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Books

BLOODS: *An Oral History Of The Vietnam War By Black Veterans*

By Wallace Terry
Random House, New York, 1984, 311 pp.

Reviewed by Paul R. Hathaway

The Vietnam War was a troubling irony.

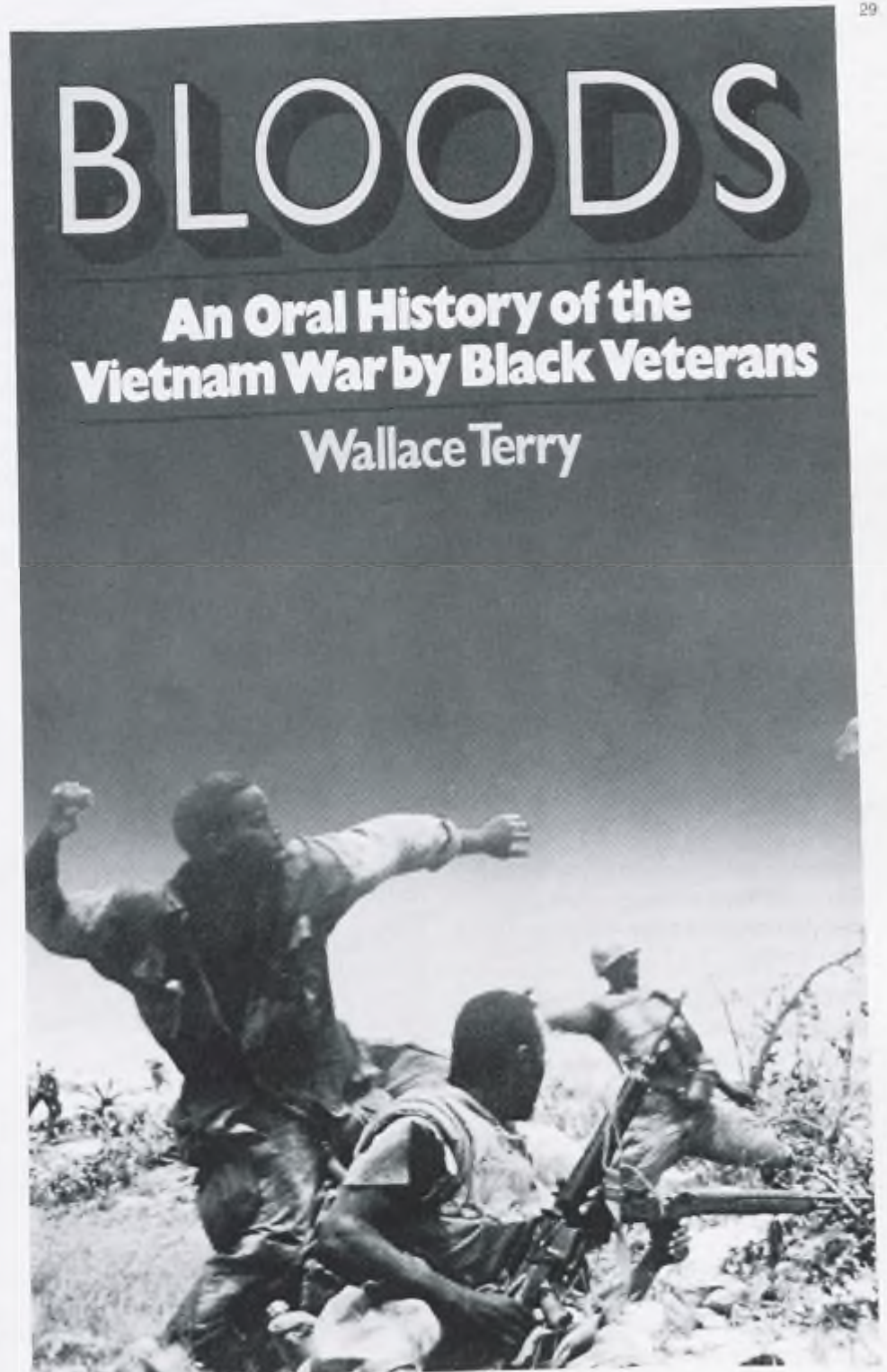
Thousands of miles away American soldiers were fighting a war of questionable validity against a faceless enemy while at home many Americans were waging a war against poverty and racism on behalf of millions of Black Americans.

At a time when a new consciousness was emerging about Black America, no war had ever been questioned with such intensity by Americans. No war had ever been probed and poked at like this one.

It was tough enough to be white in Vietnam; it was even tougher to be Black. Where were your priorities? Where were your concerns if you were Black? Was the *real* war at home or was it in this strange land?

Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans, edited by Wallace Terry, a former Howard University journalism professor and Saigon correspondent for *Time*, tells us, sometimes with excruciating detail, what it was like to be

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a Black serviceman in Vietnam at the height of the war.

Says Terry in his foreword:

"In any Black soldier of Vietnam can be found the darkness that is at the heart of all wars. What the Black veteran illuminates in these pages of his own humanity as well as racial perception will help complete the missing pages of the American experience, and add to the pages of universal understanding of man's most terrible occupation."

Terry lets the action unfold for us through the eyes of 20 Black veterans. Compassionate, but too tough to weep over its wounded, *Bloods* moves through the marshes and the brush of Vietnam with a serene and poignant feel for the people and the land, and the only thing our 20 narrators can be certain of is the uncertainty of it all.

For many Black serviceman, Vietnam is nothing more than a mirror of home. Rebel flags taunt them. They get the worst and most dangerous jobs. A North Vietnamese disc jockey, Hanoi Helen, after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., coos:

"Soul Brothers, go home. Whitey raping your mothers and daughters, burning down your homes. What you over here for? This is not your war. The war is a trick of the Capitalist empire to get rid of the Blacks."

Indeed, the war did raise questions about the nature and the level of participation of Blacks in combat. Though Blacks made up 11 percent of the American population, they accounted for 31 percent of the combat troops and 23 percent of the fatalities. When they returned home, their unemployment rate was twice as high as that of white soldiers.

It would be trite to call this a book about Black soldiers' experiences in Vietnam, or about race and racism in war. It is really about Black men struggling for their self-respect, about strong men trying to survive.

What does a man do when he finds himself in the most indecipherable of wars?

Colonel Fred Cherry, the first Black airman captured after his plane crashes in North Vietnam, is beaten regularly by his captors over an eight-year period because

he refuses to denounce his government publicly.

He never gives in. Why?

"I always kept in mind I was representing 24 million Black Americans," he said. "If they are going to kill me, they are going to have to kill me. I'm just not going to denounce my government or shame my people."

William S. Norman, now a vice president with Amtrak and a former lieutenant commander in the Navy, says he saw a militancy in the Black servicemen in Vietnam he had never seen before.

"These men belonged to a generation that was far, far more outspoken than any generation of Black men before them. So they get over there, get introduced to the drugs, the killings, the uncertainty, and they still had to put up with racism within the service. They were there to kill and be killed. About ready to die. To do first-class dying. Yet in terms of their assignments and promotions and awards, they were getting second-class treatment. It created a special brand of bitterness."

For some soldiers arriving in Vietnam street-wise and world-innocent, Vietnam was an experience that could send one home pieced together in a box or it could turn one's soul to ice.

Specialist 4 Arthur "Cyclops" Woodley turns killer at 18 after he discovers the bodies of American servicemen castrated, killing at least 40 people. One day in the bush, he comes upon a white soldier beaten by the Viet Cong and left for dead. The soldier's pain is so great he begs Woodley to kill him.

Listen to Woodley:

"I put my M-16 next to his head. Next to his temple.

"I said 'You sure you want me to do this?'

"He said, 'Man kill me. Thank you.'

"I stopped thinking. I just pulled the trigger. I cancelled his suffering."

Embittered, perhaps by war, Woodley takes to wearing a necklace made up of the ears and fingers of his Viet Cong victims.

"I would go downtown (in Vietnam), and you would get free drugs, free booze, because they wouldn't wanna bother with

you 'cause this man's a killer."

Later, though, he mellows.

"I started seeing the atrocities we caused each other as human beings. I came to the realization that I was committing crimes against humanity and myself. That I really didn't believe in these things I was doin'. I changed."

Specialist 4 Robert E. Holcomb was not just another Army inductee. A draft evader for more than a year, he gives himself up to the FBI in New York City and is inducted into the Army in manacles.

Later he is shipped off to Vietnam where he shows a gift for leadership.

Recalls Medal-winner Holcomb:

"Though Blacks made up 11 percent of the American population, they accounted for 31 percent of the combat troops and 23 percent of the fatalities."

"A few of us Black soldiers were able to get into positions where we could have some freedom, make our lives a little better even though we were in a war that we really didn't believe in. But most Blacks couldn't, because they didn't have the skills. So they were put in the jobs that were the most dangerous, the hardest. Or just the most undesirable. A white soldier would probably get a better position. And Hispanic soldiers and Jewish soldiers and Polish soldiers would catch some flack too. But not as much as a Blood."

One night in 1981, after the war, Holcomb discovers what the Vietnam years really stole from him. He is introduced to his 11-year-old son by his former girl friend who thought that he had died in the war.

Later, Holcomb would travel to North Vietnam as part of an official American delegation to plead for the return of the

Sgt. Maj. Edgar A. Huff

U.S. Marine Corps

Take this time at Camp Geiger. This gunny sergeant was reporting in, and he telephoned my quarters. This was 1963.

"Did you know what the damn chief clerk of yours done this evening?"

"No. What did he do?"

"He assigned me to stay in a room with a damn nigger."

I says, "Is that right?"

He says, "Yes, sir, Sergeant Major. And I'd rather sleep on the parade ground under a flagpole than to sleep with some goddamn Black nigger."

So I says, "Well, I can take care of you tonight. Tomorrow, I'll assign you to your permanent quarters. I make it a practice to do everything for my staff NCOs."

So I arranged for this gunny to have the VIP quarters that night in the staff NCO club.

The next morning I told my driver to go down to supply and draw out a half a tent, five tent pegs, and one pole. I said, "You know one Marine don't rate but half a tent."

So I'm sitting there in my office with about 25 yards of campaign ribbons, a bucket of battle stars, and each one of my sleeves look like a zebra. Ain't no

way in hell a man could not know I was not the sergeant major.

When the gunny walked in, he stopped and looked at me as though he saw a ghost.

He said, "are you the sergeant major?"

I said, "Well, Gunny, you are familiar with the rank structure, aren't you?"

He said, "You not the one I talked to last night, are you?"

"Why sure I am. Sit down."

I made him drink coffee, and the cup was rattlin' like it was a rattlesnake. Then I drove him out to the parade grounds, up to the flagpole, and said, "Here is your quarters. Now you pitch your lean-to on the flagpole like you requested." And it was raining like hell.

When I came back, the tent was running full of water. I said, "Get this tent trenched out like it's supposed to be. You are ruining government property."

Then he said, "I'll stay with that fella."

I told him he would have to get this Black sergeant to agree and bring him to my office. Well, it was all right with the sergeant, and the gunny moved in. □

—FROM 'BLOODS'

remains of missing American servicemen.

There are some men whose bravest moments come long after the war is over.

Specialist 4 Robert L. Mountain of Millen, Georgia, loses a leg in Vietnam and returns to the United States determined to go on with his life. He earns a bachelor's degree in sociology and goes into the counselling of amputees. Later, he takes up track, breaking the world record in the 100-meter dash for amputees.

Still, *Bloods* is not a book doggedly seeking out happy endings.

Specialist Stephen A. Howard, a combat photographer, winds up seeking psychiatric help after several crippling injuries.

He is a haunted man. Vietnam, he says, taught him to lie and cheat.

"And the lie was," he says, "you ain't have no business bein' there in the first place. You wasn't here for democracy. You wasn't protecting your homeland. And that was what wears you down. We were programmed for the fact as American fighting men that we were fighting a civilized war. And you don't fight a civilized war. It's nothing civilized about — about war."

And there is Sgt. Robert Daniels of Chicago who lost his right arm in Vietnam and never found a job in his own field of accounting even though he has a degree. Today he lives on disability and Social Security checks.

"I wish I would've come back the way, you know, I went. I might have realized which way my life would've went. All I did was lost part of my body. And that's the end of me." □

The reviewer is director of the Department of Publications at the university, and formerly a correspondent for Time magazine. He covered Vietnam for the Washington Star during and after the Tet offensive in 1968.