August: James Anderson, Jr. Receives a Posthumous Medal of Honor

Marine Private First Class James Anderson, Jr. was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism while serving in the war in Vietnam. He was the first black United States Marine to receive the award. His platoon was trapped in thick underbrush and facing extreme fire from automatic weapons and small firearms. Several of his comrades were wounded in the assault. A north Vietnamese soldier hurled a grenade that landed in the middle of Anderson’s platoon by his head. Without thinking, Anderson grabbed the grenade, tucked it inside his chest and closed his body around it, whereby it exploded. Although some of his fellow platoon members were hit by shrapnel, Anderson’s body took the full force of the grenade. Among his other awards were the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross with Palm and the Purple Heart.

Anderson was born in Los Angeles in 1947. He graduated from high school and then enrolled at Los Angeles Harbor Junior College; he left to join the Marines. Anderson was sent to Vietnam in December 1966.

Private Anderson is from the long and proud tradition of black men who have volunteered to defend their country in every war since the American Revolution. They were turned down because of their race; indeed, when they were finally allowed to enroll, it was generally due to the fact that more troops were badly needed in order to accomplish the mission as outlined by the military.

The Army and the Army Air Corp—the forerunner of the Air Force—only accepted black men for its all black units. These men were invariably assigned to the most menial and dangerous jobs. The Navy only accepted black men as stewards and mess attendants. In 1941, African American men were allowed into the Army Air Corp under the so-called Tuskegee
Experiment, in which the armed forces would teach a small number of black men to fly. The Navy began accepting African American men for other fields. The USS Mason was the first naval ship to have a mostly black crew, and the first one on which black men were trained for the job of signalman. The Marines finally began accepting black men in 1942.

Still, the armed forces remained quite segregated. African Americans on draft boards during the 1940s were few, and it was much more difficult for black men to qualify for deferments. More than sixty percent of black enlisted men were placed in non combat roles, menial work, and jobs that to little or no skill. African American fighting men were only one percent of commissioned and, and no black officer was allowed to outrank a white one. They could not use the officers’ clubs, and were often treated worse than German prisoners of war. African American men in the armed forces faced beatings, shootings, and unjust imprisonment; one black soldier was lynched. Black enlisted men were also court-martialed at a rate that was out of proportional to their numbers. Many whites resented seeing black soldiers in uniform. At least six black fighting men were killed in America precisely because they were in uniform.

Black women also had a tough time in the armed forces. In the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) they were left out of office and technical jobs, and disproportionately assigned to menial work such as cleaning and laundry. African American nurses in the armed forces were not allowed to care for white soldiers. Black women were totally banned from Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services (WAVES) until the Republicans made it a campaign issue in 1944. Finally, they were left out of the United Service Organizations (USO), and so were unable to participate in the important function of providing troops with recreational opportunities.

It was not until President Harry S Truman signed Executive Order No. 9981 which banned discrimination based on race, color, national origin or religion in 1948 when real change started to
occur. Still, segregation in the armed forces remained a problem. For instance, there was still a unit of Buffalo Soldiers, the famed black military men who fought against Native Americans in the west in the late nineteenth century, as late as the Korean War, which was 1951. African American soldiers continued to face racial discrimination in during the war in Vietnam.

In every war fought by the United State, black men and women fought with courage, valor and distinction. From the American Revolution to the war on terrorism, they never stopped volunteering to fight for a country that treated them as less than human. James Anderson, Jr. was twenty years old when he saved his platoon— and America—from a that grenade.

Further Reading

