African Americans and the United States Military: A Brief History

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> Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
> Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
> Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
> By feeling hearts alone best understood,
> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
> What pangs excruciating must molest,
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
> Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
> Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
> Others may never feel tyrannic sway?
>   --Phyllis Wheatley, "To The Right Honoourable William, Earl of Dartmouth"

> They say I am just a Marine … [but] how can I forget eighteen years of being black and all that being black means in this country?
>   --Private Allen E. Jones, quoted in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, 1970

John Patrick Shanley's play *Defiance* features a scene in which its three main characters attempt to hash out the allegiances that those in uniform owe to the universalizing laws of both organized religion and the Constitution of the United States, as well as to their experiences as members of majority and oppressed minority racial groups. Chaplain White (whose name makes it hard for the innocent reader to miss the significance of his point of view to the play's battle of ideas) finds the rise in sympathy for the Black Power movement among African-American Marines at Camp Lejeune in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination to be particularly distressing: "There's no place for it in the armed services. I don't think there's any place for it in the United States!" (21). The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Morgan Littlefield, while more sympathetic to the African-American point of view than the chaplain in discussing the racial problems on base, insists that "A battalion has to answer to an order like one man" and

worries that his "black marines seem to be setting themselves apart and that's no good" (22). Both men strenuously insist that they do not observe the color of a man's skin in evaluating him, and in truth Shanley's script offers no unambiguous reason for the audience to believe otherwise. Caught in the middle of their discussion, however, is the play's lone African-American character, the likewise symbolically named Sergeant Lee King. Trapped as he is between his pride in his heritage and his desire to be treated according to the color-blind ideals of the Marine Corps, Sergeant King and his predicament dramatize powerful clashes of ideals and social forces that have affected African Americans in their relationship to the United States military since the nation's founding.

In an era where Barack Obama serves as the Commander-in-Chief and the military is one of the most racially integrated institutions in American society, it is worth considering as one reads *Defiance* that things were not always so. The two epigraphs of this essay serve as bookends to the history of African Americans in relation to American patriotism and the nation's armed forces from the Revolution through the Vietnam era. Phyllis Wheatley, the literate slave of a prominent Boston family, offered poetic support for American grievances against the colonial regime of taxation using her own actual state of enslavement as a way of proving her right to protest against a fiscal regime that many Bostonians and others referred to as metaphorical slavery. This condition of being both a patriot and, in many cases, at best a second-class citizen marks the experience of many African Americans in uniform until the integration of US armed forces under President Truman. The quotation from Private Allen Jones serves as a reminder that even after integration and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, life in an officially color-blind military (or country, for that matter) did not and does not guarantee equable treatment before the law, whether that law is civil or the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

As should be evident from the words of Phyllis Wheatley, African Americans have been part of the national political struggles of the United States since before independence, even despite the vexed relationship to the ideals of liberty and justice experienced by both the enslaved and "free black" populations. Indeed, one of the first martyrs venerated by colonial patriot activists was the merchant fleet sailor Crispus Attucks, who died during the famous Boston Massacre of 1770. On 5 March 1770, a confrontation between British troops garrisoned in Boston and a group of Bostonian boys escalated after one of the soldiers struck one of the youths with his weapon, eventually drawing an angry crowd of civilians into a confrontation that left five men dead, including Attucks, who was of mixed African and Native American heritage. Attucks, who had escaped from slavery in nearby Framingham, Massachusetts, in 1750, became a somewhat ironic martyr to the liberty of the colonies (Kaplan 7-8; Buckley 3-4). While some contemporary observers, including future president John Adams, hesitated to honor Attucks, he eventually became a symbol of patriotic sacrifice for the American rebels (Kaplan 8-9).

Attucks is not the only African American to have participated prominently in events surrounding the early history of the American Revolution, moreover. When colonial militiamen banded together to form "minutemen" companies, both slaves and free men of African heritage were part of these bands. On 19 April 1775, Captain John Parker's minutemen confronted British troops on their way to secure gunpowder supplies at Lexington, Massachusetts, and this confrontation resulted in the famous "shot heard round the world" that instigated the revolution. Among the men who fought that day at Lexington and Concord were a number of slaves, including Prince Easterbrook, who would participate in several major campaigns throughout the war, as well as Peter Salem, who would also fight valiantly as one of roughly twenty African-American troops at the battle of Bunker Hill (Kaplan 17-18; Buckley 8-12). Also at Bunker Hill,

the freeman Salem Poor fought so valiantly that a group of fourteen officers (all white, of course)

petitioned the general court of Massachusetts and the Continental Congress to recognize Poor

with "The Reward due to so great and Distinguisht [sic] a C[h]aracter" (qtd. in Kaplan 19).

Such service was not without controversy, however. The Continental forces had a mixed

record on the service of African Americans. The most integrated service was the Navy, which

welcomed African-American sailors with open arms (Buckley 27-8). Of the small first band of

Continental Marines, at least four were of African heritage (Culp 10). The Continental Army,

however, experienced significant political difficulties relating to the race question. Southern

congressional delegates fearful of armed African Americans forced the adoption of a "whites

only" policy for the Army in July of 1775 (Buckley 19). In the meantime, in Virginia, the former

Royal Governor, Lord Dunmore, had begun to offer refuge and weapons to slaves willing to flee

their masters and join the British cause; his "Ethiopian Regiment" was notable for the slogan

emblazoned on its uniform: "LIBERTY TO SLAVES" (Holton 154-6).

Ultimately, the difficulty many states faced in meeting their congressional enlistment

quotas ended the ban on African-American troops. Beginning with the volunteers of the First

Rhode Island Regiment, which was formed in 1778, the northern and mid-Atlantic states began

accepting both freemen and slaves into segregated units, with those slaves who enlisted promised

emancipation at the end of the war (Kaplan 55; Foner 10). By 1779, even the deep southern

states of Georgia and South Carolina had extended this offer (Foner 12). In the end, roughly

5,000 African-Americans fought for the Continentals during the course of the Revolution,

compared to roughly 1,000 who took up arms for the British (Kaplan 32; Buckley 4-5). The

bitter racial politics of early American history were hardly pacified by either the revolution or its

conclusion, however. At the end of the revolution, Congress, its hand forced once again by

southern agitation, passed legislation requiring an all-white military. While the Army and the Marines (which would not admit African Americans again until World War II) held to this edict, the Navy continued to enlist African-American sailors, especially since many whites preferred to pursue the higher wages of the merchant fleet (Edgerton 18). During the War of 1812, for instance, roughly one-sixth of the Navy was African-American, including one quarter of Commodore Perry's forces at the critical Battle of Lake Erie (Buckley 46; Edgerton 20). With the notable exception of General (and later President) Andrew Jackson's enlistment of the sole African-American unit of state militia (the New Orleans Free Men of Color) at the war's concluding Battle of New Orleans, however, the ban on African-American infantry remained largely in place until the Civil War (Buckley 48-9).

Given the centrality of the question of slavery to the outbreak of the Civil War—in 1860 enslaved African Americans accounted for roughly one-seventh of the population of the United States—the Union was surprisingly lackadaisical at the beginning of the war in bringing African-Americans back into the infantry. When African Americans finally were admitted as members of the United States Colored Troops, their numbers would eventually reach some 180,000 men out of roughly 2.8 million total Union enlistments (57). It should be noted that during the Civil War as during the Revolution and the War of 1812, the Navy outstripped the Army and Marines in their willingness to use African-American servicemen: roughly 30,000 of the approximately 120,000 sailors who served during the Civil War were African-American (Edgerton 25). The Army, however, at the war's outset proclaimed itself uninterested in tapping this rich potential source of personnel, while the Confederacy used slaves as military laborers and in the production of war materiel, giving the CSA a decided advantage in this particular aspect of manpower (Smith 14). After the Union disaster at the first battle of Bull Run in July 1861, however, the

potential importance of African-American troops became apparent to the Union, and President Lincoln soon called for fifty thousand African-American volunteers, albeit none were to serve as regular troops (Buckley 82).

Between 1861 and 1862 Congress passed the First and Second Confiscation Acts, as well as the Militia Act, which provided for the emancipation of slaves in Confederate territory who were willing to serve as soldiers in the Union Army, as well as their dependents (Smith 13-14). This legislation might be seen as following policies that had already begun to emerge in the field. In early 1862, for instance, General David Hunter issued an emancipation order to enlist and arm slaves in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida in order to hold the coastline of this region. Many of the men who volunteered for the so-called 1st South Carolina volunteers had been slaves on plantations in the Sea Islands of South Carolina (Buckley 84-5). Likewise, in July 1862, the same month that Lincoln signed the Second Confiscation Act, General Benjamin F. Butler began enlisting volunteers in the newly liberated city of New Orleans, including a Francophone unit, the 1st Regiment of Louisiana Native Guards, who had previously offered their services to the Confederacy (86-7). Ironically, it was only later, with the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation at the beginning of 1863, when northern abolitionists and the Union Army began to organize northern freemen into volunteer units (89).

In 1863, the enlistment of African Americans, both freemen and former slaves, became an essential component of President Lincoln's plans for maintaining recruiting strength in the Union Army (Smith 23). The so-called United States Colored Troops were slower in being developed than units such as the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, the first African-American regiment in the Union Army, but eventually these units, which attracted volunteers from a broad cross-section of African-American society, were all commissioned as part of the USCT (28-9).

Even once they were commissioned, however, the men of the USCT were not initially trusted with combat responsibilities, frequently being relegated to the subordinate status of laborers; while USCT troops had a very high mortality rate (roughly one-third), less than five percent of those fatalities occurred in combat (41). After being thrust into combat in such desperate situations as the battles of Port Hudson, Louisiana (27 May 1863) and New Market Heights, Virginia (29 September 1864), however, the USCT distinguished themselves and earned the respect of many white officers—and only about one hundred of the USCT's officers were African-American—who had previously believed them incapable of fighting (54-5, 36-7). USCT troops, it should be noted, faced a particular danger in combat: massacre at the hands of the enemy if captured. In 1864 at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, and Poison Spring, Arkansas, USCT troops were murdered en masse by Confederate forces (Buckley 103-4). Despite this added risk, however, African-American troops continued to demonstrate their valor until the completion of the war, a point demonstrated by the presence of USCT troops in the vanguard of conquering Union armies. The first troops to enter Charleston after the city surrendered were the 54th and 55th Massachusetts, and when Richmond surrendered in April 1865, the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry, the first cavalry unit in the USCT, rode in the Union vanguard (107-8).

African-American cavalrymen, of course, constituted the most famous African-American troops of the post-bellum era: the "Buffalo Soldiers" of the United States Army. These cavalrymen would eventually serve in a number of venues beyond the western frontier where they first acquired their nickname, including San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. Colonel (and later President) Theodore Roosevelt promised the African-American cavalrymen that he would never forget their service during that conflict. In 1899, however, African-American units were disbanded and their officers decommissioned, eligible only to serve

as NCO's, changes that Roosevelt as President did nothing to alter (152). Moreover, as Roosevelt began to expand the Navy, he eliminated integrated ships, reduced African Americans to the roles of boiler-stokers and stewards, and began engaging in a radical reduction in the number of African-Americans in the Fleet: by 1906 they made up less than 5% of the Fleet, and by the beginning of World War I, less than 1% (Edgerton 59-60, 72).

Only about 10,000 African-American troops served in the U.S. Army at the beginning of World War I, but almost 370,000 more would be enlisted during the war, with nearly 90% of them deploying in labor, service, or supply units (Buckley 165). Two new divisions, the 92nd and 93rd, were created to accommodate the combat troops. With American commanders uncertain as to how to deploy African Americans, these divisions were assigned to the French, who, partly due to their previous experience with troops from their African colonies, welcomed them with open arms (167, 201). Ironically, while commanders in Europe were hesitant to deploy African-American soldiers, back in the United States black National Guardsmen were regularly being deployed to guard potential targets of sabotage; suddenly black skin had become a marker of inviolable loyalty to the United States (177). Regardless of the ironies of the war, certain steps forward appeared to have been made, most notably the commissioning of 639 African-American officers in the Army in 1917 (178). By the time the troops returned from Europe in 1919, however, it had become clear that little had changed on the home front: seventy-eight African Americans were lynched in the United States that year, including ten veterans, more than one of whom was killed in uniform (223).

Many African-American troops returned from France having seen that they did not need to be relegated to the second-class citizenship afforded them in the United States, but comparatively little changed either in the armed forces or in the civilian world between World

Wars I and II. Indeed, the racial tensions illustrated by those postwar lynchings were not at all unusual in a time of war: in 1943, with the country fully mobilized and fighting the Second World War, there were 242 race riots—chiefly instigated by whites—in forty-seven cities across the country (136). It is more than a little ironic, therefore, that the first American hero of World War II should be an African American. Dorie Miller was a messman on the *U.S.S. West Virginia* at Pearl Harbor, part of the tiny percentage of African Americans permitted to serve in the Navy in this most menial capacity. After the Japanese airstrike, Miller carried the mortally wounded captain to safety and manned one of the ship's anti-aircaft guns. Despite the fact that Navy regulations forbade blacks to fire these guns or even receive training in how to do so, Miller shot down a total of, according to witnesses, four Japanese planes. After receiving the Navy Cross, Miller was briefly brought back stateside in 1942 on a tour promoting war bonds before he returned to his duties as a messman, going down along with all hands aboard the torpedoed carrier *Linscome Bay* on Thanksgiving Day, 1943 (Buckley 275).

Perhaps partly because of Miller's example, in April 1942 the War Department ordered the Department of the Navy to begin accepting African-American volunteers, a decision that included preparation for the inclusion of some 1,200 Marines—the first such men to serve in the Corps since the Revolution (Culp 29-31). The Navy, however, did not move swiftly on this front: by February 1943, African-American representation had increased to 2% of the enlisted ranks, but two-thirds of those servicemen were messmen; even after increased political pressure pushed the number to 5%, messmen were the only African Americans in the Navy serving in combat assignments (Edgerton 156). The military's attempts to deal with segregation and desegregation during World War II, in fact, produced a mixed record. The War Department desegregated all military recreational facilities in 1943 (Buckley 260), but it required a threatened march on

Washington by the NAACP to force President Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination by defense contractors (270-1) . At the same time, the number of African-American enlisted personnel grew between 1941 and 1945 from 5,000 to over 900,000, and the number of African-American officers grew from five to over 7,000 (280), while the war also saw the commissioning of the first African-American tank crews, paratroopers, and, with the Army's 332nd Fighter Group, pilots (277). Despite the foot-dragging caused by the Jim Crow requirement for segregated training for African-American Marines, moreover, in 1942 Camp Montford Point finally opened, providing a training location for the first such Marines in modern American history (Culp 31).

The men who became the Marines of Montford Point, like the African-American Union volunteers of the Civil War, came from a wide variety of backgrounds that ranged from recent college graduates to Army enlisted men and at least one lieutenant (Culp 35). Their introduction into the world of the segregated military would begin with their transportation to and around Montford Point, a satellite facility near Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. African-American troops taking trains to North Carolina from northern states would be forced to move into segregated "colored" cars while the trains traveled through the South, and trainees were not permitted to stay overnight at the rifle training facility at Stone Bay because there were no segregated accommodations available for them. Some Montford Point Marines later recalled that having trucks full of armed African Americans on the highways caused a considerable disturbance among white residents of the area [61].

African-American units would also have to be segregated. While the original plan for Montford Point Marines had been the creation of the 51st Composite Defense Battalion, an artillery and anti-aircraft unit meant to hold forward operating bases, African Americans were

also being integrated into a variety of menial laboring roles in the Corps, and "raids" on

Montford Point trainees slowed the development of both the 51st and its sister unit, the 52nd

Defense Battalion (36, 45). Personnel problems generated by the segregated military became

even worse in December 1942, when President Roosevelt instituted the draft as of January 1943,

which promised to bring in 15,000 new African-American recruits to the Marines in 1943 (67).

With an insufficient number of Defense Battalions being formed to accommodate these troop

levels, the Marines began directing these draftees toward a glaring personnel need revealed by

amphibious landings in the Pacific theatre: manpower to unload supplies on beachheads. As a

result, many African-American draftees became part of new Depot Companies who served as

stevedores on beachheads, heroically performing heavy manual labor while under enemy fire

(67-8, 77). One such man, Private Kenneth J. Tibbs, was killed during the landing at Saipan on

15 June 1944, becoming the first African-American Marine killed in action (150).

Throughout the military, battlefield necessity began to challenge segregation. During the

Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes Forest during December 1944, for instance, the Army's

legendary "Big Red One" had been so depleted of manpower that General Dwight Eisenhower

and his subordinates temporarily integrated the division by incorporating over two thousand

African-American volunteers to replace white troops who had been killed in action (Buckley

322). In the Marines, change came somewhat more slowly, even as the 51st and 52nd Defense

Battalions deployed in the Pacific and men from the depot companies continued to die during

amphibious assaults as Allied forces drew closer to the Japanese home islands. In September

1943, for instance, the Corps created the 1st Marine Ammunition Company, an African-

American depot unit specially trained to offload ammunition and explosives (Culp 104-5). The

officers of this unit, it should be noted, were white, and while the Corps had made considerable

efforts to produce African-American NCO's capable of training and leading new recruits in segregated companies (62), efforts to send African-American candidates to Officer Candidate School had been a failure. The first African-American officer candidates in the Marines began training in 1943 through a collegiate officer training program known as V-12 at Purdue University, where the captain in charge of V-12 forced the University to integrate a dormitory so that white and black candidates could be housed together as Marines (172-5). Such small victories seemed to fade at the end of the war, however. The number of African-American Marines, which at the war's end had reached 17,135, was designated to drop to a maximum peacetime number of 2,800, a number that by January 1947 had been reduced yet again to 1,500 (226, 230).

Meanwhile, African Americans, including veterans, faced difficulties both in and out of uniform. In 1946, for instance, a veteran named Macio Snipes was the only African American to vote in the Democratic primary in Taylor Country, Georgia, after which he was dragged from his house and shot to death (Buckley 337). Partly out of horror at the treatment that African-American veterans were receiving, World War I veteran President Harry Truman began to take steps to advance civil rights in the United States. Most notably, in July 1948 he issued Executive Order 9981, which ordered the integration of the armed forces (339). The order applied chiefly to the Army and Marines, since the Navy, while still largely white, had integrated its ships in 1947, a year before the Executive Order and two years before the first African-American graduate of the Naval Academy, Wesley Brown '49, would be commissioned (340). The new Air Force integrated in 1949, and the Army and Marines over the course of 1950-51, with the final segregated units in the Army being dissolved in 1954 (340-1, 367). The demands of the Korean War finally accomplished the full integration of African-Americans into the armed forces.

An executive order integrating the military, however, did not guarantee a change in the culture of the institution, which took longer to adapt. As many African Americans who made officer rank discovered after integration, for instance, making rank could be counter-productive given the difficulty of forcing white troops to obey orders from an African-American superior. Other problems, such as discrimination against African-American personnel in off-base housing, were common. In the early 1960s some changes began to occur within the military. In 1961 President Kennedy reenforced Truman's Executive Order 9981 with Executive Order 10925, which declared racial discrimination in hiring to be antithetical to the principles of the American Constitution (Kimbrough 52). In 1962, moreover, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara issued an order that required military commanders to oppose racial discrimination against military personnel both on and off base (Buckley 377-8). (Here one might think again of Shanley's Lieutenant Colonel Littlefield and his efforts to integrate the New Beach Apartments in Jacksonville, North Carolina.) Such changes only intensified the ongoing discussions in the African-American community during the civil rights era as to the utility of military service as a means of gaining the full rights of citizenship and the obligations of black servicemen to a country in which they were still widely discriminated against.

The discrimination was especially obvious in southern states. Even disregarding such outrageous issues as segregated restaurants and buses, off-base housing discrimination was a fact of life for many service members and their families (Kimbrough 69). The Marine Corps did not assign African-American women to Camp Lejeune prior to 1962, for instance, due to the lack of acceptable available housing (Westheider 12). Despite the military's efforts to eliminate this sort of off-base segregation, results were limited even close to the nation's capitol: in 1967 only about 3% of the available housing units within commuting distance of Edwards Air Force Base

were listed as desegregated by the military, and African-Americans assigned to Fort Meade might have to commute as much as forty-eight miles each way to reach suitable housing (13). Meanwhile, as the Vietnam conflict escalated, African Americans became an increased presence in uniform once again: by 1968 they accounted for 9.8% of all military personnel, including 20% of combat troops and 14.1% of military fatalities (Buckley 415). Meanwhile, according to a 1969 report, only 2.1% of United States military officers were African-American, and many of those officers were posted to what seemed to be dead-end desk jobs (Foner 211).

Tensions within the military escalated not only because of career paths within the ranks, but also because of events in civilian society. By 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. had turned against the war in Vietnam and begun speaking out forcefully against it, a decision sure to send shockwaves through the African-American population (Kimbrough 81). King's assassination on 4 April 1968, along with the shock of the massive Tet offensive by communist forces in Vietnam, only exacerbated the growing problem of African Americans' vexed relationship to the war and the military, not to mention the problem of the often hostile responses from whites to their desire for full citizenship (Westheider 73). At the naval installation at Que Viet, some white servicemen marked King's death by donning makeshift Ku Klux Klan outfits, and at Da Nang someone raised confederate flags (Foner 213). Escalating racial tensions led to a number of incidents, including a riot at the Long Binh military prison, where African Americans were in the majority, after King's assassination (Kimbrough 88-9). Such episodes were hardly limited to the prison population. The Marine Corps began tracking racial assaults at Camp Lejeune in the summer of 1968, and before the end of the year had recorded over one hundred and sixty. Worse yet was an interracial fight that broke out at the service club on 20 July 1969, which ended with one marine dead and dozens of others hospitalized (Westheider 87-8). In the field, Doctor King's

assassination and the increasing racial tension in the armed forces offered the communists a propaganda tool that could be aimed at African-American troops (71-3).

King's assassination also changed the tenor of the debate in the African-American community. The ideas of Malcolm X, who had rejected nonviolent protest as a means for African-American liberation, suddenly gained more acceptance and relevance among African Americans in uniform (69). Added to the danger of growing unrest in the ranks was the unfairness of certain elements of military policy. African-Americans had scarcely any representation on draft boards prior to 1968, for instance, especially in southern states with large African-American populations such as Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi (27-8). Likewise, when racial unrest broke out at Fort McLellan in Alabama, resulting in the arrest of seventy-one African-American soldiers, the arrests created a suspicion of racism (Foner 233). Racial mistrust led to increasing self-segregation among the races within the enlisted ranks, as well as the deeper entrenchment of such racialized symbols as the elaborate gestural greetings known as "dapping" among African-American troops and prominent displays of the confederate flag among whites (Kimbrough 86-7; Westheider 83-4). In the Navy, all of these factors combined to create situations such as the disturbances on the aircraft carriers *Kitty Hawk* and *Constellation* in 1972 (Foner 244-6). During that same year, the Marine Corps, deeply concerned about the potential erosion of its *esprit de corps* by racial tensions, developed and mandated a twenty-four hour course on race relations for all personnel. Despite such efforts, however, by the early 1970s in many areas of both military and civilian American society tensions had escalated to the point that one career officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Peterson, an African-American Marine pilot stationed in Vietnam, pointed out the potential danger of military and civilian racial unrest

intersecting: "You have some very angry blacks who are here who are going to go back and are going to be more angry once they return" (qtd. in Westheider 184).

Such, of course, are the conditions that the reader observes in Shanley's *Defiance*, a play that begins with a gunnery sergeant berating his charges for a racial incident that happened during an exercise and ends with one of the few African-American officers in the Marine Corps defying the order of a white superior, albeit certainly not on grounds of racism. Shanley's characters are marked not only by the country in which they were raised, but also by the military in which they serve. Captain King is trapped between his own conservatism and sense of duty, his grief over Dr. King's assassination, and the anger of the other African-American Marines around him. Colonel Littlefield is trapped by his own desire to escape his father's overt racism, his express duties as a commander both to combat racial prejudice and to preserve good order, and his obvious ambition. Under these two flawed men serve a battalion of Marines who are creatures of their time, all marked by the racial and international politics of the day, from Chaplain White down to the gunnery sergeant and on down to the privates, both black and white, who must learn to live and die together under the flag of the United States of America.

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