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No Room in the Cemetery

WETUMPKA, Ala.—PFC Jimmy Williams's uniformed body was lowered in a grave in the piney woods of South Georgia Monday while a grieving mother pondered the fates which denied him a final resting place in his hometown.

And it may be that the 4000 citizens of this little town 13 miles northeast of Montgomery are searching their collective conscience for an answer to why they could offer only a pauper's grave to their first casualty of the Viet Nam war.

"My son died fighting on the front for all of us. He didn't die a segregated death, and he'll not be buried in a segregated cemetery," Mrs. John Williams, mother of the Green Beret paratrooper, declared.

City officials had claimed there was no room for the dead soldier in the segregated city cemetery. Mayor Demp Thrash said the only plots available were for paupers in the rear of the burial grounds.

Friends and neighbors of the 19-year-old youth, who was killed in Viet Nam May 19th when grenade fragments ripped into his body, crowded funeral rites at the Newton Church of Christ in Montgomery Sunday.

The flag-draped coffin was buried with full military honors in the Andersonville (Ga.) National Cemetery, a 100 miles from Wetumpka. It was the nearest available funeral site, an Army spokesman said.

Mrs. Williams, a 38-year-old practical nurse, has filed a complaint with the Justice Department. Under the public facilities section of the Civil Rights Act, the government could take the case to court using the mother's complaint as grounds for entering the dispute.

A spokesman for the Justice Department said the department would press the case despite the mother's decision to take the son to Andersonville.

Mrs. Williams said she had reconciled herself to the distant burial.

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“I don’t have any animosity toward anyone. I couldn’t love Christ whom I cannot see, and hate the Mayor. Whatever we sow, we shall reap. If they (the city officials) think they’ve done right, well, maybe they have,” she said.

“I did not want my son buried in an out-of-the-way place for unknown people. My son was not a shoe shine boy like his father. He was a soldier, a paratrooper in the Green Berets.

“He was not fighting a second-class war, and did not die a second-class death,” the grief-stricken mother continued.

“I wanted him to be buried near his home because I know this is what he would have wanted,” she added.

Mrs. Williams says she has been unable to find work since three of her six surviving children entered previously all-white schools in Wetumpka last fall. The town’s population includes some 1,500 colored persons.

Mr. Williams, 49, was a shoeshine boy for the mayor, a barber, 25 years ago. He currently works for a local glass company.

Jimmy, the oldest of the seven Williams children, joined the Army two years ago upon graduating from high school. He was sent to Viet Nam in February.

Last Tuesday his body, guarded by military men, was sent home for burial. A military survivors assistant assigned to aid the Williams family, Lt. Robert L. Kraselsky, said the only site he could acquire in the town was the paupers’ section.

W. T. Goodman, the funeral director handling the arrangements, said there were no cemeteries exclusively for colored persons in the town.

“Someone, somehow always found a plot for the deceased through friends or relatives. Many were buried in countryside cemeteries in the county,” he revealed.

The Rev. Fred Gray, who officiated at the funeral rites, accused city officials of being unconcerned about the death of their first casualty of the Viet Nam war. Not until the burial furor arose did the city fathers bother to express condolences to the family, he said.

Mayor Thrash said that at the present the 200-year-old cemetery has slaves on one side and colored persons on the other, and whites in the middle. “We aren’t going to dig up slave graves for anybody,” he said.

Thrash revealed plans for expansion of the cemetery. "If they want to move the boy back, they're welcome to it," he said.

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