Music greatly impacted African American culture during the Vietnam War. A number of African American entertainers visited troops either through USO shows or independently. Denise Perrier, a San Francisco-based nightclub singer toured Vietnam for two years in the late '60s. Sammy Davis, Jr., James Brown, and others were popular with the troops. The primary influence, however, was recorded music. By the 1960s black musical expression, which included soul, R&B, jazz, gospel, and rock, turned its attention to the
Music was the unified voice supporting a perspective that simultaneously reflected humanity, disgust, and hopelessness. Soul Soldiers' audio installation gives visitors an opportunity to listen to the era's music and read along with the poetic lyrics, which address issues surrounding the war.

The music of the Vietnam War falls into three categories. Firstly, there is the early period (1962 to 1966), when the U.S. served as advisor to the South Vietnamese forces before entering combat in 1965. This period's music romanticizes the war with songs like "Soldier Boy" by The Shirelles and Joe Tex's "When I Got Your Letter." During the second period, 1967 to 1970, both the war and war protests escalated: the draft was increased, Muhammad Ali claimed conscientious objector status, King was assassinated, and the Tet Offensive showed the lengths the Viet Cong would go to win the war. Music at this time addressed the war's devastation and called out for its end. Nina Simone's "Backlash Blues," the titanic mantra of James Brown's "Say It Loud/I'm Black and I'm Proud," and rock music icon, Jimi Hendrix's monumental "All Along the Watchtower" and "Machine Gun" were political in tone and explosive in sound. Even though the Temptations tugged Motown out of its romantic period with "Ball of Confusion," the most iconic hit of this period was Edwin Starr's "War." Written by the Motown team of Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, it was originally penned for the Temptations new lead singer Dennis Edwards to belt the rhetorical question, "What is it good for?"

The third period, 1971 to 1975, witnessed the final withdrawal of troops. The call to remove soldiers from Vietnam echoed in Freda Payne's "Bring the Boys Home." Later, soul and R&B songs focused on the changed America that veterans returned to. The most iconic recording being Marvin Gaye's concept LP, What's Going On. Inspired by his brother Frankie's Vietnam stories, Gaye took oral history and folded it into compositions that include remnants of soul, jazz, gospel, and...
Aretha Franklin released her monumental R&B Lady Soul in 1968. It topped the charts and was a popular album with black soldiers in Vietnam.


blues. The unmistakable interludes in songs like "What's Happening Brother" and "Inner City Blues" make them classics of African American music. Gaye was Motown's sex symbol, but with this album he turned away from romanticized crooning to address politics, war, the environment, race, religion, and economics.

Visual art by African American Vietnam Veterans from the collection of the National Vietnam Veteran Art Museum opens up a dialogue about creativity and reflections on the war. Oil paintings and mixed media are included in the exhibit and mirror outlooks on the politics of war, family, death, and race. Many veterans embraced art as a way of "coming back to the world." Farris Parker's "Children Reaching and Playing: Canned Food in the Fence," Will Foster Smith's "Silhouettes of Soul," and Cleveland Wright's "We Regret to Inform You" speak directly to black consciousness, the war, and its impact on families.

American society was forever changed by the Vietnam War era. This historical period was full of movements and events that altered American society. For African Americans, civil rights and Vietnam were centrally charged. Vietnam continues to be an emotional point of discussion. Returning veterans confronted with angry and uninviting protests, would not talk about their experiences for many years and some are just now beginning to reveal their stories. For now, historians must rely on journalists like Wallace Terry, who helped expand the dialogue about Vietnam and its impact on African Americans and writers such as Albert French, who penned his memoir, Patches of Fire, relaying a deeper perspective of African American Vets' experiences.

The last section of the exhibit focuses on health and veterans organizations. After soldiers returned from Vietnam, health issues were a serious concern. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a battle-fatigue psychological condition, affected many, yet for years the VA Hospital would not recognize PTSD, and veterans did not qualify for treatment. Organizations such as the Black Vietnam Era Veterans Incorporated (BVEV) helped obtain VA benefits for PTSD and other health issues. Drugs, alcoholism, and sexually transmitted diseases had lingering effects on returning veterans as well. Agent Orange and other herbicides used by the U.S. military to destroy foliage in the Vietnamese countryside created health complications culminating in advanced diseases and organ failure. The Agent Orange Act of 1991 gave the VA responsibility for translating scientific conclusions into compensation policy. Vietnam Veteran Curt Standifer, a member of the 2nd Battalion, Company B, 101st Airborne Division, from 1968 to 1969, suffers from kidney and liver failure due to Agent Orange exposure. Standifer, a veteran community organizer in Cincinnati before and after the war, carried a journal during his tour and organized a black studies group in Vietnam. An entry in his journal titled, "Why Me In Vietnam?" sums up the sentiments of many African American servicemen:
Crossfire by William M. Myles is one of nine art pieces on loan from the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in Chicago. Courtesy of National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum.

The War in Vietnam is a war we cannot win, should not wish to win, are not winning, and which our people do not support. So why should me, a brother of soul, whose war is on the streets in the states be here fighting.

Standifer had no idea that when he went into the jungles of Vietnam and touched foliage treated with napalm and Agent Orange that he would suffer ailments some 30 years later.

Soul Soldiers approaches the Vietnam story from a social, not a military, perspective. A blow-by-blow account of battles and war strategies is largely absent. For Soul Soldiers is not an exhibit about the war, but the impact of the war on African American life and culture—stories largely absent from most popular depictions of the conflict. Very little of the literature, motion pictures, documentaries, or broadcast references examine the effect of this contentious war on African American life and culture. The story is told through the voices of African Americans, particularly veterans, and interpreted with artifacts, music, art, film, and oral history.

For this reason and others the History Center presents Soul Soldiers. It was chiefly inspired by my older brother, Jimmy McNeil, a Vietnam Vet (1965-1967), who died tragically in New York City in 1971. His life gave me the inspiration to look at how this war impacted African Americans.

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1 Ho Chi Minh, “lynching,” La Correspondance Internationale, no. 59, 1924. For more information about Ho Chi Minh’s time in America, see William J. Duiker, Ho Chi Minh (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 50-51.


4 Statistics gathered from the Southeast Asia combat area Casualties file (CAF), National Archives.


7 Curt Standifer, “Journal,” p. 8, Heinz History Center. This document is on loan to the Soul Soldiers exhibit from Curt Standifer, a Cincinnati-native Vietnam Vet. The journal was kept by Standifer during his tour of Vietnam where he made entries in the midst of war, 1968-1970.