



AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

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Sammy Davis, Jr., a United Service Organizations performer and part of President Nixon's anti-drug program, talks with troops at Bien Hoa Air Force Base, Vietnam on February 22, 1972. Davis, a World War II veteran, observed a different military experience in Vietnam: "They're regarding men as individuals. When I was in the Army, I was on a post where a colored guy couldn't get his hair cut." (National Archives)

When I was a kid in the Marines, I remember the first place I saw the WHITE ONLY, COLORED ONLY signs. They were on the wall in this train station in Rocky Mountain, North Carolina. . . . I'll never forget seeing them, never. We all had our green Marine Corps uniforms on, but the colored kids had to go one way while the white kids could go the other way. All of us probably ended up in Vietnam. I know I did. I don't know whose freedom I was fighting for, but I know whose freedom I won, and that was mine.

— Corporal Albert French

African American troops served in the military with distinction during the Vietnam War. In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States' long history of racial inequality and segregation culminated in the civil rights movement. The social and political turmoil crept through American society, including the U.S. military.

At the same time, the military organization struggled with its own forms of institutional discrimination. As the war progressed and the nature of the unrest in U.S. society evolved, the military experienced changes in its mission, organization, and personnel. Within this context, African American Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines faced a unique and difficult challenge. They bravely served their country while simultaneously bearing the burden of second-class citizenship. Their stories help demonstrate the variety of American experiences in the Vietnam-era military.

A LEGACY OF MILITARY SERVICE

Even before the American Revolution, African Americans served in the military. Through World War II, however, they generally served in segregated units. Despite inequality, they served for a variety of reasons—including patriotism, adventure, and a desire to prove their loyalty and claim first-class citizenship. In 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued an executive order mandating the desegregation of the armed forces. The process took time, and the armed forces did not fully desegregate until the end of the Korean War (1950–1953). With this step, the military became one of the first large institutions in the United States to desegregate, gaining a reputation as a relatively progressive organization. Throughout the 1950s, many in the African American community perceived military service as a path to greater social and economic opportunity, and they enlisted and reenlisted

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT,
Private First Class James Anderson Jr., USMC

2d Platoon, F Company, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines,
3d Marine Division, III Marine Expeditionary Force

On February 28, 1967, Private First Class James Anderson Jr. was killed in action on a patrol northwest of Quang Tri. When a Communist grenade landed in the midst of his platoon, Private First Class Anderson grabbed the grenade and pulled it to his chest, curling around it as it exploded. He absorbed the impact of the explosion, saving his comrades from serious injury or death. Anderson posthumously received the Medal of Honor for his "heroism, extraordinary valor, and inspirational supreme self-sacrifice."

Few African Americans in the twentieth-century U.S. military received the nation's highest military decoration. Anderson was not only the first African American recipient in Vietnam, but also the first African American Marine to ever receive the award. No African Americans received the award in World War II, and only two in the Korean War. For many years, the African American contribution to the U.S. military remained largely unrecognized. In Vietnam, the military's first racially desegregated conflict, 20 African American servicemen received the award.



Lieutenant Colonel Harry Townsend (left) of the 268th Combat Aviation Brigade stands in front of his helicopter with the Sergeant Major, South Vietnam, 1967. (Courtesy of Colonel [Retired] Harry Townsend)

As African American officers faced a Communist enemy in Southeast Asia, they also struggled for equal opportunity rather than tokenism. Racial tensions rose throughout the war and the need for African American leadership became apparent, but the percentages of African American officers did not change significantly. In 1962, African Americans constituted less than 2 percent of the officer corps in all services, and ten years later approximately 2.3 percent.

Lingering institutional discrimination affected their ability to advance. Weak officer evaluations from the 1950s, a remnant of more overt discrimination, could damage overall efficiency ratings, blocking promotions and command experience. In 1968, Frederic E. Davison became the first African American to lead an active combat brigade when he commanded the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam. Other African American officers likewise achieved a number of firsts throughout the era. But as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Equal Opportunity, and Vietnam veteran, H. Minton Francis pointed out in 1974, "the very fact that women and minorities still make news when they are placed in [these] positions . . . makes it evident, in their perceptions, that it is a one-of-a-kind advancement."

in proportionally larger numbers than other segments of the population. Vietnam veteran Brigadier General J. Timothy Boddie entered the Air Force in 1954. He grew up learning about that legacy of military service, and wanted to fly fighter planes like the famed World War II pilots, the Tuskegee Airmen.

By the beginning of the Vietnam War, the racial climate in the military had improved. The Department of Defense not only desegregated the military in the 1950s, but also on-base schools for military dependents and civilian defense facilities as well. Yet despite these efforts, as the United States sent increasing numbers of troops to Southeast Asia in the 1960s, racial inequality in the armed forces persisted. African Americans entered the military in large numbers as volunteers and draftees, and they continued facing discrimination in areas such as training, promotions, assignments, and administration of military justice.



Air Force F-4 pilot Major J. Timothy Boddie, Jr. receives a patch for his 200th combat mission, including 57 missions over North Vietnam, in summer 1967. The majority of African Americans in the Air Force were concentrated in administration, air police, food service, and supply and transportation. (Courtesy of Brigadier General [Retired] James Timothy Boddie, Jr.)

A GRATEFUL NATION THANKS AND HONORS OUR VIETNAM VETERANS

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Captain Don Phillips (left) of the 173d Airborne Brigade discusses artillery support for upcoming operations with a forward observer, November 10, 1966. Colonel (Retired) Phillips' daughter, historian Kimberley L. Phillips, later recalled the paradox of African Americans defending the freedoms they were often denied at home: "This is forever etched in my brain. When I was not even 6-years old we were traveling [from Fort Benning, GA] across to Los Angeles. . . we could not stop for food because we were black. . . My dad was off to Vietnam, but he could not stop along the highway to get something to eat." (National Archives)

Most of the prejudices, for a while, went away. Even though blacks were into their Black Power salute, and a few whites had their confederate flags and stuff, there was a togetherness that I think you can only get in times of peril.

— Chief Warrant Officer 3 Doris Allen

THE EARLY YEARS, 1961–1967

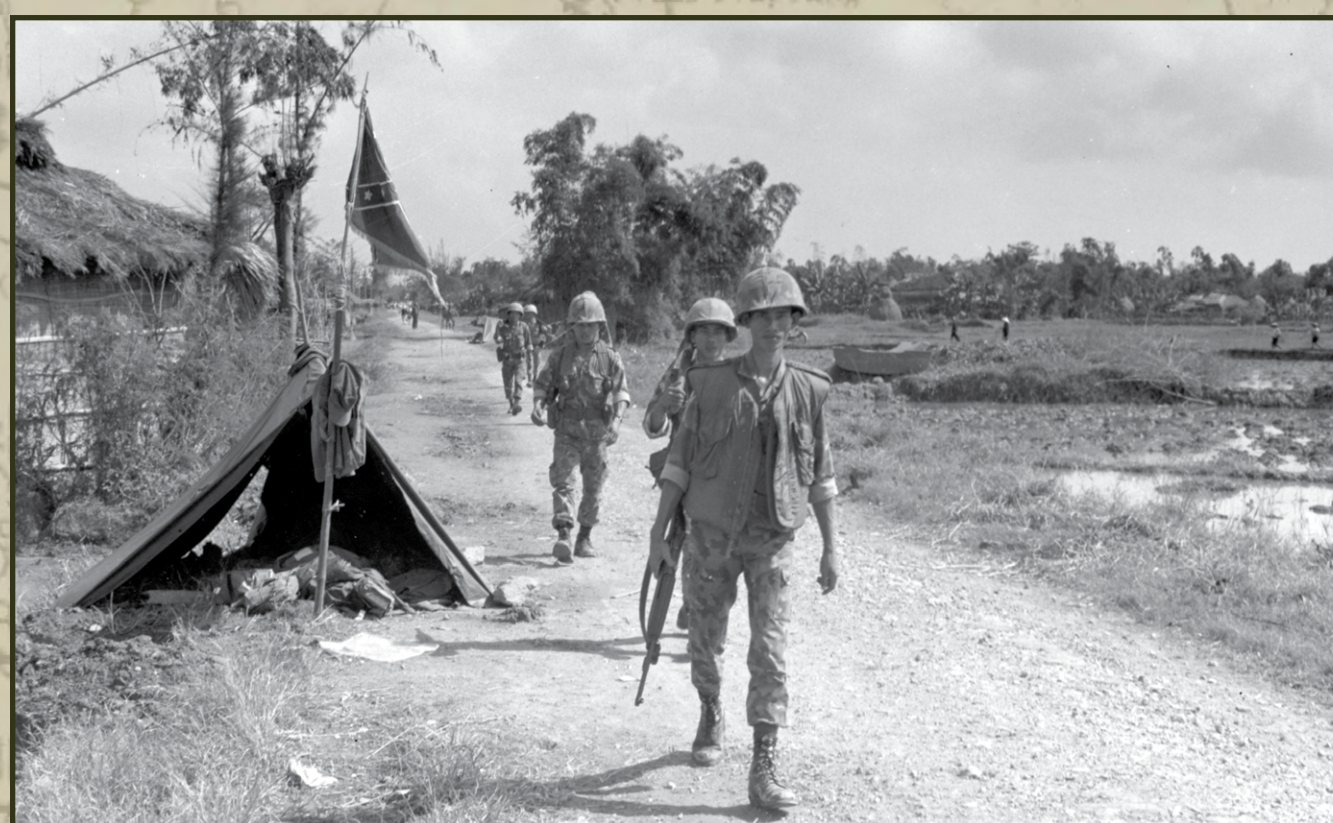
During the advisory period and as the war escalated, African Americans consistently volunteered and reenlisted, serving in numbers roughly proportionate to their overall population percentage [tables 1–2]. Many volunteered for combat units because, as African American Green Beret Melvin Morris pointed out, "it was the prestigious thing to do, and if you got in, you went." These units also offered faster promotions and additional pay.

By 1966, African Americans represented over 20 percent of the Army's two airborne units in Vietnam. At the same time, African Americans frequently lacked access to the same economic and educational resources as whites. They were less likely to receive occupational or educational deferments, and they scored lower on military entrance examinations, leaving them ineligible for some of the more technical military occupational specialties [table 3].



Members of the 25th Infantry Division load their gear as they prepare to cross a canal in a 3-man assault boat, May 13, 1968. (National Archives)

In addition, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara (1961–1968) introduced "Project 100,000" in 1966, a program in which the military began accepting men who did not meet physical or mental standards in order to satisfy growing personnel requirements. The secretary hoped to provide disadvantaged groups with educational and medical support, and valuable skills for post-military life. The project ran for six years and some 350,000 "New Standards Men" served. These men were disproportionately southerners and African Americans, and frequently landed in combat specializations with little marketability in civilian life.



South Vietnamese soldiers walk past an American Marine's tent with the Confederate flag flying above it, 1968. The display of the Confederate flag generated tensions between black and white American troops in Vietnam. (U.S. Marine Corps History Division)

These high ratios of African Americans in combat produced proportionally larger black casualties through 1968 [table 4]. The Department of Defense recognized this disparity and worked to remedy the imbalance, but the damage had already occurred. Even with the corrections, the perception of inequality in conscription and assignment remained, and many in the African American community



Former military heavyweight boxing champion Staff Sergeant Percy J. Price (left) leads Marines on an operation south of Da Nang in 1967. African American officers and non-commissioned officers led squads, platoons, and companies as part of the III Marine Amphibious Force in Vietnam. (National Archives)



Clyde Fields (left) and another American soldier "dap" with a Chu Hoi Vietnamese soldier, a Communist defector, at an American fire support base in South Vietnam, 1970–1971. This formal greeting was a gesture of camaraderie, and the more elaborate "dap" could take a number of minutes to perform, occasionally to the exasperation of fellow white soldiers. (Courtesy of Clyde Fields)

began speaking out against the war. Discontent with systemic discrimination against black troops fed into a growing unrest over urban racism and inequality across the United States. It was one of many factors contributing to volatile civil rights protests in several northern U.S. cities in 1967. Leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. condemned the use of black troops to "guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem," and urged young African American men toward conscientious objection. Only weeks after King took a stand on Vietnam, heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali refused to serve and received a conviction for draft evasion, later overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.

A GROWING RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

You're over here in this heat . . . in this hellhole, and then look, just look at what's back there waiting for me.

— Specialist Fourth Class Russel Campbell, 1968

These divisions on the home front affected African Americans in the military and of military age. The African American veterans who served early in the war finished their tours in Vietnam and in the wake of the 1968 Tet Offensive larger numbers of draftees entered the military. African Americans continued to volunteer, some seeking to escape the urban poverty and unrest that swept the nation. But the growing radicalism of the civil rights movement spread within the military, affecting the wave of new servicemembers in Southeast Asia. By the late 1960s, mounting numbers of American troops of all races reflected these attitudes from the home front and opposed the war. One African American journalist spent a month interviewing African American GI's in Vietnam in April 1968, and found that 80–85 percent of the interviewees expressed negative feelings about the war or the military's treatment of African Americans, frequently both. Many of them joined a rising subculture of increased black nationalism, and some began displaying symbols of racial pride such as black power salutes or "dapping," a gesture of racial solidarity.

African American military personnel after 1968 represented a new mentality. Only a few steps removed from the movements on the home front, black servicemembers around the world (including some career military personnel) became less willing to tolerate systemic discrimination, cultural intolerance, or overt bigotry such as racial epithets, expressions of white supremacy, and Confederate flags. African American and white military personnel grew increasingly distrustful of one another. Racism, misunderstanding, and a Department of Defense largely unprepared to address institutional inequalities left an environment primed for racial conflict.

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A U.S. Navy Mobile Construction Battalion (Seabees) lays explosive lines to clear a route of buried mines to construct roads in South Vietnam, September 1970. By 1972, as news of the riots aboard the Kitty Hawk and Constellation spread throughout the Navy, it awoke underlying racial tensions between Seabees at Naval Station Midway Island leading to violence between black and white Seabees. (Navy History and Heritage)

It is self-deception to think that [American servicemembers] . . . come untainted by the prejudices of the society which produced them. They do not.

— Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt
Chief of Naval Operations, 1972

TURMOIL IN THE MILITARY

As Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt described, a tumultuous home front certainly affected race relations overseas, and the military consistently blamed the problems it faced on the unrest within U.S. society. Yet some historians argue that a home front in turmoil and increasing proportions of draftees were insufficient in explaining the racial discord that emerged within the military. By 1969, poor discipline and low morale plagued the U.S. military in Vietnam. Disillusionment with the war filtered in from society, but the military also increasingly suffered from leadership deficiencies. Scandals and cover-ups such as those surrounding the My Lai massacre hinted at a larger breakdown in the professionalism of the officer corps.

And the non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps faced problems as well. The standard one-year fixed tour in Vietnam meant that many NCOs rotated home just as they accumulated leadership experience, and an NCO shortage as early as 1967 led to accelerated training programs. Tensions between career military personnel and younger troops also produced mistrust. With the emergence of the White House's Vietnamization policy in 1969, American servicemembers of all races increasingly saw little point in fighting and risking death in Vietnam as the United States openly sought to extricate itself from the war.

Beginning in 1968, those tensions erupted into violence on bases in the United States and in Vietnam. By the summer, African Americans made up almost half of the prison population of the major stockades in Vietnam, despite constituting less than 11 percent of the armed forces. Factors such as inconsistent sentencing for minor infractions contributed to these disparities. On August 15, 1968 at the Navy's Da Nang Brig in Vietnam, a group of mainly black prisoners fought with white prisoners and guards. It took commanding officers nearly a day to restore order. Two weeks later, on August 29, a small scuffle between black and white prisoners at the Army's Long Binh Jail escalated into disorder and arson throughout the compound as several hundred black prisoners took control of the facility and held it for a month. Between January and September 1969, more than 20 violent racial altercations occurred between U.S. troops in Vietnam.

The majority of racial violence occurred at large bases or support units "in the rear." In the field, where men depended on their comrades for survival, troops had less opportunity or motivation to engage in racist practices or



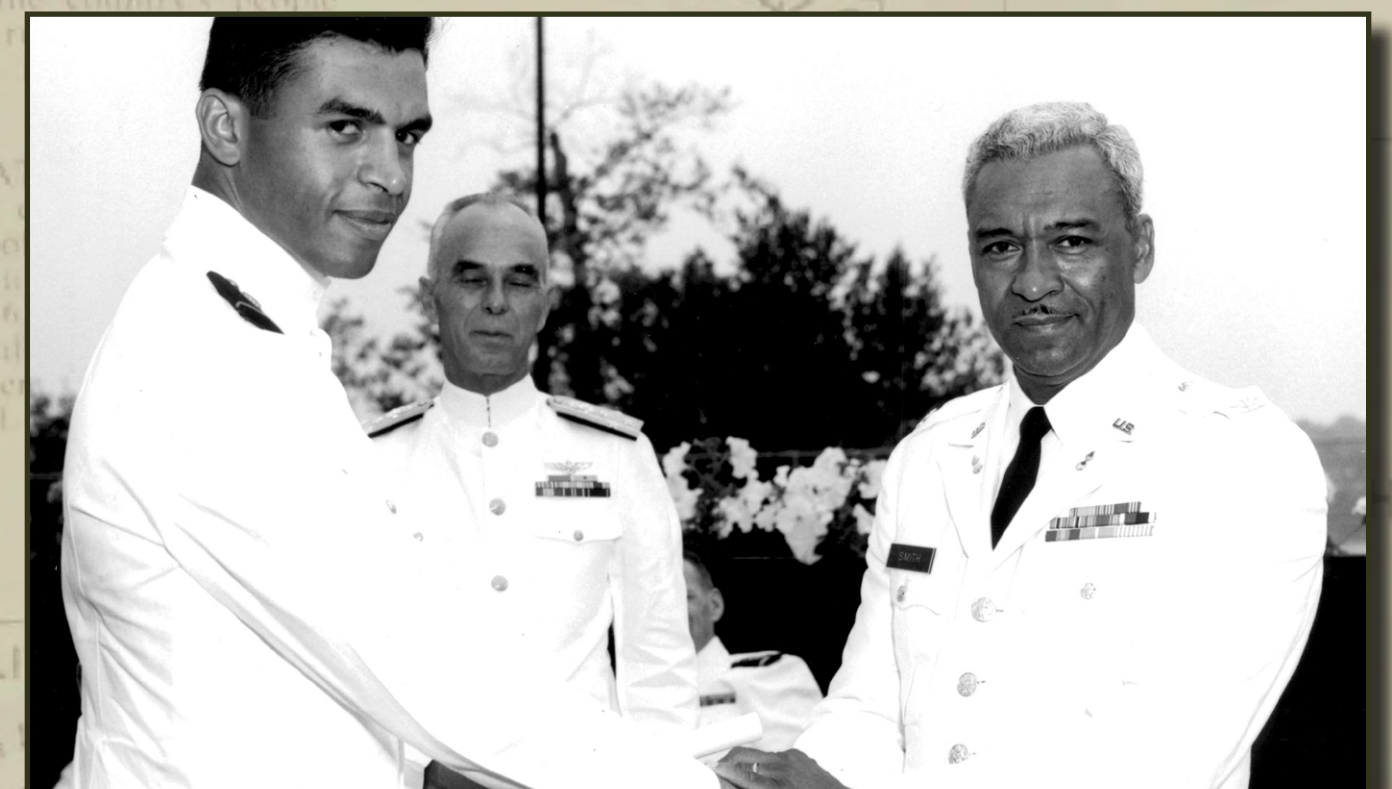
Army nurse Captain Joyce Johnson treats a patient at Long Binh in 1967. She recalled of her fellow nurses in Vietnam: "The esprit de corps was automatic. We were all there for the same reasons, no matter where or what part of the country we had come from, we had the same goal. . . . You knew what had to be done. And you could do it." (Courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel [Retired] Dr. Joyce Bowles)

While the records of their service are incomplete, somewhere between 7,000 and 11,000 American women volunteered and served in Vietnam. Statistics on African American women are even less available. On a daily basis, African American women faced a variety of challenges in the military, notably racial discrimination and gender bias. They performed a range of important tasks in Vietnam, however, from nursing to intelligence analysis, and many of these women observed that when it came to racial problems, "we don't have time for that."

While their stories are largely absent from the Vietnam War narrative, their military service and leadership in the officer and nurse corps challenged contemporary ideas about gender. At that time, African American women rarely held leadership positions over groups that included white men. Some activist servicewomen united with other activists in the military. Even as civilian women activists complained of sexism in the civil rights and antiwar movements, military activists at times exhibited greater gender cooperation and equality, challenging prevailing gender stereotypes.



Specialist Fourth Class Esther M. Gleanon works as a clerk-typist for the Women's Army Corps detachment at Long Binh in Vietnam, 1968-1969. (Women's Memorial Foundation Collection)



At the 1966 U.S. Coast Guard Academy commencement ceremonies, Colonel Merle J. Smith, Sr. (right) congratulates his son, Ensign Merle J. Smith, Jr., while Commandant Admiral Willard J. Smith observes. Merle Smith, Jr. was the first African American Coast Guard Academy graduate, and in 1969 he commanded a patrol boat in Vietnam, becoming the first sea-service African American to receive a Bronze Star. (U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office)

political disputes. Vietnam veteran General Colin Powell, a major in 1968, recalled that, "Our men in the field, trudging through elephant grass under hostile fire, did not have time to be hostile toward each other. But bases . . . were increasingly divided by the same racial polarization that had begun to plague America."

Both the Army and Marine Corps struggled to control the racial unrest through 1970. Initially, the Air Force and Navy avoided the racial violence. With more technical and rear-echelon assignments, those two services could recruit a better-educated and more homogeneous enlisted demographic, often men who sought to avoid being drafted into the ground forces. As one African American lieutenant commander noted, "You could go aboard a carrier with 5,000 people . . . walk into the areas where I work with all the sophisticated computers, and it would look as if there were no blacks on the entire ship." When President Richard M. Nixon scaled back the draft in the early 1970s and moved toward an all-volunteer force, however, that predominantly white recruitment pool narrowed. In 1972, major riots occurred on the aircraft carriers USS *Kitty Hawk* and USS *Constellation*.

In response to the unrest, the Department of Defense began implementing reform programs in 1969, including a review of the military justice system and founding the Defense Race Relations Institute in 1971 to educate its leadership about diversity and tolerance. The programs alleviated some of African American troops' grievances, but imbalances remained as the military moved toward an all-volunteer force in 1973.

CONCLUSION

African American veterans experienced the war in a variety of ways; there was no standard narrative or story. Lieutenant General Larry Jordan, a second lieutenant in Vietnam, recalled that it made him into a better leader: "I can honestly say I think my Vietnam experience was a good one. I don't regret going, I did what the nation asked me to do." First Lieutenant Joseph Biggers expressed dismay about coming back to the United States and facing criticism from some African American activists who denounced him as part of an unjust system. Each sacrificed for his country despite facing a determined enemy in Vietnam and the added burden of discrimination. The hurdles that African American veterans confronted paved the way for important reforms in the Department of Defense that improved conditions for future generations of servicemembers. Both during and after the war, the Department of Defense began to modernize its equal opportunity system and improve cross-cultural communication. Equal opportunity remains a challenge, and African Americans in the military still face systemic inequalities such as low representation in the officer corps. Yet these veterans left an enduring legacy: thanks in part to their experiences and struggles, the military has undergone racial progress since the 1960s and 1970s.

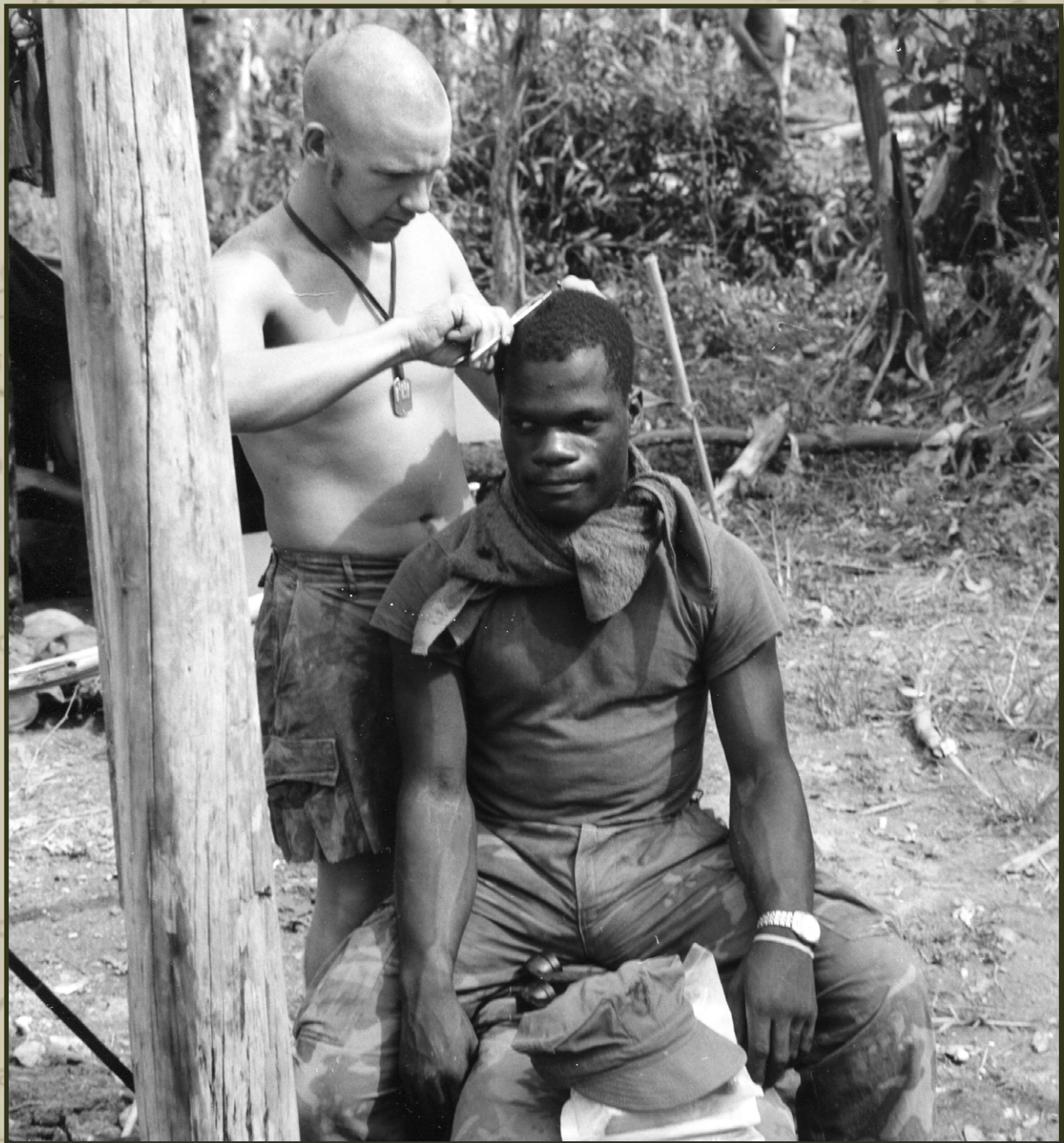
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An African American radio operator in the 1st Marine Division receives a haircut in the field, June 18, 1969. Barbers remained largely inexperienced in cutting African American hair until the military expanded its diversity program and began providing them with training in 1973. (U.S. Marine Corps History Division)



Lieutenant Colonel Roscoe Robinson (right) shows Major General John J. Tolson his unit's position on a map during Operation PEGASUS to lift the siege of Khe Sanh, April 6–8, 1968. Robinson became the first African American four-star general in the U.S. Army in 1982. (National Archives)



Mineman Second Class Franklin Marshall, part of the Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal team responsible for harbor security, searches for mines, especially those attached to ships' hulls, April 1966. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



Captain Joan Ford, a flight nurse with the 56th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron, greets ambulatory patients as they board a C-141 aircraft at Clark Air Base in the Philippines for airlift home, March 1966. The military often evacuated wounded servicemen from Vietnam to the Philippine Islands for immediate medical care. (National Archives)

TABLE 1
African American Percentage of Total Strength

SOURCE: Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772–1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1995).

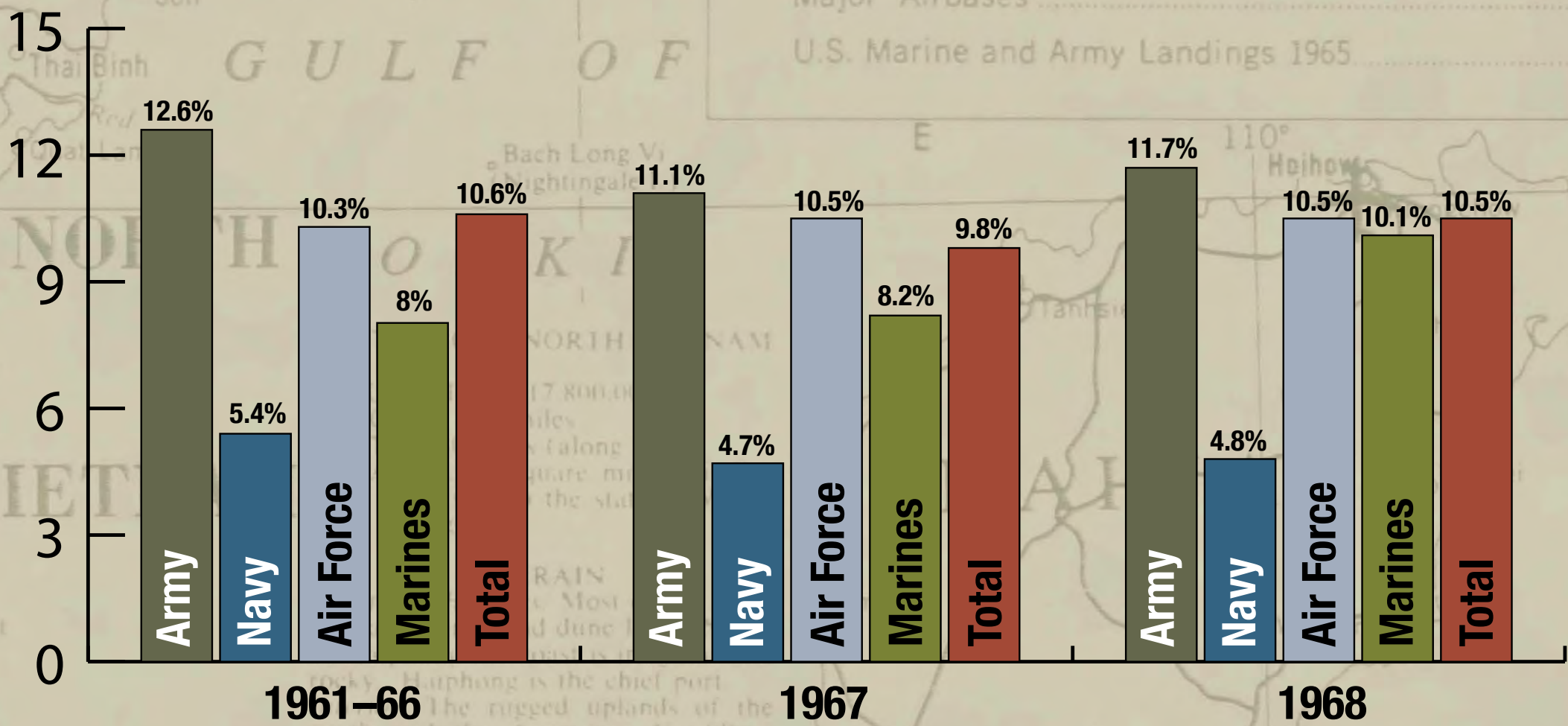


TABLE 2
African American Percentage of Total U.S. Population

SOURCE: Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century*, Census 2000 Special Reports, Series CENSR-4 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

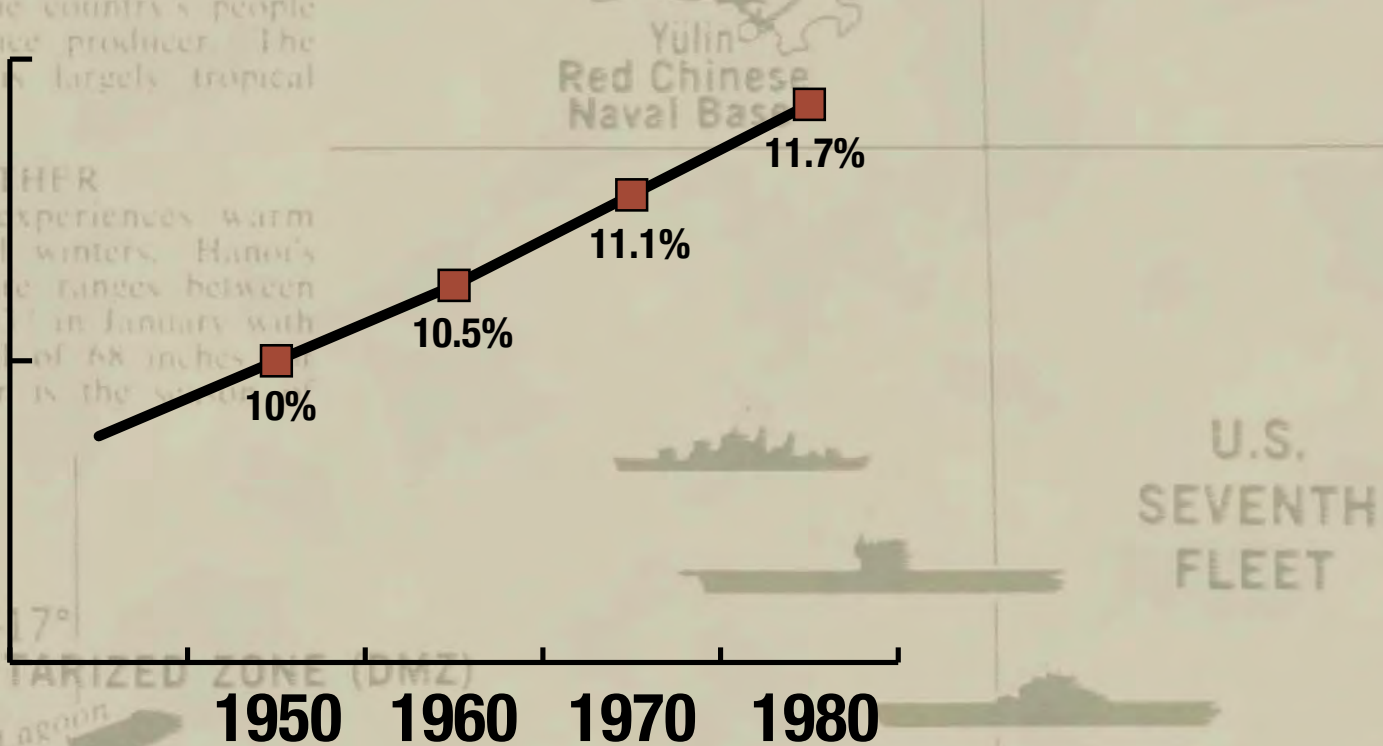


TABLE 3
Occupational Distribution by Race, All DoD, 1962

SOURCE: Morris J. MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940–1965* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1981).

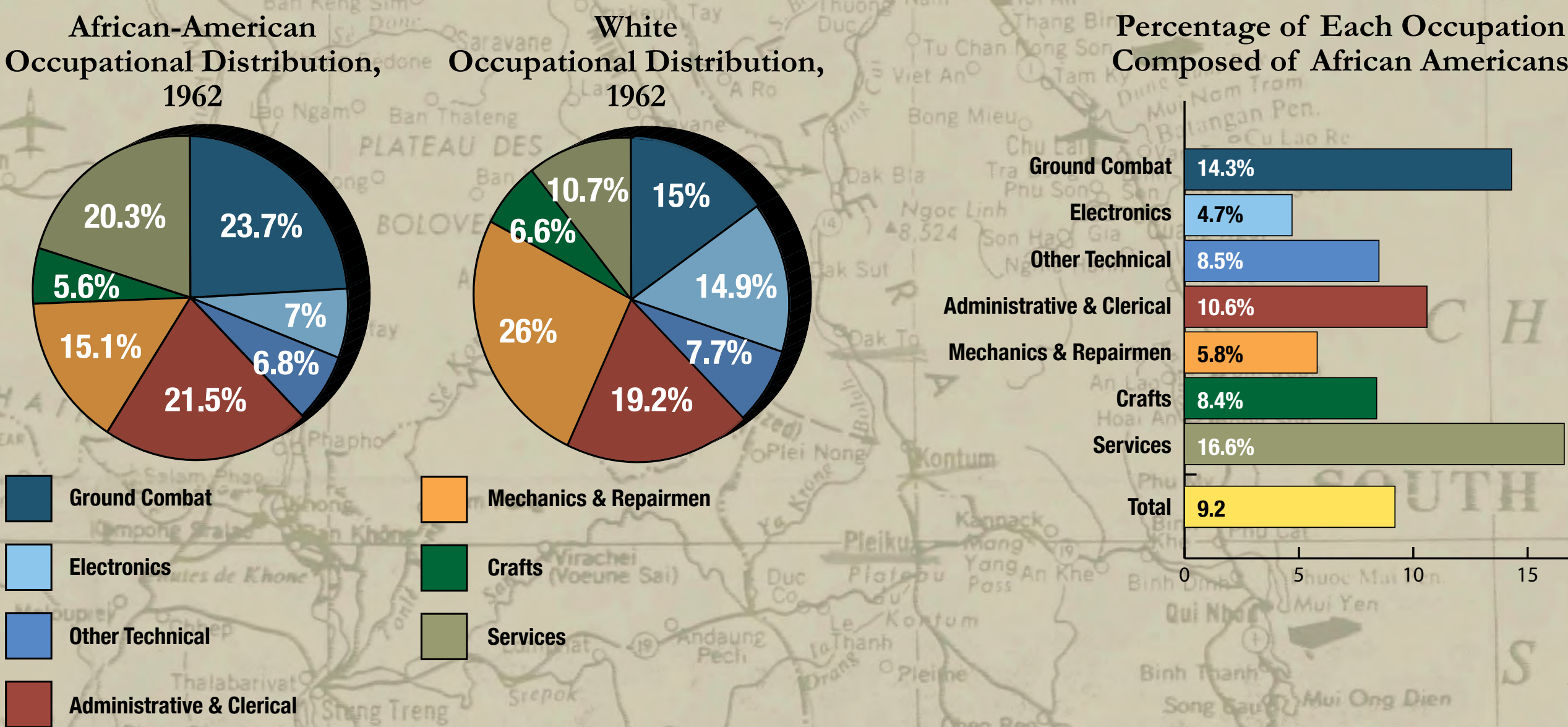


TABLE 4
African-American Percentage of Total Killed in Action

SOURCE: Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772–1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1995).

