

Here's What it's Like to Put Up With 'Just Joking' Racism in the Military

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The sun was setting under a Mississippi horizon. Curled in a corner, with his knees drawn in and his hat pulled over his eyes, a Black soldier named Brown found a place to nap.

In the infantry, you're taught to sleep if you're not doing anything else. But if you listened closely, you would have heard white soldiers whisper among themselves: "Lazy n-." White noncommissioned officers searched for the Black soldier's team leader to smoke him (make him do push-ups, yell at him, and so on) while white soldiers slept nearby.

Contrast this with how we delude ourselves: Everyone is green in the military. That's military-speak for "Racism doesn't exist in the ranks."

While some minority soldiers and a lot of white soldiers believe the military enjoys a post-racism world, the rest of us feel the pain of racism acutely.

We all understand that the veterans of our great-grandparent's generation suffered from racism. Lawrence D. Reddick observed in 1949 that the Army had a stereotype of the "Negro" as "*fearful, unreliable, and lacking in the manly virtues of a warrior.*" In fact, white leaders treated their Black subordinates more harshly, according to Margarita Aragon in "A General Separation of Colored and White."

Other minorities felt the pain of racism in different ways.

"In the service, we were all equal," Aragon quoted a Mexican American man as saying. "We were all Americans, but [we] turned into a Mexican as soon as we took our uniforms off."

Fast forward more than 70 years later and military members like Brown, the Black soldier who took a nap, still face racism from their brothers and sisters in arms. We, two soldiers of color who served together in Iraq, sat down to talk about racism in the military and how and why we participated in it.

You read that right.

Nate is mixed Pacific Islander and white, and he served in three infantry units (two in Iraq and one in Afghanistan) as an infantryman, team leader, squad leader, and as a senior convoy commander in a transportation unit in Afghanistan. Mike is Filipino and served seven years as an infantry medic.

Nate: Doc, can you share examples of racist instances that you've seen in the military?

Mike: One day, Brown—who we mentioned earlier—had one of his boots untied. My battle buddy pulled me aside and said, “He’s a [N-word],” as if I was in on a great secret. Maybe it was because I’m Asian.

But just a few weeks before, he had pulled back his eyes and said, “Ching ching chong” to me as if it was a joke I’d take with no problem. Was it because I had let him make fun of me that made him think it was OK to call people the N-word?

Nate: How did you feel when your battle buddy said that? Did you say or do anything about it?

Mike: I did not want to start a ruckus, so, unfortunately, I kept my trap shut. In fact, I pretended to be in on the secret. “Hm, yes, I can see what you mean,” I said, rather than, “Hey. That’s not cool.”

Being Asian, I occupy a unique space where white people occasionally reveal their racist thoughts to me. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from it, it’s that racists don’t think they’re being racist. In fact, when they’re being racist, they often play it off as a joke.

Did you ever encounter similar “jokes”?

Nate: Yes, I saw this pretty often throughout my military career. When I attended the Advanced Leaders Course, a bunch of soldiers from Puerto Rico mostly spoke Spanish. The instructor teaching the course got upset that they were speaking Spanish and said, “jokingly,” that they needed to stop speaking “that guada-guada shit.” He misquoted an Army regulation that states that soldiers are not required to speak English for personal communications. The instructor claimed that soldiers were to speak only English while in uniform.

Mike: It’s always a joke, isn’t it?

Nate: It is always a joke! On my third deployment in Bagram, Afghanistan, my platoon sergeant was being vocally racist about Black and brown soldiers. It got to the point where I would give him an awkward look, and he would then gaslight me by saying he was “just joking.”

One day, he was talking about how Mexican and Black soldiers are “lazy,” so I kicked him out of our FOB hopper—a small pickup truck we used on the base. He claimed to be “just joking” again, but I took off and left him on the other side of the base. When he got back, he tried to get me in trouble for insubordination, but I had spoken with our commander first, and my platoon sergeant was relieved of his position.

After that, I got a reputation for being “that guy” with white NCOs, because I couldn’t take a joke. But my soldiers respected me.

Mike: I have to admit that I was part of the joke, too, because I let the Asian jokes slide. In fact, I perpetuated the Asian stereotype.

We had a Vietnamese soldier with a thick accent, and I would often pretend he was Viet Cong. I'd make him take pictures with AK-47s and say Vietnamese words for my amusement. I thought at the time it was all in good fun—we're all green, right? But looking back, I imagine he thought I was a jerk for reducing him to his ethnicity.

Nate: As NCOs, we reinforce and reproduce colonialism and white supremacy. In other words, to be successful in the military, we subconsciously buy into the idea that we are subordinate to another ethnicity, that we are dependent on their approval, that we need to not step out of line, that—as long as we are not “that guy”—they won't see us as “other” and call us out.

As a soldier, if you want to be taken seriously, you have to. NCOs enforce the standard, and that standard was created in white supremacy and colonialism. In the military, if you can't take a “joke,” people will isolate, target, and ostracize you from the group. As a brown man, when I picture myself as a veteran, I see a grizzled, old, bearded white dude, not unlike the NCOs I looked up to.

I use these examples to illustrate how much I had internalized white supremacy and colonialism. I reproduced, in laughing at or making jokes about brown people, the same standard that was forced on me by other NCOs. I thought I was doing right by my soldiers by doing so, but only after years of reflection do I now see the damage I caused.

Mike: I've had my fair share of “dog-eating” jokes lobbed at me. Sometimes soldiers would slap me on the back and say, “Hey there, chink.” I would just laugh. I thought it was all in good fun; we all had moved so far past race that we could joke to each other about it. In reality, I've realized that we were reinforcing racial stereotypes and white supremacy.

You don't hear “white people” jokes, and even if you did, they wouldn't have the same power: There's no history of people of color lynching white people in the town square while an audience watched or putting white people in camps during wartime or forbidding white people to own property or withholding the vote from white people or not allowing white people to join the very same military where jokes about people of color are still an ordinary thing.

When I look at how we suffered racist jabs and even perpetuated them, I try to think of what we reinforce by doing so. Besides lowering the self-esteem of an individual, we reinforce a racial stereotype on a person, which has secondary effects on his or her ability to rise in the ranks and gain recognition. Now that person is associated with something potentially disastrous. A joke can be a joke, but a racist joke can affect the well-being and careers of people.

Nate: Like many institutions, racism in the military is far from over.

For us to heal and grow, we must first recognize that racism exists in the military and will continue to exist until we understand that racist jokes are not jokes. We need to normalize and empower our soldiers to go to the equal opportunity office or to the Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention Program (because women are also “in on the joke”).

If we do not, we encourage silence. Silence protects racism and it harms our soldiers.

Instead, we must motivate our troops to be “that guy” and say something.