

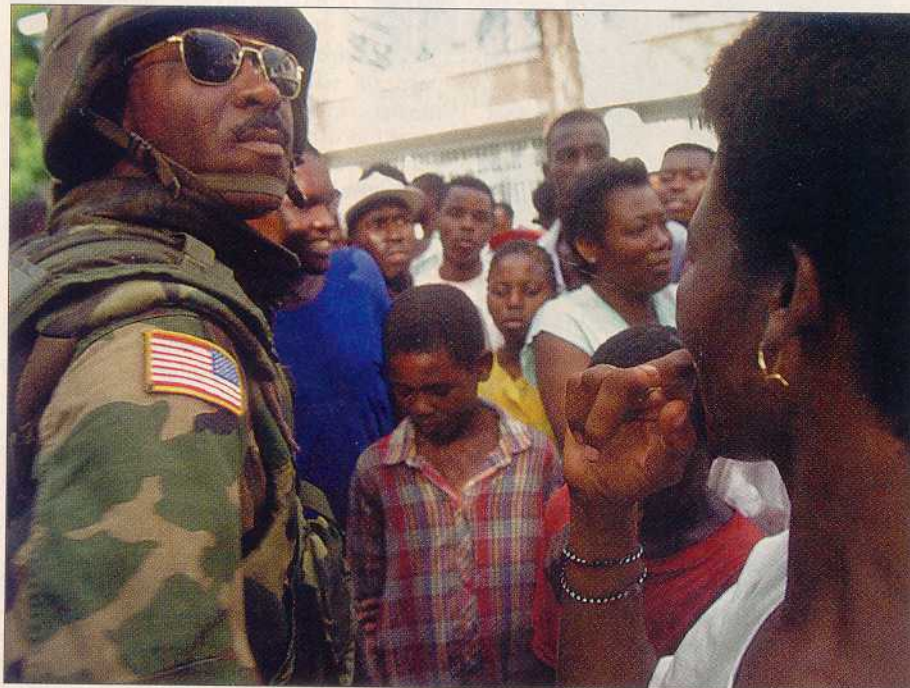
A Black and 'Blan' Mission

Haiti: African-American GIs as liberators

THE LAST THING BLACK TROOPS EXPECTED when they hit Haiti was that they'd be besieged by cheering throngs calling them "blans." But that's Haiti: a country so black, so isolated and so racially polarized that the Creole word for "whites" describes foreigners of any race. After recovering from their astonishment, the African-Americans saw that no malice was in-

with the same themes. Whether repelled by Haitians' seeming passivity to homegrown tyrants or filled with hope for a newly freed people, the African-American liberators are riding a tide of strong emotions.

Some of Haiti's horrors are uncomfortably familiar. "You can run, but you really can't hide from yourself," says Special Forces Capt. Kenneth Morris, 34, an Africa



ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN - JB PICTURES

Crash course: A U.S. soldier in Port-au-Prince during week one of the operation

tended. Indeed, many immediately observed the frustration of Haitians who tried to strike up conversations in Creole, unable to grasp at first why some of their liberators, people who looked more or less like themselves, wouldn't respond. Such were the beginnings of a crash course in just how widely two peoples torn from West Africa by slavery have diverged.

A month after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide triumphantly returned to power, the U.S. intervention in the hemisphere's first black republic hasn't turned into the military quagmire some predicted. But for blacks, nearly one third of U.S. Army enlisted men, it has been a psychologically jolting experience. The sights and sounds of an African-born culture created by 400 years of slavery, independence, oppression and the hope of redemption pack a special wallop for troops whose own past reverberates

specialist in charge of peacekeeping in Jacmel, south of Port-au-Prince. "A lot of Haiti reminds me of the rural South in the '60s. In some places in Mississippi today you have small houses with tin roofs, poor-quality roads, kids playing in the street without underpants." Corp. Milton Gardner, 23, of Columbus, Ga., is blunt: "Here's one black country that's filled with homelessness and poverty. It seems like one big ghetto."

History offers a parallel of its own. The 1915 U.S. takeover of Haiti was led by a Virginia-born commander who boasted that he knew all about handling black people. During their 19 years in Haiti, the blans smashed an insurgency, imposed Jim Crow rules in Haiti's best clubs and set up a Haitian army whose brutality, greed and incompetence decades later set the stage for the new intervention.

But the historical parallel can make

black GIs less sympathetic to Haitians, not more. They are the proud children and grandchildren of people who fought and overcame Jim Crow. Why, some of them ask, haven't the Haitians overthrown tyranny? Standing guard duty at the Port-au-Prince cemetery to prepare for a visit by Aristide, Ranger Sgt. Vada King of Orlando, Fla., wondered aloud why his help was needed. "If somebody is beating my wife, I'm going to die defending my family," he said. "They've got 7 million people in this country and a 7,000-man army—[the people] could have taken it out." Forty miles away, Sgt. Gregory Handy, 34, a member of the Special Forces A-team in Petit-Goâve, said he doesn't expect the peace to last. "I can't see where they could fault anyone else for where their country is," he says. "There are no white people killing these guys. Everything I've read doesn't show any future for this place."

Hard workers: Such barbs gall the more than 300 Haitian-Americans in the U.S. force. Haitians may make poor guerrillas, but they're hard workers, the Haitian-Americans retort. "You go to the States and tell someone about a job at McDonald's and they'll say that's beneath them," says Corp. Michel Lavelanet, 24, a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne who's working with Special Forces in Jacmel. "Here, people will dig a ditch if that's what they have to do to work." He and others nurse bitter memories of struggling for acceptance among American-born blacks. Marine Corp. Roudy Simeon recalls being advised to pass himself off as Jamaican; Special Forces Specialist Jeffrey Simon, 22, from the U.S. Virgin Islands, practiced to lose his accent so that high-school classmates in Los Angeles would quit picking on him.

Culture clashes aside, the black liberators are happy to help Haiti heal—and gratified to be treated as role models. "Blacks really want to see this place successful," says Maj. John Brown, a business consultant who is organizing school-repair projects for Haitians and soldier volunteers. Rescuing democracy in the Americas' first black republic feels good. Haiti isn't Somalia, the military planners like to say, and that's doubly significant for black troops. Many of them went to the Horn of Africa in 1992 filled with romantic notions of returning to the land of their ancestors; they were disillusioned when the mission soured. Few expect much from Haiti. Still, the Haiti intervention does have a certain historical symmetry. When Haitians overthrew their slave masters almost 200 years ago, plantation owners in the young United States were terrified that the Caribbean revolutionary wave might sweep them away. Little could they have imagined black soldiers one day helping to liberate Haiti.

PETER KATEL in Port-au-Prince