

Life with the Guard

Liberation News Service

BERKELEY, Calif. (LNS)—The National Guard pulled out of Berkeley the morning of June 3 at 6 o'clock.

People's Park, which they had occupied for over two weeks has been left to a handful of Burns Agency rent-a-cops, who wander forlornly about the perimeter of the fenced-in lot.

What was it like to have the National Guard come to town?

The Guard has been a regular summer visitor to America's ghettos, but Guardsmen and white students have just begun to make one another's acquaintance. Since America's ruling circles are opting for armed repression of the student movement, the experience in Berkeley is especially useful.

In the space of two weeks both guardsmen and the people of Berkeley went through a lot of changes.

A good number of the men, it was quite clear, were our brothers—students and younger faculty from University of California campuses, San Francisco State and other nearby colleges. If they had had any control over their lives, they would have been out in the street with us fighting for the park.

And, as we later found out, many brothers did not answer their phones or pleaded illness when they found out their unit was being called up and deployed in Berkeley.

Sometimes these men took opportunities to show that they were on our side.

A group of guardsmen phoned the People's Park headquarters at the Free Church one night to announce they were contributing all the money they made on active duty to the bail fund. One man came all the way to my house to buy "Free the Park" buttons to distribute to his comrades.

Ten guardsmen announced in a group to their officers that they had friends in Berkeley and would refuse to shoot if the order were given. They were put on permanent duty at the Berkeley Marina, two miles from campus, where they occupied themselves sailing boats.

Not all the Guard was so friendly. Except for the fact that almost all of them were white, the guardsmen were a real cross-section of American military aged men.

No one wants to be on active duty, but there were a good many of them who accepted with relish the task Governor Reagan laid on them. In civilian life, many of these men own or work in small businesses; some are cops.

These law and order freaks were just itching for the chance to bust open a few heads.

A friendly citizen who asked one of them what the patch on his uniform meant, got the answer: "That stands for how many hippies I've killed!" Someone else, after his attempts at fraternization, got a bayonet slash in his back.

Most guardsmen fell uncomfortably somewhere between the brothers and the law and order freaks. They were angry and confused by the whole situation, but they did not know where to direct their hostility.

Were they to blame the street people or Ronald Reagan? the university or their officers? Mostly they just wanted to be left alone to live out their lives somewhere downstate from Berkeley, making payments on the car and spending Sunday with the family.

These civilians discovered to their chagrin that their officers were gleefully playing war: reveille at dawn, marching in formation, guard duty in shifts, rations from tin plates.

As the days dragged on in the fenced-in compound which had once been a park, Army life got to them more and more. Like their less fortunate comrades on active duty, they found that the easiest way to cope with Army inhumanity was drugs.

When a new unit was readied in the morning to relieve his troops in the park, men were popping bennies as they climbed into the trucks. Inside the Park stashes of marijuana were laid behind the trees.

For these men who knew something was rotten, but didn't know just what, fraternization had a real impact. The word had gone out on the streets of Berkeley as soon as the Guard arrived that Guardsmen were not pigs. They were people very much like ourselves, and, like ourselves, victims of a system they could not control.

So, from the first day, Berkeley people made a special effort to explain themselves and the Park to the troops. During the calm periods, you could see Guardsmen rapping with people on every street corner. Stacks of leaflets went under jackets to be passed out and read when the brass turned its back.

The officers very quickly perceived that fraternization was taking a real toll on the morale of their troops. A standard pep talk was developed for officers to give to units ready to be trucked up for duty in the park. This spiel was recounted by one Guard as follows:

“Those hippie women up there are going to try to taunt you with their breasts...(cheer from the troops)...They're going to give you food, but don't eat it because it's full of hallucinogenic drugs...(another cheer from the troops)...don't accept any subversive literature either...or flowers. Anyone disobeys these orders will be subject to court martial...(dead silence from the troops).”

But the desire to know and the spirit of the people was greater than army discipline. Reams of leaflets continued to disappear among the troops; guardsmen kept showing up at centers of radical activities; V-signs kept flashing out of the troop transports.

Our cause and our analysis were discussed and debated among the troops.

Our feelings of love and our desire for community were recognized as real and legitimate by many who had never even thought about the possibility of such things in America.

Calling out the Guard in Berkeley may have had effects Governor Reagan never dreamed of.

Back at home, spending Sunday with the family and paying off the car, men may be thinking new and dangerous and beautiful thoughts.

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