

## Veterans Day: My Father's Story

By Shawnta S. Barnes - November 11, 2017



James A. Stockton

Veterans Day, originally called Armistice Day, is observed on November 11 each year to thank those who served in our military. According to the Veterans Day Teacher Resource Guide provided by The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans Day National Committee, “There are nearly 20 million Veterans living among us, in every state and territory and from every walk of life” and counted among them is my father James A. Stockton. For this Veterans Day, I decided to interview him to learn more about his time in the military.

**Shawnta Barnes: Why did you decide to join the military?**

**James Stockton:** I decided to join the military because Martin Luther King was just assassinated. Black people were depressed and losing hope, but I wanted to attend Lane Technical Institute to study drafting. It cost \$2,000 for the program. I dropped out of Tech High School and enlisted because Mama didn't have that kind of money to send me.

**SB: Why did you choose the Marine Corps?**

**JS:** I chose the Marines because they are the first ones to go fight and take the objective.

**SB: When did you serve?**

**JS:** June 20, 1968 – June 19, 1972.



James A. Stockton, 1969 in Vietnam at Vulture Hill

**SB: During your time in the Marines you fought in the Vietnam War. What would you like to share about that time?**

**JS:** One time we went on a patrol and we were looking for the North Vietnamese to make sure they were not going into South Vietnam. Charlie Company came under attack. We were asked to come and assist them. Our Lieutenant told us to go directly through the tree line. You don't do that. We should have went along the tree line. I was a squad leader at the time. To make it fair, each of the four squads in the platoon rotated being the point squad, the squad that leads the attack. On this particular day, my squad was point squad. When we went in, we were attacked. I got knocked down after getting hit in the chest. I also got hit in the leg. The rest of my squad didn't make it out. After I was rescued by reinforcements, I kept trying to figure out how I made it out because I knew I had got hit in the chest. The reason I came out of that fire fight was that I had a flak jacket on and I had my two bags of grenades wrapped around me. I also had my weapons, which were a M-79 grenade launcher and a .45 pistol. When I later looked inside my bag, the bullet got lodged in one of those grenades. If that grenade would have went off, I wouldn't be here right now.

That's how I earned the Purple Heart. Secretary of State William Rogers was on tour at the time and presented me the Purple Heart aboard the USS *Repose*, but I don't have the medal now. Later, after I recovered, we were attacked and we lost our belongings and that included my medal. Being awarded the Purple Heart helped pay for your college. Because I received the Purple Heart, my children were able to have their college tuition covered.

The only time when we were on patrol that we never came under the attack from the North Vietnamese was when we were patrolling with the ROK Marine (Republic of Korea). The reason why the Vietnamese would not attack us when we had the ROK Marines with us was because the ROK Marines would kill everything in the village: Mama san, Papa san, Baby san, and all living animals. When I returned home, I received a letter with the presidential seal on it from President Nixon thanking me for my service. I was over there in Vietnam December 1968-December 1969.



James A. Stockton with other enlisted Marines at Camp Pendleton, California

**SB: How did you become a squad leader?**

**JS:** They would bring the white guys in and automatically give them promotion over us and we had been out there fighting for almost six months. Five or six of us black guys refused to go out and fight. The Staff Sergeant who was over us said that we could go to the brig for that. We asked him, “Who are you going to send to get us?” We were the baddest things out there. Then, he promoted me right there on the spot. Racism was everywhere, but you always have to stand up to that kind of mess. That was what Martin Luther King was all about.

**SB: What reflections do you have about fighting in the Vietnam War?**

**JS:** If you look back at the Vietnam War, the Americans were supporting one side, which was the South, and the Russians and Chinese were supporting the other side. All three of these countries economies boomed. The Vietnamese

did not have a clue what was going on and they were the people who suffered. No one kept count of how many Vietnamese were killed in this war because the United States considered Vietnamese casualties as collateral damage. We did not create a democracy in Vietnam. The only thing we left was: death, destruction, and American sired babies. We are doing the same thing with North and South Korea today. The Americans are supporting the South and the Russians and Chinese are supporting the North. If war breaks out, all three economies will boom again and if there is a ground war on that peninsula, the Korean casualties will be considered collateral damage. The Americans are also doing the same thing in Palestine. They are giving one side weapons to commit genocide against the other side. We don't agree with what the Germans did to the Jews, but this was for a shorter period of time, which is a grain of sand compared to the 400 years of slavery that happened to black people in this country. They are sending black people's taxpayer money to Israel to buy weapons to kill Palestinians, who are other people of color. Black people should not have to pay taxes in this country for a minimum of 800 years because we have already worked 400 years for free. Our tax money should be going into our schools, our businesses, our neighborhoods and supporting black culture. Fighting in a war, makes you think about history and American actions such as the genocide committed against American Indians another group of people of color.



James A. Stockton, South Carolina

**SB: What did you do once you returned from Vietnam?**

**JS:** When I got back, I went to Paris Island, South Carolina. I was a Cross Country Chaser. If some guy deserted and went AWOL, I would pick the guy up from the sheriff after he was caught and return him to base. Later, I was transferred Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

**SB: When did you finish high school?**

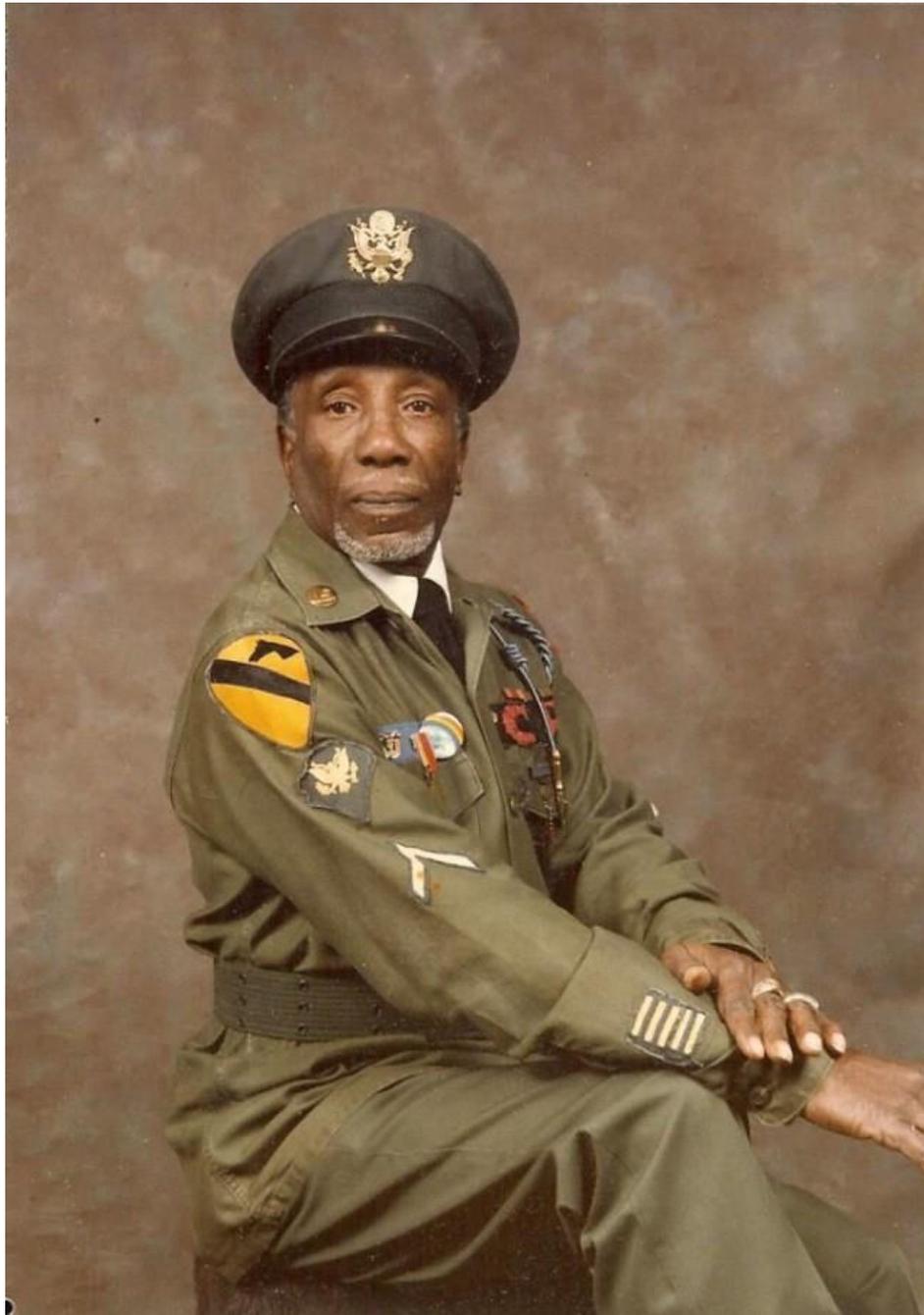
**JS:** I took classes while at Camp Lejeune and got my GED there in June 1969.

**SB: Were you able to save \$2,000 to attend Lane?**

**JS:** When I came back, they had closed Lane down. Instead, I went to IUPUI for about a year. IUPUI was a new college when I got out and I thought it was going to be the best choice. That's when IUPUI was on 38th street right across from the fairgrounds. They were very racist back then. I studied drafting and the drafting instructor I had gave me and this other black guy, who was from Vincennes, Indiana, a failing grade for the course even though we had passed every assignment. We went and protested to one of the deans at IUPUI. The dean said they had problems with the instructor and that's why they had to let him go. Then, we were told there was nothing they could do about our course grade. We both left that school after that. Then, I used my VA benefits to go to Ivy Tech and I took some drafting courses and machine and tool and earned an associate degree from Ivy Tech. I was able to transfer some of my credit hours from IUPUI to Ivy Tech. If I would have known it was going to be like that at IUPUI, I would have went straight to Ivy Tech when I got back. That's just how it was; you had to fight racism everywhere back then.

Sometimes, I look at how kids are now in school and we had to fight for everything and they just take it for granted. We lived through lots of racism. Some of these kids are into some crazy crap. They're focused on getting tattoos. They're living in the virtual world and doing everything else they can except getting an education. Some that do get an education, don't understand how to use it. It's very discouraging. Mama used to say, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." We kicked that door open and they won't go through. You need a good education to get ahead.

**SB: Do you do anything special on Veterans Day?**



Clarence Richardson, World War II Veteran; James A. Stockton's Uncle

**JS:** No, not anymore. I used to go downtown with my Uncle Clarence because he liked to walk in the Veterans Day parade. He was a World War II veteran and he loved doing it. Since he died, I don't do that anymore.

I was glad I had the opportunity to learn more about my father's experience in the military and how he stood up to racism. He takes education very

seriously. My cousins always say, "You can't see Uncle Jim without him asking you about school." Today, on Veterans Day, take time to thank the men and women who have served our country and how they fought to protect our liberties. And as community members, lift up each other and support each other to make sure no one is wasting his or her education or opportunities to have a productive life and become a productive citizen.