

Black Vets Recruited

Unit Organizing for Angola War

By Leon Dash

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LARRY MITCHELL
... leads recruiting drive

About 200 black Vietnam war combat veterans in the Washington area are organizing to go to Angola and fight on the side of the U.S.-backed forces in the civil war there.

The black Army, Navy and Marine Corps veterans, most of whom are in their early 30s, include messengers, hospital technicians, a Washington police officer and several unemployed men who are bitter about their failure to find work here.

Most of them fought in Vietnam in specially trained infantry units with high esprit de corps and have had some difficulty adjusting to civilian life, a spokesman said.

Larry Mitchell, a Holy Cross Hospital operating room technician who is recruiting the veterans, said they will be organized and ready to leave for Angola by Feb. 15.

"(The recruitment drive) is speeding up and my phone is jumping off the hook," said Mitchell, who reached many of his prospects through classified advertisements that ran in local newspapers this weekend. "We'll be ready to go."

Mitchell said his recruiting began in early November and was speeded up after he received a commitment last week from the Congress of Racial Equality to provide transportation to Angola.

Mitchell said he is worried about a successful drive that the Soviet-backed forces in Angola, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), have been leading against the beleaguered National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), the only American-backed faction still holding out.

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"I thought I'd never want to go to war again," said Mitchell, 36, who served two tours of duty in Vietnam. "But I feel it's easy to stand on a soapbox and scream and yell about our brothers in Africa. I feel if you can speak out about something then you can fight for your beliefs.

"I feel closer to this situation than I did in Vietnam," he said.

One of Mitchell's recruits, Clifford D. Harris Jr., a researcher and messenger for the Washington law firm of Morgan, Lewis and Bockuis, said "I've been talking about this thing for a month and I'm ready to go now.

"I know the side I'm going with is losing," said Harris, 35, who was wounded with the Americal Division's "Jungle Warriors" in Vietnam. "That only makes me want to go all the more. Today. Now."

Another recruit, Wilbert Goodall, 33, said he has "seen action" in the U.S. military in South Korea, Zaire (formerly the Belgian Congo), the Dominican Republic, Pleiku, South Vietnam, and the Gulf of Tonkin, and at the University of Mississippi and in Birmingham, Ala.

"I'm a trained, unemployed professional fighter and I can be helpful," Goodall continued. "I was trained to do this type of work. Out here in

civilian life, no one has any use for it."

Donald Davis, an Army veteran who is now a District policeman, said he has not made up his mind yet but is interested in the prospect of going. "I have to find out some more about it," Davis said in a brief conversation yesterday.

Last month, newspaper stories quoted unidentified U.S. intelligence sources as saying that the Congress of Racial Equality's chairman, Roy Innis, was recruiting black American veterans "for service as mercenaries" in the Angolan civil war.

In an interview with The Washington Post in December, Innis acknowledged he was interested in recruiting black American veterans for combat in Angola, but he denied they would be mercenaries.

"I'm not recruiting mercenaries," Innis said, "so matters such as pay are not a consideration. The veterans we hope to recruit would be available for use as a buffer force in case there is a cease-fire."

Innis said his first suggestion of sending black Vietnam-era veterans to Angola came in a speech to the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles last November. "So you see," he said, "it is no secret recruitment program."

"I want Afro-Americans to become a more aggressive force" in African affairs, Innis

said. "Unless we, as Afro-Americans, have a more forceful say in affairs affecting the (African) continent, we will find that Africa will become another Southeast Asia."

Innis said he would be seeking the support of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) for his idea. He was in Africa yesterday.

Two weeks ago the 46-member OAU deadlocked on the issue of which side to support in the Angolan war. Each side drew the support of 22 nations, with Ethiopia and Uganda remaining neutral.

U.S. intelligence sources have estimated there are 7,500 Cuban troops now fighting in Angola on the side of the Soviet-backed Popular Movement. The same sources said there were 1,500 South African troops fighting with the American-backed UNITA, but they are now withdrawing.

"Cuba yelled so much about American involvement in Cuba and look at what they're doing," said Larry Mitchell. "They're shoving communism down the throats of Africans."

"It would be different if I go over there," Mitchell added. "I feel I have the right. (The Angolans) are my brothers."

"I'm totally against communism in any form," said Harris. "As far as I am concerned the Cubans are Russians. They are committed to the Soviet Union."

"This has nothing to do with my being black," said Goodall. "I am a professional soldier and it's just another job. No, I don't know how much I will be paid."

Goodall said that in 1963 he participated in a covert military mission in Stanleyville (now Kisangani) in northern Zaire to rescue besieged white missionaries. "I was with the Army's 1st Cavalry, 2d Infantry then, and it was a secret mission," Goodall said.

"I have the leadership ability, the experience and I'm a strong believer in democracy," he added. "The (UNITA) Africans are trying to fight for democracy. We're leaving next month."