

Millington, Tennessee – 1968

While attending my aviation training at the Naval Technical Training Center (NATTC) in Millington, Tennessee, I became more aware of racism in America. I was just about to turn 19 years of age and this was my first experience away from home on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. My earlier years, growing up in Boston as well as my high school years never had me thinking in color. I made friends easily and they came in all colors.

Millington was a small community and basically a town to support the naval facility. When you had time off from training you headed to Memphis. A short bus ride away. A regular navy shuttle bus went from the base to downtown Memphis, stopping in front of the USO. The USO provided a good service to servicemen but we rarely spent much time there.

In Memphis, I would get around by using the local bus system. On one occasion, early 1968, I was riding on a somewhat full bus, when an older black woman boarded. I got up to give her my seat which seem to upset other riders. Civil rights laws were passed several years earlier, and this woman had every right to sit in this seat in front of the bus. Their displeasure was not directed towards her but at me. After a few words back and forth, I was told by the driver to get off the bus. I started to understand.

The Memphis sanitation strike began in February 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. Following years of poor pay and dangerous working conditions and provoked by the crushing to death of workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker in garbage compactors, over 700 of the 1300 black sanitation workers met on Sunday, February 11, and agreed to strike.

In 1968, King and the SCLC organized the "Poor People's Campaign" to address issues of economic justice. King traveled the country to assemble "a multiracial army of the poor" that would march on Washington to engage in nonviolent civil disobedience at the Capitol until Congress created an "economic bill of rights" for poor Americans.

Dr. King planned to bring his campaign to Memphis on March 22nd but was cancelled due to a snowstorm. Not just any snowstorm but one that dumped almost 9 inches on the city. The city of Memphis has not seen that amount of snow since that day in 1968. The city did not have the necessary equipment to remove that amount and many roads were impassable. Back in Millington at NATTC, the thousands of servicemen in training were given shovels and bussed to Memphis to assist with removal. I remember in school a snow day meant going out and have fun. This was not one of those days. The snow did not last long and in a few days, there was not any indication that it even occurred. Temperatures were now in the '70's



On March 29, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to Memphis in support of poorly treated African American sanitation workers. A workers' protest march led by King ended in violence and the death of an African American teenager. King left the city but vowed to return in early April to lead another demonstration.



With tensions building in Memphis, the Navy directed servicemen to not go downtown. The shuttle schedule was reduced and on some occasions was discontinued. Several servicemen had their own vehicle and would venture out for various reasons.

On April 3, King addressed a rally and delivered his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" address at Mason Temple, the world headquarters of the Church of God in Christ. King had already been aware of the continued death threats and it ultimately became a reality on April 4, 1968.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.



Tensions in Memphis as well as around the country escalated to fever pitch.

A small excerpt from a Mike Murray's personal column – "As my flight rolled up to the gate, the stewardess informed us in a sweet southern drawl: "Welcome to Memphis. The temperature is 74 degrees. Please be aware that the city of Memphis is under Martial Law. You must be off the streets of Memphis between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. Thank you for flying Delta. Enjoy your stay in Memphis."



Back at the naval training facility in Millington, we were once again told to stay clear of downtown Memphis. I was not only a student but as a U.S. Coast Guardsman's was given an additional duty as a section leader of my specific barracks on base. The Coast Guardsman

attending training were usually given this additional duty since we attended multiple schools and stayed at NATTC longer than most. This allowed for better continuity with barracks leadership. On April 5, 1968, while on duty in the barracks office, I was visited by FBI agents to ask questions regarding a specific serviceman. Looking back, it was hard to believe in 1968 that the FBI reacted as quickly as they did on tips regarding the previous days' assassination. The FBI questioned the individual because years earlier his father was involved with civil rights violations that ultimately caused his death.

I only spent about six months in Tennessee, but I learned a little more about the SOUTH, the confederacy, and racism in America. I returned to Massachusetts in the early 70's only to further recognized how racism not only existed in the North but had escalated to be equally as unjust as I witnessed in the South. The desegregation of Boston's public schools was another dark period in our history. In 1975, I left Massachusetts to live in St. Croix in the United States Virgin Islands. I received some strong words from my Boston relatives when I moved to an island that was 90% black. Why?... they asked.

2021... hard to believe in America, we still struggle with racism. I ask... When?

Tom Anusewicz