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Memphis-Nam-Sweden: The Story of a Black Deserter

Terry Whitmore, Richard Weber

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There are all-too-few Vietnam War memoirs written by African-Americans. This is perhaps the best of those few. It is the autobiographical account of a young black man, who, newly graduated from high school, joined the Marine Corps to escape inner-city Memphis. Military service was the avenue out of the ghetto, but within six months Terry Whitmore found himself, like many African-American enlistees, in Vietnam with the infantry.

Despite his growing awareness of racial injustice in the armed forces, he proved himself courageous. In a vicious firefight, he was badly wounded. In the hospital, encased in bandages, he was awarded medals for heroism by Lyndon Johnson himself.

The seriousness of his wounds required that he be sent to Japan for treatment. He was notified that he would be discharged. As he recovered, he became involved with a Japanese woman opposed to the war, and through her influence and that of black soldiers he met, he equated the motivations for war with American racism. Inexplicably he was ordered back to Vietnam. He made the decision to desert. Pursued by MPs, he was shuttled about by a protective underground community until members of the international peace community spirited him to asylum in Sweden via a modern underground railroad. In Sweden he found himself put on display by the all-white "movement" there. Eventually Whitmore managed to tell his own story in his own voice. His book is among the finest memoirs of Vietnam experience.

Terry Whitmore lives in Stockholm. Richard Weber is an attorney, teacher, and film writer who lives in Stockholm. Jeff Loeb is a teacher at Pembroke Hill School in Kansas City, Missouri.

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