

“I Am Tom Sincavitch”

Fifth Estate Collective

1969

The scene is a church located in the heart of Detroit's Inner City.

A small army of some 40 agents of the State roar up to the church, force their way in, and demand a man named Tom Sincavitch.

About 43 young men, all wearing nametags reading: “I am Tom Sincavitch,” identify themselves as the wanted man.

Identities are checked, fingerprints examined, and 15 minutes after the raid began, Tom Sincavitch has been dragged from the church and is on his way to confinement at a military post.

You see, Tom Sincavitch, a 27-year-old commercial artist who lives in Detroit, is a deserter. He “resigned” from the U.S. Army Reserves on June 1, 1968, after 4-1/2 years of service.

He joined in September, 1963, when faced with the threat of conscription. But he became increasingly disenchanted with the military, and conversely, more deeply committed to peace.

The last straw for Sincavitch came when he, along with 400,000 other reservists, was ordered to take “riot training” in anticipation of another “long hot summer.”

“After just one day of this, the hypocrisy and racism evident in the training as a total concept made an immediate decision on my part mandatory,” Sincavitch said in a public statement.

“I realized then that I had been stalling a confrontation with the military that was inevitable,” he stated, “and realized that there was no use in trying to prove the sincerity of my beliefs or my moral position to a system which I consider immoral.”

His “resignation” earned him the title of “deserter,” a charge difficult to prove, and carrying a penalty of up to five years in prison and a dishonorable discharge. Chances are, that since the nation is not officially at war with the people of Vietnam, Sincavitch could wind up being charged with being absent without official leave (AWOL) which carries a penalty of up to six months in prison.

Sincavitch was ordered to active duty with the Army unit his reserve was attached to, the Fifth Army, in October. He didn't go. He recently learned the FBI was looking for him with a desertion warrant. The story was confirmed when they came to his place of employment looking for him.

He didn't make it hard for them to find him.

He took sanctuary in St. Joseph's Episcopal Church, on Woodward Ave., between King and Holbrook on Monday March 10. He was joined by a varying number of other Sincavitches who lived in the church, sleeping in sleeping bags, and cooking in the church kitchen, and waiting for the FBI to show.

The wait wasn't long. At 3:30 pm, Wednesday, March 12, they came.

A church secretary, Marjorie Ives, said she saw them arrive in the alley behind the church.

“I hit the ‘bust button,’ a buzzer to the church kitchen, and screamed that the bust had come,” she said. “But it was too late, the agents were all over the place.”

The agents, armed with a crowbar, forced their way into a side door.

Tommie Suber, who was one of the 43 Sincavitches in the church, tried to block the door. He was turned upside-down and dropped on his head, then arrested for assaulting a federal officer.

All of the Sincavitches were rounded up and forced to sit in the pews. The suspects were interrogated until only Bernie McCoy and the real Sincavitch were left. Agents seized the hand of the second man and compared his fingerprints under a magnifying glass, with those of Sincavitch.

"This is the one," growled Paul Stoddard, head of Detroit's FBI office. "Let's go."

The rector of the church, Rev. Robert E. Morrison commented: "We have to figure out what to do next. The church was always open, but they busted in and began pushing our people around. It was a non-violent action on our part, but not on theirs. I'm a non-violent man, but I don't know how much longer I can remain so. We just saw justice in action."

Morrison was almost in tears as he spoke. Many of the other Sincavitches were openly weeping. "No one resisted them," Morrison added, "They could have affected a peaceful arrest."

Sincavitch was sped away to Fort Wayne, the Army induction center on Jefferson and Livernois in Detroit. About 150 of his supporters held a peaceful candlelight vigil at the fort that night. Sincavitch wasn't in the fort, however.

Sincavitch arrived at Fort Riley, Kansas shortly after noon March 13. Fort Riley is a detention center used by the Fifth Army. He had spent the night at the Fifth Army's headquarters in Chicago.

His attorney, James Lafferty, explained that the desertion charge is credible only if the accused has made an overt act to escape. Sincavitch tried to fool no one about his whereabouts.

Desertion can be charged, however, if a soldier has been AWOL for more than 30 days. Lafferty isn't quite sure whether he'll represent Sincavitch at his court martial, whatever the charge.

"Tom doesn't want any traditional legal representation," Lafferty said. "It was never our intent to go battling into court, using fancy legal stuff. Tom feels that his position is more moral and political than legal."

Sincavitch explained it in his statement: "I am no longer able to support the military machine that seeks to enslave the bodies and minds of men and make them accomplices to these crimes."

He bore witness because: "I am proud to be able to make this statement because I think all of us realize that our responsibility is to life, not unjust laws, and share the hope that everyone will someday be united to that purpose."

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Fifth Estate #75, March 20-April 2, 1969

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