

Black Vietnam veteran denied American Legion membership

By The Associated Press

A black Vietnam veteran who was denied membership in an all-white Florence American Legion post said Thursday the rejection shatters the legion's image of being one big, happy family.

"Personally I'm very disappointed that it turned out this way. I somewhat expected some rejection but I didn't expect it to be of this nature and this magnitude," said Thurmond Thompson, who was denied membership at Fred H. Sexton Post 1 after six veterans voted against him.

The vote on July 3 sparked a heated debate and led to the resignations of at least three members, said Bernie Wollgast, a member of the post's executive committee.

"There was a lot of yelling, fussing, cussing and

carrying on," Wollgast said. "All hell broke loose."

A spokesman at the organization's national office in Indianapolis, Ind., said Thursday that national bylaws prohibit discrimination and the Florence post could lose its charter if the allegations were proven.

A committee of three American Legion officials will investigate the allegations of discrimination and determine whether action should be taken against the post, state commander Norris Kinion said. He said the committee would meet for the first time Monday.

Kinion said the American Legion has had few race-related problems in the past and he believes the allegations, if true, reflect only the views of one post and not the entire organization.

Thompson said he wanted to join the post, which has about 250 members, because it sponsors athletic

teams for many of his friends' children. He was disappointed by the rejection but said he does not plan to protest.

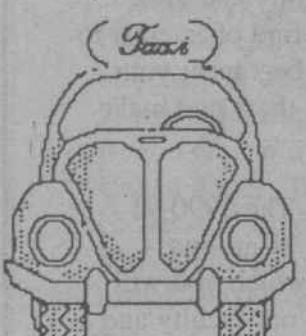
A copyright story in the Florence Morning News on Thursday reported that a former post commander said at the meeting said he did not want to see blacks in the post.

"I don't want one in here," Past Post Commander William D. Leftridge said during debate about the meeting, according to the minutes. "For 70 years since the post was chartered, there hasn't been one in here and I don't want to see it now."

Leftridge did not return messages left Thursday by The Associated Press.

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