Two Generations of Marine Corps Veterans Discuss Race in the Military

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Two Generations of Marine Corps Veterans Discuss Race in the Military
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Photo Caption: Jeremy Dobbins interviewing Jay Blunt
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Today our Veterans’ Voices series continues with a cross-generational conversation about racism. For some recruits, the military is the first time they have to confront their own prejudices, and live and work with people different from themselves. Here’s Marine Corps veteran and Wright State student Jeremy Dobbins of Springfield, and Marine Corps and Vietnam veteran, Jay Blunt of Dayton.

Transcript:

Jay Blunt (JB): I had a guy at my boot camp, couldn't read or write, but during the time of Vietnam, if you could put an X down, they'd take you. One day, he asked me to write a letter for him, and it was the first time he’d ever asked a black person do anything for him. And we sat down; we had this great talk. It was a great experience. I wrote a little letter, and it didn't sound much different from the kinds of things I would say to my mom and my family. And I got a letter out. I don't know how he made out, but I think about him all the time, because he just needed to break through wherever he came from. You know, some of these guys come deep backwoods and they don't see the world. They only hear it on TV.

Jeremy Dobbins (JD): When I went through boot camp, there were two guys, one was a big black guy from New York City and another was from somewhere down south. I want to say Alabama, or Texas...

JB: Alabama, probably.

JD: They got into a big fight in the wet room, or the rain room, the shower room.

JB: Yeah, the shower room.

JD: And they ended up getting forced..they had to do everything together. They were like, for now on, if one’s pooping, you’re pooping too, if one’s on fire watch, you’re both on fire watch, too, if one’s at chow, you’re at chow, too. And at the time everyone’s like, oh, they’re just doing that because they’re fighting. But when you’re in situations where your lives depend on each other, there’s just no room for anything like.
JB: No. I don’t know if you had the House Mouse…

JD: Yeah, they’re usually the smallest guy.

JB: Yeah, well, the House Mouse was between me and a guy from Kentucky…, or someplace. And if one of us couldn’t be the mouse, they’d call the other one the roach. And if we started arguing, they would make one of us roll around on the ground like a roach, and the other would put his hands on his head and they’d spray us like it was Raid. And it was so embarrassing that we’d just look at each other like, I can’t get mad at you because I’m going to pay a bad consequence for it. But by the end, by the time we graduated from boot camp, we were the best of friends. The one thing about the military is they can command you not to be racist. You can be a black American, white American, red American, but you’re all doing the same thing: you’re protecting Mom and apple pie.

JD: Yeah.

JB: I remember in the 80’s standing on the bus stop waiting to catch a bus and these people next to me started talking. I realized they were speaking in Vietnamese and I didn’t know how to react, I didn’t know whether they were the enemy, or..? I realized they were trying to become American. And I instantly had a bias against him because of being in Vietnam. And I realized, well, that’s as bad as bad as somebody in Arkansas having a bias against me because, my skin. So you have to get over that, you have to really get over that. And whether you like it or not, you have to get used to the guy to your left and to your right.

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