

A Day at ASU HQ

PFC Bill Smith (ret.)

1970

Note: The American Serviceman's Union (ASU) is the largest GI anti-war group with close to 10,000 members in dozens of chapters on military bases across the world. The ASU publishes the largest circulation anti-war GI paper, THE BOND, that reports on the struggles of GIs to end the war and their struggles against the brass. The following article originally appeared in THE BOND.

Membership in the ASU is limited to rank-and-file enlisted men and includes receiving "The GIs' Handbook on Military Injustice" and a subscription to the ASU paper. The cost of joining is one dollar per year. Civilian subscriptions to THE BOND cost \$3.00 per year but is free to GIs. The ASU headquarters are at 156 Fifth Avenue Room 538, New York City 10010.

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The American Servicemen's Union headquarters is on the 5th floor of a twelve story building on New York's lower 5th Avenue, some distance from the fancy fashionable part where the well-to-do have their Easter Parade.

The small, crowded office is piled with ASU literature (neatly stacked) and staffed by ex-GIs, who get no pay but work all sorts of hours. If you come in, you will probably first meet Executive Director Bob Lemay.

Slender, with shaggy hair and rolled up sleeves, Bob wears the same sport shirt clothes he did as when he went to town as a GI. And if you have a problem he'll talk it over with you just like a fellow GI in the barracks—except that working with thousands of cases handled by the Union, Bob has become something of an expert on many problems.

For instance, a GI on leave calls the ASU number in New York from a telephone booth somewhere in New Jersey. Although he and a bunch of guys in his unit belong to the Union, he personally has never written or called the Union except to request his subscription to the Union paper, THE BOND.

He has his copy of his BOND in his hand now. Wrapped inside the BOND are his Army orders to report to Oakland, California for duty in Vietnam. He's not going!

Bob Lemay, Executive Director of the ASU, is on the receiving end of the call. After a few short introductions, the real story unfolds.

"Where are you now?" "I'm home on leave. I'm supposed to report to Oakland in two weeks. I'm not going. I told my draft board that I wouldn't go if the Army tried to send me, but they took me anyway."

Bob tells the man to come to the office and talk. He explains that the people that staff the office are, like himself, ex-GIs and some are Vietnam vets who are more than sympathetic to his problem. A date is set.

Organizationally, the American Servicemen's Union (specifically the Union center in New York) has a story uniquely its own. I mean that our Union because of its own special concerns and responsibilities as a union of rank and file enlisted men has its own-problems and often has new approaches to old ones.

Bob has hardly put down the phone when a basic trainee from Dix, who has been writing to the Union for several weeks about his training company and its sadistic commanding officer, walks into the office and informs Bob that he has refused to train.

“Our CO is pushing us hard because he knows that most of the guys are shipping after AIT to Nam. I have a medical disability that they’ve refused to recognize. I just walked out. I need a civilian doctor’s evaluation.”

Now, the New York office people are faced with a problem. Although the Union aims to provide sound legal advice and often (based on the case) legal counsel to all Union members, it can’t guarantee that special kind of help to all the hardship and disability cases that now-and then come through the office.

Bob and all the Union members at the center know what it means to be separated from the world and virtually enslaved by some pig General and his puppet doctors. But what do you do when a brother walks in with an immediate problem that he can’t ignore, like this guy from Dix who has severe pains in his groin.

Well, you do everything in your power to help him, because he is your brother and this is his Union and if you can’t help him it’s because the pigs are still keeping all of us down.

Five of the regular New York staff are there now. Ed Rader, an organizer from Ft. Lewis, John Lewis (who ran the SPD news at Ft. Dix), Bob Lemay and Dick Wheaton (who were among the first Union organizers at Ft. Sill) and Andy Stapp, the Union’s chairman.

Nobody’s lounging around. Everybody has an assignment they’re working on. At first the guy from Jersey is stunned. He’s seen action like this before in his orderly room and at the headquarters detachment. A bunch of guys, like himself, filing and stacking, typing and answering phones, but these guys are working against the Brass, not for them.

Some of them were clerks, some of them infantry men in Nam, but all of them are turning around every bit of knowledge they have of the military machine that spit on them for two or three years and using that knowledge against it.

After some telephone calls by Bob and some quick hustling from another Union staffer, the man returns to Dix with a civilian doctor’s evaluation of his problem. Hopefully, though, he’ll soon feel strong enough to organize some other men in his unit to the Union.

What this brother has seen is a little of the action at the Union center, which is working six and seven days (and nights) a week to reach out to guys (who are often hundreds and thousands of miles away) to help build, strengthen, organize and coordinate our GI power.

Union Demands

1. The right to refuse to obey illegal orders—like orders to fight in the illegal, imperialist war in Vietnam.
2. Election of officers by vote of the men.
3. An end to saluting and sir-ing of officers.
4. The right of black- and brown-skinned servicemen to determine their own lives free from the oppression of any racist whites. No troops to be sent into black or Spanish-speaking communities.
5. No troops to be used against anti-war demonstrators.
6. No troops to be used against workers on strike.
7. Rank-and-file control of court-martial boards.
8. The right of free political association.
9. Federal minimum wages.

10. The right of collective bargaining.

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