

# *The Wrongs of Racial Bias*

*by Frederick Wickert*

This is being written as a response to the story, *Destiny: Path to the Future*, by Carol J. Garriott, posted on Ourecho.com. I wrote a comment but the page suddenly became unavailable, and I suppose the comment was too long anyway.

I can understand the feelings Carol had when she encountered the racial bias that she had not been used to previously. I was raised in the Catskill Mountains where everyone was treated and accepted equally. Black people were a rarity where I lived, but always accepted when they came. I am also a descendent of abolitionists. (See *A GLIMPSE OF HISTORY*, Ourecho ID #926)

My first brush with the racial bias that shook me was when I was stationed at Bolling Field in Washington, DC, fresh out of Combat Air Police School. I arrived there for duty in early November, 1953. I was astonished at what I found there. Nearly twenty years later, I was asked to write an article for the VIP, the squadron newsletter, shortly before retiring from the Air Force, while stationed at Andrews Air Force base, Maryland. I will include it in this essay.

My second brush with it was while stationed in Tokyo, Japan. I pressed charges against an officer who greatly abused one of the men on my shift because he happened to be black. I charged him with conduct unbecoming an officer and a Gentleman and prejudicial to the good order of the United States Air Force.

There was also an incident in which a black man was stationed at the main entrance of the Far East Air Forces Headquarters building. He frightened a General's wife and orders were given that in the future, blacks were not to be posted there. It just so happened that this particular black man was a bit peculiar and not the brightest kid in the class. Someone protested to his Congressman over the order. The Air Force then went way overboard in trying to prove they had no bias. They singled the individual out to shower all sorts of accolades on him and promote him ahead of his peers, solely because he was black and to prove they were not biased. The man was given rank that he was not qualified for, but at the same time, hidden out of sight by making him a permanent special guard at the driveway entrance of the Commanding General's house. The public did not see him there.

I next observed it in Orlando, Florida. Our shift was preparing to spend two days at Cocoa Beach on our 72-hour break. We worked revolving shifts for nine days and then had seventy-two hours off. One of our men was black. He was a good man and one of us. We intended that he be included in the festivities. He declined. He made the remark that if he were to go with us, he could expect to, "haaaang around for a while." He was alluding to something he dealt with all the time, that none of us had ever given any thought. He knew that because he was black, if he had gone to Cocoa Beach with us, he could expect to be lynched by southern whites.

In another incident, my car was in the shop. I took the bus to the base. Another man from my squadron, who happened to be black, was also riding that bus. We were both in uniform. I was seated and there was room for him in the seat. I told him to sit down. He told me he was not allowed to sit in that section of the bus because of his color. I stood up then and said loudly enough for everyone on the bus to hear it that if he wasn't good enough to sit on their bus, then neither was I. I remained standing beside him for the remainder of the trip.

In another situation, I had stopped with a friend at a tasty freeze. While we were eating our ice cream, a school bus pulled in. The driver and the coach were white. All the boys on the bus, a high school baseball team, remained on the bus. The driver and the coach went to the window and purchased cones for all the boys on the bus and handed them into the bus. I inquired why the boys didn't get off the bus and was told they were not allowed, because they were black. Only then did I become aware that in the south, black people were not allowed in the same business establishments as whites.

After nearly four years stationed in Florida, I was assigned to Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. There I became a member of Presidential Aircraft Security. After five years there, I went to South East Asia for a

little over a year, to do my part in the Vietnam War. Then I returned to Presidential Security to finish my Air Force career. There I sometimes wrote letters to right some wrongs, and was successful in some. I was also a pitcher on my team in the softball league. Having a prominent nose, I was nicknamed the Hook, and a drop curve I threw when pitching became known as the Snorkel ball.

I was nearing retirement in spring of 1973, and our Chief asked me to write something for the VIP concerning my thoughts about my Air Force Career. Some of what I wrote concerned the topic now under discussion. I include it here.

## REFLECTIONS OF THE SNORKEL BALLER

(Their title – not mine)

For some months now, I have been getting some static from those in “The Back Office,” about my, “Poison Pen.” You can imagine my surprise when the Chief asked me to write an essay for the squadron newsletter, initiated by my old flight. I thought when he asked me to base it on my thoughts and reflections of the Air Force, and more particularly on my most recent tour in the 89th, that he must be really off his rocker to stick his chin out like that. I agreed to do it. Then I began reflecting on the theme and just what my thoughts really are in that regard. I was a little surprised myself at those thoughts. Why? Because it was no longer a joke, but suddenly, something serious.

Over the past twenty years, I have seen the Air Force come a long way in changes. I have seen the influence of Air Force people have its effect in the local and world community and I have seen the 89th itself, come a long way.

My first years in the Air Force taught me a great deal about the world. In the beginning I was shocked at the prejudices and injustice that existed in our Air Force. I was also shocked to learn that one found it very difficult to earn his way because position and promotion was purely and almost entirely a matter of politics and bribery, and had very little to do with ability or with knowledge and skill.

I was dismayed at the attitude of the American public. The Korean War was in its final stages and young American men of all races and creeds had voluntarily laid their lives on the line in Korea. Yet, when I was in basic, the people of nearby towns hated the GI with a passion.

After I completed Combat Air police School, I was assigned to Bolling Field, which at that time was an active air field. I was shocked that signs were posted at the entrances to trailer parks and apartment house areas stating, “No dogs, GI’s or niggers allowed.” I couldn’t comprehend such a thing. Off base, there were public rest rooms marked, “Whites only.” On base, the Air Force had its own way. There, were three latrines marked, “Officers,” “Men,” and “Women.”

Later I went to Okinawa and Korea, and learned that in spite of our American inadequacies, we really had it made. These people really knew what rough could be. I saw there the real meaning of injustice and of things like police brutality. I saw it exist not only in their civilian life, but in military as well. Both theirs and in ours.

As the years went by, things gradually began to change. Every now and then, here and there, a man had the courage to fight the system and it hit the newspapers. Sweeping new policies would always follow. The entire system changed gradually and slowly improved.

At the same time other countries, such as Korea, also made some improvements. Believe it or not, much of it was due to the influence of American Air Force people. Laws and even governments began to change and the lives of many peoples gradually began to change and improve.

The American public has also changed in its attitude. The great Civil Rights movement and Civil Rights legislation had not yet begun when I observed in Florida and Washington, that the attitude towards GI's and Blacks had softened somewhat. No longer was it mandatory for Blacks to ride only in the rear of the bus, and no longer did the signs at the trailer parks and apartment areas appear. The sentiments were still practiced a great deal, but things were somewhat better.

Stories began to appear and be heard of community assistance by military volunteers and more and more news began to appear about military injustices in specific cases. As recent as 1963 or 64, I heard a discussion in a bar in Clinton, in which one man was telling others about an Air Force guy that moved in next door to him and how he was surprised to learn that he was a pretty nice guy. Now, such a discussion would be the most amusing, but in those days it was quite serious. There were other things that occurred along the way and the American public gradually began to accept the fact that military people were indeed respectable professionals and not merely alcoholic bums who couldn't hold a job or stay out of jail in civilian life.

Life in the military is still no bed of roses, but it has improved a great deal. In the system itself, skill levels have become a very easy thing to obtain as compared with the past. Promotions too, are far easier to come by for the average individual and are no longer based on pure favoritism as it once was. No longer are Black Air Police barred from certain posts because high-ranking officers didn't want to see them or didn't want their wives to be checked by them.

No longer is military justice a matter of, "You're guilty because I said so." Rather, it is nearly always guilty because it is proven so, with a far greater chance of a successful appeal.

The pay ratio to civilians has improved greatly and the benefits that go along with Air Force membership are outstanding, if taken advantage of. No longer is it necessary to have sufficient funds to go to college prior to Air Force service, to become an officer. Now you can do it with Air Force help to get your degree while you are in the Air Force, and then get your commission. There is a wealth of benefit in the Air Force now, for any who have the initiative to take advantage of it. This was not always so. There is a great deal about the Air Force that can be improved upon, and it will be, but it is up to the membership to fight for it and to go after it. Nobody is going to give it to you.

Now, as for the 89th, it to has come an unbelievably long way. There have been so many improvements in facilities, working conditions, equipment, human relations and leadership, that it is amazing when one looks back ten years to what it was once like. Still, there is room for more improvement and more improvement is in the planning stages. It seems a long time coming, but when you look back on it, one can easily see where improvements have been rapid as compared to other units.

As for human relations, well, I guess I could probably write a book about it, but I won't. I will say however, that most of the things we get all up tight about are minor when looked at from a distance. In our own little world, they sometimes loom very large indeed. Bu constantly trying to battle those things that do get us all up tight, we do gradually bring about improvement in our lot. I of course, have built a reputation for battling, (poison pen and all). I only regret many times over the years that I didn't battle when I should have, or failed to carry the battle as far as I should. I am convinced that the only way we can change things that are wrong is to fight for that change, and when we don't we have only ourselves to blame, when that change for the better fails to come.

When you make the protest of your choice, however, don't do it with anger and hostility, because you only put the people you are trying to reach on the defensive. Make sense when you do try to protest, and try to live with the petty and unimportant. If you don't, it will become a habit to pay no attention to your gripe, because it will be anticipated as just more pettiness rather than anything of real importance.

One thing that has been extremely noticeable to me in the 89th is that some men are very bitter about the attitudes and conduct of their supervisors. Yet, when those same people become supervisors, how quickly they forget the things they found objectionable, and how quickly they become a carbon copy of the same things they hated in their supervisors.

The best advice I can give you was given long ago by others. Always remember that no man is better than you are. He may temporarily have the advantage but that does not make him your better. Therefore, treat every man as your equal, because he is. Respect each man as an individual.

There is an old Indian prayer especially valuable that says, "Grant that I may have the wisdom to walk in another's moccasins before I find fault with the paths that he takes."

A bit of advice too, from Abraham Lincoln. "It is pretty hard to make a man miserable, when he believes he is worthy of himself, and feels a kindred of spirit with the one who made him."

If every man will reflect on these things, from the lonesome tail guard to the back office of the Commander, and practice them, the 89th Security Police Squadron can be the greatest place to be. It will take all of you, because as in any squadron, only as a team working together for the benefit of each other, can it be worth a damn.

One more saying fits in here and it is probably the most important one of all. That is that the word "I," is the least important word of the English language.

My best wishes to all of you,

Freddy the Hook