



**Jeremy P. Maxwell.** *Brotherhood in Combat: How African Americans Found Equality in Korea and Vietnam.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. 224 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-6006-1.

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A common theme in military history studies, especially those that delve into the gritty world of the blood and mud of combat, is the development of camaraderie between soldiers as they lock horns with the opposition. This brotherhood, as it were, helps to alleviate differences—such as regional, ethnic, economic, or racial to name but a few—among those waging war. For Maxwell, this is not only true, it is the cornerstone of his spritely, informative, but rather brief overview of the role combat—specifically in Korea and Vietnam—played in the racial integration of the American Armed Forces.

To pursue this goal, he builds off the thesis of Gerald Goodwin’s “Race in the Crucible of War: African American Soldiers and Race Relations in the ‘Nam,” which suggests that “socially constructed” racist norms that existed between whites and blacks withered away in the face of enemy fire—essentially, that the necessity and dire reality of the moment squashed the prejudices of yesterday. Maxwell breaks sharply, though, with Goodwin when it comes to the issue of when this occurred. Thus, it did not begin with the Cold War asymmetrical struggle conducted in Southeast Asia. Instead, it is in an earlier conflict in Asia, the Korean War, that its origins can be discovered. While we can all hem and haw on when the breakdown of racial segregation in the

armed forces *truly* began, I contend, and I suspect Maxwell would agree, that there is a larger story behind it that likely originates with the use of African slaves in colonial militias. What he has written here, therefore, is a twentieth-century jaunt through a small aspect of the larger narrative of African American efforts to fight side by side with their fellow white countrymen, and, of course, to be fully recognized as societal equals for their service to their country.[1]

If the trial of combat was the great elixir to what ailed the Americans as far as racism within the ranks and society went, then that means that “real change” did not begin with a political solution. Specifically, the author believes that Harry S. Truman’s Executive Order 9981, which began the process of integration, was not as important to the end goal of racial integration of the armed forces as the outbreak of fighting in Korea. To an extent, this is a totally understandable and a reasonable supposition. And further in his defense, Maxwell’s study only examines the US Army and Marine Corps, two branches notoriously reluctant and reticent in their desires to grapple with racial issues, and how the war in Korea, and later in Vietnam, forced them to adapt and evolve.

There are several flaws with this approach when one considers the totality of initiatives and endeavors underway during the era, with much

of it owing to the existence of the president's order and how liberal reformers, white and black, got behind it politically and forced the military to act. While understandable, Maxwell's examination only tells part of the story and largely leaves out other branches such as the newly minted Air Force, which also engaged in combat—namely in the skies above Korea and Vietnam—and was far more aggressive in its drive to end racial segregation within its ranks. There are also far more binding mechanisms than combat when we discuss war. In other words, soldiers do not need to physically experience combat to congeal with others. Membership in the ranks, it could be argued, might be enough for some. For others, say those who served in support roles, can also develop relationships. There is, after all, something to the notion of having to toil at a job, day after day, with another human being slowly breaks down barriers. Regardless of the branch, who is to say that there were not those who came to accept one another for no other reason than that they had no other choice than to do so because the proximity and nature of their occupations demanded it? This does not mean combat service did not matter. It certainly did. But it was not the only way to bring the races together. A little more nuance on this, coupled with Maxwell's coverage of the combat arms, could have brought greater depth and understanding to an interesting examination of the growing camaraderie between the races during the Korea and Vietnam Wars.

The real star of this book and others like it is necessity. It has remained at the heart of all works discussing the racial integration of the American military. The wars in Korea and Vietnam were no different. The era that brought a presidential order ending segregation in the military, though, changed the gambit entirely. More than anything prior to it, Truman's order opened the door for necessity to come running through in a fashion that proved more permanent than past attempts, notably during the Second World War, to racially integrate the military—namely because it was

backed by the power of the president, which frankly had not happened before and once proven successful was likely to stick.

While it is brief, has a unique rationale for why Harry Truman, in part, issued EO 9981,[2] and questions the importance of the order in the grand scheme of things, Maxwell's work certainly shines best when wrestling with race, combat, and camaraderie and the latter's development on the battlefields of Korea and Vietnam. Those who write about this topic will find useful analysis within those sections, but will be left wanting more analysis of the binding power of camaraderie.

#### Notes

[1]. For more on Gerald Goodwin's thesis, see "Race in the Crucible of War: African American Soldiers and Race Relations in the 'Nam," (PhD diss., Ohio University, 2014).

[2]. There is a bit of confusion in the narrative that is worth mention. Maxwell notes the famous meeting in 1946 between Truman and civil rights leaders who informed him of several atrocities that returning African American personnel of the Second World War faced. The outcome of this was the well-documented emotional exclamation by the president, "My God! I had no idea it was as terrible as that! We've got to do something." For the past seventy years, historians, including me, have described the most influential story told the president during that meeting as that of Sergeant Isaac Woodard—a tale which also drew the attention of famed broadcaster Orson Wells, who railed publicly against the savage attack on the Pacific War veteran. Though Woodard is mentioned, Maxwell focuses instead on the story of Macio Snipes, a black man from Georgia, as the penultimate influence on Truman. Maxwell's understanding of this comes from Gail Buckley's *American Patriots* (New York: Random House, 2001), which, in turn, cites the former head of the NAACP Walter White's *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (Athens: Universi-

ty of Georgia Press, 1995). Through White discusses events in Georgia, along with the story of Woodard, no direct mention is made of Snipes in his autobiography.

This is important because most of the prevailing works on this story have built a historical narrative around what White said in his biography about that meeting. For those who study the history of race in the military, Woodard's tragic tale matters because it helped convince, nudge, or guilt Truman into action. In the end, this is either a mistake in judgement on the issue or the inroads into a broader interpretation for Truman's actions. In either case, clarity is needed. For more on the Woodard's influence on Truman see White, *A Man Called White*, 330-31; Morris J. MacGregor Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces: 1940-1965* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1981), 129; Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 206; Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1998), 316; Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 162; Robert B. Edgerton, *Hidden Heroism: Black Soldiers in America's Wars* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 162; Christine Knauer, *Let Us Fight as Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 38-43; Geoffrey W. Jensen, "The Political, The Personal, and the Cold War: Harry Truman and Executive Order 9981," in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Race*, ed. Geoffrey W. Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2016), 192-93; and James E. Westheider, "African Americans, Civil Rights, and the Armed Forces During the Vietnam War," in *Integrating the US Military*, ed. Douglas Walter Bristol Jr. and Heather Marie Stur (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 101.

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