

GI in Mutiny Trial

Bob Seingrass

Liberation News Service/The Movement

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif.—Twenty-seven GIs at San Francisco's Presidio Army Base stockade face the death penalty for staging a non-violent sit-down to protest the Oct. 11 murder of a fellow prisoner.

The victim, Richard Bunch, 19, was mentally ill. He had gone AWOL, returned to his home in Ohio, and told his mother he had died and been reborn as a warlock, able to kill enemy soldiers at a glance.

His mother turned him in when she received assurances that her son would be given psychiatric care.

Instead, he was sent to the Presidio and confined there with 140 other prisoners in a stockade built to hold one-fourth that many.

Before his murder, Bunch had written several suicide notes. He often woke up screaming in the night and carried on long conversations with himself. He received no psychiatric help.

On the day of his death, he scrawled a rough note; "Very well, since they want me I'll do it. Well, if you're not going to give me love at least do me the favor of complete elimination. But one click and it's over."

The Murder

That day Bunch was working on a shotgun detail (four prisoners and a shotgun-toting guard). He asked the guard, "what will you do if I run?" The guard replied that Bunch would have to run to find out. Bunch ran. The shotgun blast tore off the back of his head. The range was so close that pellets entering his back came out the front of his chest.

The other prisoners on the detail witnessed the murder. They were outraged. That night there was a minor riot in the stockade during which windows were broken.

The following day, Saturday, October 12, during the GI peace march, four AWOL GIs turned themselves in. That weekend the stockade buzzed with discussion of Bunch's murder, of the four returnees, and of the nine other GIs at the base who previously had refused to go to Vietnam.

Conditions in the stockade are vile—140 men serviced by four toilets, one sink and one shower. Guards are untrained and uncensored. Some are sadists—beatings are frequent. In the past months, five prisoners have attempted suicide,

O'Hara, the killer guard, has disappeared, presumably in accordance with the Army policy of giving such men immediate favorable transfers to the bases of their choice. No charges were brought against him. The prisoners agreed that something had to be done.

The Sit-Down

On Monday morning, when the men were assigned to their work details, 28 of them (one has since recanted and given evidence against the others) walked over to one side, sat down and began to sing “We Shall Overcome” and “America the Beautiful.” They all signed a petition seeking an investigation of the murder and the terrible treatment of the prisoners.

Guards shouted, the non-striking prisoners buzzed, and Captain Lamont ran out to order the protesters back to work.

He grabbed a microphone and then stood in front of the loud speaker, so that the men got a double dose of Sec. 94 of the Code of Military Justice, the Mutiny Act, which forbids disobedience “in concert,” to an order. But the noise being made by the guards, prisoners, singers and the two voices of Captain Lamont made the orders impossible to hear.

Finally the guards led or carried the protesters away, one by one, into solitary. There was no violence.

The Charge

The actual charge of mutiny was not placed until ten days later, apparently after the brass had consulted with Washington and the Pentagon. The charge carries a possible death penalty. If convicted, the men might expect a “lenient” sentence of perhaps 20 years at hard labor.

These protesters are typical soldiers—they are against the war and hate the military. Discipline among enlisted men has broken down and morale is dropping daily. More than 80% of the prisoners are in the stockade for going AWOL; for most, it is not the first or even the second offense. One soldier is in for slugging a sergeant and a lieutenant, another for disobeying orders to go to Vietnam. All the men are white. Most are high school dropouts; none are college graduates. A little over half were draftees while most of the others enlisted to avoid the draft. Most had their first encounters with anti-establishment, anti-military attitudes in the Haight-Ashbury, frequently a sanctuary for military fugitives. The average age in the stockade is 18-1/2.

Only ministers, lawyers and families may visit the prisoners. Two of the GIs who participated in the sit-down are Steve Rowland and Keith Mather. Other names are not available. Letters should be sent to: The Stockade, San Francisco Presidio, San Francisco, California, 94129.

Related

“Presidio Mutiny Trial Ends,” FE #81, June 12–25, 1969

Read more at the [Fifth Estate Vietnam Resource Page](#)

fifth Estate

Bob Seingrass
GIs in Mutiny Trial

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/67-november-28-december-11-1968/gis-in-mutiny-trial>
Fifth Estate #67, November 28-December 11, 1968

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net