



Brotherhood in Combat: How African Americans Found Equality in Korea and Vietnam by Jeremy P. Maxwell.

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Review by Thomas E. Hanson, US Army School of Advanced Military Studies (phd11b@msn.com).

Brotherhood in Combat is one of several recent studies¹ of the experiences of Black Americans in the twentieth-century US Army. Unlike many of his predecessors, however, author Jeremy Maxwell has devoted his book to the years 1945–75. Specifically, he details the long, often bumpy road to both desegregation and full integration of African Americans into all aspects of Army life. His central thesis is that changes in the military required changes in American society that were beyond the power of civil rights activists to initiate before 1940 (28). At that point, developments in civil society and within the military began to amplify each other. In the ensuing transformation of race relations, changes within the military outpaced those occurring in the larger society (158).

In eight succinct chapters and a conclusion, Maxwell addresses discrete topics within his thirty-year target period and the lead-up to it. Chapters 1–2 concern events from 1895 to 1945 that expedited civil rights advances within and beyond the military. Chapters 3–4 detail advances made at the organizational and institutional levels during and after Pres. Harry Truman’s Executive Order 9981 (26 July 1948) mandating desegregation in the military, and the Korean War. Chapter 6 tracks the evolution of race relations during the Army’s involvement in the Vietnam War.

Chapters 5 and 7–8 depart a bit from the author’s top-down view of desegregation and integration to focus on the experiences of soldiers of various races in Korea and Vietnam. A concluding chapter sums up the arguments made and suggests areas needing further scrutiny. The entire book can easily be read in a single sitting. Its lucid prose is free of the jargon and theoretical modeling that disfigures most other works on its topic.

Maxwell’s discussion of the “lessons” the US Army chose to learn from its employment of Black soldiers in World War I, and the growing political influence of, for instance, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, sets the stage for his appraisal of the scant concessions to civil rights made by Pres. Franklin Roosevelt’s administration. While rightly characterizing FDR’s Executive Order 8802 (June 1941), which created the Fair Employment Practices Commission, as “the greatest push for equality enacted by the government” since Emancipation, he labels the president’s record of half-measures as “appeasement” (30–31).

Nor does the author spare Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall or Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson. He faults Marshall for failing to seize the chance presented by wartime expansion of the Army to abolish segregation, instead observing that “the settlement of vexing racial problems

1. E.g., Gail L. Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Black Americans in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm* (NY: Random, 2001); Robert B. Edgerton, *Hidden Heroes: Black Soldiers in America’s Wars* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001); Christine Knauer, *Let Us Fight as Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: U Penn Pr, 2014); and Michael Lee Lanning, *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (NY: Citadel, 2004).

cannot be permitted to complicate the tremendous task of the War Department and thereby jeopardize discipline and morale” (32). While Marshall’s stance could be framed as a case of faulty prioritization, Stimson was capable of opining that “leadership is not embedded in the Negro race” (29).

In his discussion of the effects of Truman’s executive order on the services, Maxwell does yeoman’s work in exposing the Army as the least receptive to change. After an extensive discussion of the attempts to preserve segregation in the force, he shows that a change of leadership—a new secretary of defense and a new secretary of the army—was needed before real change could begin. These were overseen by the Fahy Committee, an organization chartered by President Truman to ensure the services complied with his desegregation order. However, as Maxwell writes, promulgations of policy were only the first step:

Executive Order 9981 and the Fahy Committee were the catalysts to equal status in the military, but Korea would be the arena within which integration would be tested and built upon ... When U.S. forces were finally sent to Korea in 1950 to halt the spread of Communism, blacks and whites would fight and die alongside one another in a more intimate way than they had in any previous war. (50–51)

Once the door was opened to full integration of Blacks into previously all-white units, there could be no going back. Maxwell credits Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway for finally giving integration the official backing of the institutional army (69). Within a year after the Korean Armistice, the Eighth Army under Ridgway and his successors had so thoroughly integrated the Army that fewer than ten thousand Black soldiers still served in segregated units. Moreover, the experience of fighting alongside Asian allies reinforced for both Black and white soldiers “the commonality ... that they were both American.” This fostered an attitude whereby “being American mattered most” (94) once the color barrier fell and racial integration became the norm.

In his chapter on Vietnam, Maxwell clarifies the common charge that Black soldiers died in greater numbers than white soldiers. His research indicates that both sides may have been right. Of the total casualties sustained in Vietnam, “African-American casualties represented 12.44 percent...” (111). He goes on to show that such statistics distort the truth, because they neither explain annual variations in casualty ratios by race, nor examine why Black soldiers may have been at greater risk of becoming a casualties at various times during the war. The entire discussion is worth transforming into a case study in a civilian or military educational institution because it highlights the uses and misuses to which data analysis may be put, all while hiding behind the imprimatur of supposedly nonpartisan sources.

Maxwell concentrates throughout on the recurring belief that, by rendering military service, Black Americans could dispel majoritarian opinions regarding their fitness for full citizenship. And, in both Korea and Vietnam, a genuine brotherhood among soldiers of various races, forged in the furnace of close combat where the ever-present threat of death or mutilation forced racial animosity “to become subordinate to the primary objective of survival” (14). The biggest obstacle to racial harmony in both cases, argues Maxwell, was the dichotomy of Black experience: (a) brotherhood without hesitation in combat vs. (b) immediate reversion to second-class status in rear areas or back home. The final end of segregation in the US military coincided with the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954). Thereafter, the campaign for full civil rights energized Black Americans—volunteers and draftees—in ways that made conflict almost inevitable, since, as Dwight Eisenhower put it, “prejudices ... will not succumb to compulsion” (155). The growth of Black militant movements affected race relations in Vietnam, culminating in a dramatic shift following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Protests stemming

from that event merged with the larger antiwar movement, fed by media coverage of the Tet Offensive. This created an irresistible demand for social change that aligned civil society more closely with what was by 1975 settled practice in the military services.

Brotherhood in Combat is an ideal starting point for readers wishing to understand the evolution of the civil rights movement in the United States, the movement's relation to the military services, and its effect on US military policy during the Cold War. It deserves a wide readership in university courses and at every level of professional military education.