

Lamont Steptoe: The other part of that is that when it came time for me to get my sergeant stripes, this particular lieutenant was trying to refuse to give my sergeant stripes.

Ishmael Reed: What was his background? Did you know anything about the guy?

Lamont Steptoe: No.

Ishmael Reed: Just that he was from Chicago.

Lamont Steptoe: Right, just that he had gone to Officer Candidate, so there was another soldier in the platoon named de la Cruz. Manuel de la Cruz from Chicago. He was one of the founders of "The Latin Kings." He was the company clerk and he eventually gave up being a clerk because he began to be guilty as he saw how traumatized we were when we came back from the field. But anyway he stood up and he fought with the lieutenant verbally and was thrown out in the orderly room over three times for arguing with this lieutenant about making him give me my sergeant stripes. So I eventually got my sergeant stripes, but Manuel de la Cruz had a lot to do with it.

Ishmael Reed: Did the Latinos and Blacks get along?

Lamont Steptoe: Oh, yeah. In Vietnam? Oh, hell yeah. Any person of color got along with other people of color, you know, because, you know, because of being surrounded by all of these White soldiers.

Ishmael Reed: You're talking about the incident where the Whites and the Blacks got into battle?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, in a place called Chu Lai.

Ishmael Reed: And what sparked it?

Lamont Steptoe: Racism.

Ishmael Reed: What happened? Was there a particular incident?

Lamont Steptoe: I'm not sure, but I understood it happened and I understood there was a bar fight between 200 Black soldiers and 200 White soldiers.

Ishmael Reed: Were there casualties?

Lamont Steptoe: Yes, I think there were.

Ishmael Reed: Deaths? What about deaths?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, I think there were deaths.

Ishmael Reed: Was there any report or anything about anything? Anybody write about that incident?

Lamont Steptoe: I think it may have appeared in "The Stars and Stripes" the official newspaper of the United States Army.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, so now you're with your dog up there on that Black Virgin Mountain. What happens?

Lamont Steptoe: Well that particular day we didn't have any contact. I was able to get back to my mission. There was no contact.

Ishmael Reed: So they sent you back to where you were.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, yeah. You see, if I had been in the battle Ishmael, one of three things would have happened: I would have been killed, I would have been wounded and I would have had to kill. That wasn't in God's plans.

Ishmael Reed: So what was the response of the guy who sent you up there when you came back?

Lamont Steptoe: Nothing. Nothing. He was liberal in a sense that after duty hours there was those of us... Vietnam was divided into three kinds of people: You had those of us who were the heads and wore peace symbols and smoked pot and do other drugs, and you

had those who were alcoholics who would get drunk and beat each other up, mostly they were good old boys from the South and we would sit around watching them.

Ishmael Reed: What about heroin?

Lamont Steptoe: Oh, yeah, that was available, yeah.

Ishmael Reed: Was it widespread use, or what?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah. Yes, and this lieutenant told us, he said...we could go out in the back of the hooch's and smoke after duty hours and the lieutenant was okay with that. He was also okay with Mama San brining us prostitutes so soldiers wouldn't end up f***ing each other but even though that happened there were still soldiers who were f***ing each other.

Ishmael Reed: Was that widespread?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, it was on the DL. I mean, I knew who in my unit was doing it and then um, um, let's see. Where were we going with this? What was your last question?

Ishmael Reed: Heroin. Widespread heroin and homosexuality.

Lamont Steptoe: And then you had the alcoholics and then you had guys who read the Bible every night and who didn't drink alcohol and who didn't do drugs and who didn't f*** the prostitutes. So those were the groupings inside the military in Vietnam.

Ishmael Reed: Was it a demoralized army?

Lamont Steptoe: Only that demoralization started to show up in 1971. The later part of 1971 when a lot of soldiers said, "I'm not going out there to get killed. I'm not going to be killed in Vietnam. They started to confront their commanders and this also led to people getting fragged, commanders getting fragged, you know, getting killed by their own troops.

Ishmael Reed: Were they amazed that the Viet Cong was able to take on this army?

Lamont Steptoe: No. I don't think it was amazement. No, I mean, the 25th Infantry basically was basically a place called Cu Chi. That's where all the tunnels were. Only years later that I figured out that right under our feet, in Vietnam, under our feet, right under our base camp and they would send these doughnut dollies, they would dress in pin stripes and come out and play games with us, you know, to see a round eye, you know. These White boys used to say, "I can't wait to get back to America so I can f*** some round eyes."

Ishmael Reed: What are they talking about?

Lamont Steptoe: The fact that the Vietnamese's eyes are slits.

Ishmael Reed: Oh. I see, I see, I see, I see. So it was pretty much a racist army, huh? The American army.

Lamont Steptoe: Oh, yeah. I mean the same problems we have out here they have out there but the only difference is, Ishmael, a lot of Black men join the army because even inside of that totalitarian environment it's what you have on your shoulder or your arm that people have to listen to. Even if they're racist and they don't like you, you can out rank them and they have to do what you say.

Ishmael Reed: I see. I see. That doesn't happen in civilian life.

Lamont Steptoe: No.

Ishmael Reed: I see. Okay. Because there are few Black bosses in civilian life.

Lamont Steptoe: Right. Right. Like I said what I was doing this past week, um, that we had to worry about Viet Cong as Black soldiers, we had to worry about being killed by

the Vietnamese army and we had to worry about being killed by these redneck racists from down south.

Ishmael Reed: Did you meet any good rednecks?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah. Well Dennis Evans was a redneck from Alabama. He was a good redneck.

Ishmael Reed: He had a different attitude.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, yeah, there were a number of White boys that preferred to hang out with Black soldiers over and above White soldiers.

Ishmael Reed: Oh, I see. Okay. And they were called “nigger lovers?”

Lamont Steptoe: Yup.

Ishmael Reed: So what did you hear from home? I mean there was a lot of activism going on home? What did you hear? You heard about Malcolm X, right?

Lamont Steptoe: I knew about Malcolm X, but we didn’t hear anything. The only way we heard anything was through letters. My mother never mentioned the anti-war movement in the States. We were totally unaware of what happened in the United States because they didn’t want you to forget that the Vietnamese...you know, when I got to Vietnam I started hearing the White soldiers calling the Vietnamese “gooks.” For me that was the same as being called a “nigger.” My first week in Vietnam, we had these Vietnamese women...they were allowed on base to do our laundry and my first week in my unit one of them looked at me and said, “you same, same monkey.” I said, “what?” She said, “you same, same monkey,” and a lot of them, especially the Vietnamese prostitutes, a lot of them walked around the back of you to see if you had a tail.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, so you encountered racism from the Vietnamese, too.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah. Yeah. Because the White boys were telling them different stuff. They do that in every war. They did that in World War II. They told French women that.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah. So Black soldiers, when we got to Vietnam, they told us Vietnamese women’s vaginas were not like Americans’. They said that they were slanted. So they would talk crazy bullshit, you know.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, well. Yeah. That’s an oldie but goody going back to the war with Japan. (The late) Billy Bang said one of the Chinese prostitutes had to tell him what was going on back home.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah. I was surprised. Well, you know...

Ishmael Reed: So that was a black out on the activism that was happening back home?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah. We didn’t have any radios.

Ishmael Reed: What about “Stars and Stripes?” “Stars and Stripes didn’t say anything?”

Lamont Steptoe: No. Hell, no. No. No we had no idea what was happening back here.

Ishmael Reed: So when did you hear about what was going on?

Lamont Steptoe: After I got back from being discharged from the United States Army.

Ishmael Reed: And how did you feel about it?

Lamont Steptoe: I don’t know if I was feeling too much. I was still in shock.

Ishmael Reed: At what? At what?

Lamont Steptoe: At the sudden transition from one day being in a rice patty and twenty-four hours later being back in the United States.

Ishmael Reed: Tell me about that dog. The dog Butch.

Lamont Steptoe: The handler that got him after me, he was also from Chicago, and he was a White soldier. He was drafted and he hated the United States military. Now these

dogs, these scout dogs, were valued at \$30,000 a piece and when you had the dogs in barracks, you know, you had a choke chain on. When you got out into the field you took off the choke chain and put a leather harness on and gave them the command, "search." So, this guy, his name was Darrel Colford. Colford and Butch got out the chopper and Butch refused to move. These animals were trained to sit three feet from an explosive device and they detect enemy ambushes and they also can find tunnels. So Colford had just stepped off the chopper and Butch froze. Then Colford jerked him forward and hit the grenade that killed them both.

Ishmael Reed: Wow. How long did you handle that dog? For how many months?

Lamont Steptoe: I was online for eleven months, because after I became a sergeant I was assigned to go out on the field with the dog handlers and make sure he knew how to work the dog properly. So, I extended because I was three years listed. As my first year came to a close, I said, "I'm not going back to the United States." So I stayed another year in the army getting up at 6AM to shine boots and taking orders from someone who had never been at war. They said, "If you extend for another year in Vietnam, you can stay another six months and drop the other six months." So that's what I did, and rather than doing another eighteen months, when we invaded Cambodia, I got another two month drop, so that's why I stayed another six months.

Ishmael Reed: So you were a dog handler and then you became a sergeant. Is that why you no longer became a dog handler?

Lamont Steptoe: Right. Right. I became another training NCO.

Ishmael Reed: So what were some of the traumatic events that you experienced there?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, you know, it was a twenty hour flight from the United States to Southeast Asia with a stop in Alaska, a stop in Japan, and then straight into Southeast Asia. A man who sat next to me on the plane was a White boy from Alabama and he was White knuckled scared and one month after we got there he got his head blown off. 10,000 of us served, 4,000 of us got killed. They got extra points for killing us because we were effective at what we did.

Ishmael Reed: Billy Bang said he was a tunnel rat and that they put snakes in there. How did that go?

Lamont Steptoe: Well see, if I had been sent to Vietnam as a straight leg soldier, I would have been a tunnel rat because I am only five foot three. So the average life of a tunnel rat in Vietnam was the same as a second infantry lieutenant. In six weeks you would be dead.

Ishmael Reed: A tunnel rat? A tunnel rat?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah. If you were a tunnel rat in six weeks you would be dead. The Viet Cong would hang this particular... Vietnam has incredibly venomous snakes. One of the most notorious ones is the Bamboo Pit Viper, which is only about six to eight inches long and they would hang them by their tails in the tunnel entrance, so when you crawled in when you got bit in the face, and if you got bit in the face by a Bamboo Pit Viper, you would be dead in thirty seconds.

Tennessee Reed: Was it a neurotoxin or a toxin in the blood stream?

Lamont Steptoe: No, it was a neurotoxin.

Ishmael Reed: Were they trying to punish him by sending him there to do that?

Lamont Steptoe: I'm sure it was some kind of punishment or they were sacrificing his a**. But my dog prevented me from going in the tunnels even though I had a commander

saying, "Can you go in there?" And I said, "See this dog right here? This dog is \$30,000. You cannot separate us. We find them. We don't go in them."

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, well Billy Bang never recovered from that experience. I think that killed him. He talked about it all the time.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, if you stepped foot in Vietnam, you were exposed to Agent Orange. The 25th infantry base camp where I lived for sixteen months was a part of the defoliated Michelin rubber plantation and during dry season it's dusty, so you're breathing in that dust. When we went on missions in defoliated areas we ran out of water. We would fill up our water from the bomb craters and if it was clear we just drank it and if it was cloudy we would put iodine in it. So, I should have been a dead man thirty years ago because of my exposure to Agent Orange.

Ishmael Reed: Well what is the government doing about it? The Agent Orange and the other toxic stuff over there?

Lamont Steptoe: Well they're recognizing it. They're recognizing it. I mean they recently gave me a ten percent increase in my Vietnam pension because of the fact that I had prostate cancer and prostate cancer came from being exposed to Agent Orange. But if you go to the Agent Orange website, you see that there are 736 conditions attributable to being exposed to Agent Orange.

Ishmael Reed: Did the manufacturers know about this or did they just shut up and not say anything about it?

Lamont Steptoe: They probably shut up and didn't say anything about it. Admiral Zumwalt of the United States navy was the one who ordered them to use Agent Orange in Vietnam. Admiral Zumwalt's son died from Agent Orange and his grandson died from Agent Orange.

Ishmael Reed: Well did they get any money out of it?

Lamont Steptoe: I don't know.

Ishmael Reed: His grandson died of it and his son died of it?

Lamont Steptoe: Yes, and only when he grandson died he said, "If I had to do it again, I wouldn't have given the order." But it came right back to his door!

Tennessee Reed: Did they mention Diabetes as a condition? I know someone who had Diabetes as a result of Agent Orange.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah. Yeah. There are 736 conditions from Agent Orange. The other thing is these troops coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan are being debriefed. We were not debriefed. The interesting thing is about Vietnam after the initial surge of men by Johnson behind the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Once that first wave of people were in Vietnam and were established at the base...going to Vietnam we were replaced one by one. We were not going over as a platoon. The only company who went over as a company were out of Fort Dix, New Jersey, and within one month, no more than two months, that entire unit was wiped out. So when I did my training out of Fort Dix, we didn't go from Fort Dix directly to Vietnam. You either went from Fort Dix to Panama to Vietnam or Fort Dix to Frankfurt, Germany to Vietnam because they felt the training in Fort Dix was so lax and so when I got there, as I said, I didn't see an M-16 until I got to Vietnam. When I got there my company commander, his name was Tommy, he had all of the slings taken off of our weapons. They weighted fourteen pounds, so everywhere we went we had to run at Port Arms because they wanted to toughen us up. From Fort Dix I went to Fort Benning for my Officer Candidate School.