

Davis, Kenny: It's Like Being At War ^[1]

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Kenny Davis: It's Like Being At War

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 12/13/1998. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I met Kenny Davis during the recent commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the [Wilmington race riot of 1898](#) ^[3]. A century ago, on Nov. 10, 1898, a white mob massacred many blacks and seized the city government. This year, led by a citizens' group called the 1898 Centennial Foundation, Wilmington remembered this tragic moment in its past with a host of community, school and church events.

At first, Davis doubted that blacks and whites could ever agree on how to mark this racial atrocity, one that still haunts Wilmington. Many white leaders felt threatened by his fierce convictions. But working with the 1898 Centennial Foundation changed him and many others, of both races.

"For the first time in their lives," Davis told me, "black and white people began to come into one another's homes and talk, and look beyond race into what's in your heart."

Davis has had some close calls. He was in combat in [Vietnam in 1965-67](#) ^[4], and, when he was a policeman in Philadelphia, he was shot and nearly killed in the line of duty. Today, he devotes himself passionately to the 1898 Centennial Foundation, while also working at a fiber optics plant and, with his wife Debra, raising two beautiful children.

At his home in Wilmington, Davis and I talked about the roots of racial prejudice. Inevitably, the conversation turned to his Army years, when black GIs who had never seen free elections in the South were sent to fight for democracy in Vietnam.



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In Kenny Davis's words:

I went to Vietnam on the 11th of December, 1965. I was a medical corpsman in the 101st Airborne, 1st Brigade. When I first got to Vietnam, our base camp was at Phan Rang. Then we got on LSTs - flat-bottomed Navy ships - and got off at We'd go out on helicopter assaults in the Central Highlands, up in the mountains. Once you got on the ground, you became an infantry unit and did search and destroys. As a medical corpsman, my job was to give first aid to wounded service One of the worst things that happened in Vietnam still bothers me. This guy Bruce Smith and I were at Fort Campbell, Ky., together, in the 101st Airborne. We became good friends. The last time I saw him alive, we were in Tuyhoa. We were That's one of the things war does: You become detached, even from other GIs. You can't afford to be emotionally involved, because you can't allow losing somebody to bother you too much. That's why it hurt so bad with Bruce. I knew him in I remember one situation, where we had a Vietnamese woman who was holding this child that was dead, that died as a result of conflict we were in. The kid must not have been a year old. The woman was bleeding. She was wounded herself It affects you. It affects you in deep and profound ways.

Even though you try to dehumanize your enemies, there is always something about children that makes it hard. Once, we were going through a dead Vietnamese soldier's effects and found a picture of his wife and two children. Then I started Another time, we were out in the field and had set up this mess tent. We had these garbage cans with food scraps in them. The Vietnamese would send their children down with boxes, and they'd scoop up the scraps to take home to eat. One I called Vietnamese "gooks." Everybody that didn't look like you was a "gook." You said, "Well, we kill gooks." You can't imagine this Vietnamese soldier having a family, a wife and children.

If you did, you'd probably lose your mind. After all, it's just not a normal thing to kill people.

When I was growing up near here, in Bladen County, I don't think a lot of white people looked at blacks as being equal, even as being persons. As a child, I remember vividly how they never acknowledged that my grandfather was a man. The

When I got back to America, coming from Vietnam, I could relate to how the black veterans of Korea, World War II, World War I, maybe even the Spanish-American War felt. They believed that defending this country would make them equal i

When I had just come back from Vietnam in 1967, I was stationed at Fort Bragg in the 82nd Airborne Division. One day we were on pass, in uniform, and we stopped at a Dairy Queen in Lumberton. I ordered an ice cream cone, and I gave th She could take my money, but she didn't want to touch me, like I was unclean or a leper or something.

Then, when I was picking up the money, I looked up: There was a big billboard right by the Dairy Queen. It said, "Join the United Klans of America: Help Stamp Out Communism and Integration."

I was a sergeant in the U.S. Army then, a Vietnam veteran. And I said to myself, "I can't believe this is happening in America."

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