

Selfridge: No more shit

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Racism has been heavy at Selfridge Air Force Base, twenty miles north of Detroit, for quite a while. Especially in the last year, there have been numerous incidents, and a great deal of harassment and intimidation of black airmen and air women (WAFs).

Colonel Harold Lund, the commander at Selfridge, is completely ineffectual in dealing with the problem, although one is not sure whether it is through incompetence or design.

The incidents are as varied as the honky mind. Repeated incidents, however, include threats to blacks who wear Afro hair styles, both through discipline and physical threats.

The former generally come from the brass and NCOs, the latter from the enlisted personnel who know that very little 'if anything will happen to them so long as they limit the outlets for their aggression to the black GIs.

Other incidents include the assignment of blacks to jobs of lower responsibility than whites of equal rank; the condoned failure of whites to follow the orders of black NCOs; intimidation of blacks who gather together socially (when a group of blacks got together in the servicemen's club to plan a charity campaign for some starving children in Georgia, they were investigated by CID—intelligence—and accused of holding "black Power meetings.")

Finally, on August 26 of this year the final straw occurred.

Four Black WAFs came out of their barracks planning to drive over to the servicemens' club.

When they arrived at Sgt. Marion Whitfield's car, they found it sprayed heavily with shaving cream and the phrases "NIGGER" and "QUIET NIGGER" clearly etched in the foam. They called the Security Police, who told them to "forget it."

No real investigation was conducted. However, the four black women had had trouble for months with a group of white WAFs who consistently bombarded them with racial epithets and other abuse.

In June, Marion Whitfield had a fight with Nancy Morin, one of the ringleaders of the white group.

So when, after leaving the scene of this latest incident, they came upon Morin and another WAF rummaging around in the trunk of Morin's car a few blocks from the scene of the "spraying," they stopped to ask her if she knew anything about the incident.

Morin and her companion, Sara Jones, had been drinking beer since about 4:30 that afternoon. It was now almost 10:30 and they were quite well juiced.

When Evelyn James, a 20 year old black WAF, and friend of Whitfield, went up to the car to ask Morin about the spraying of Whitfield's car, Morin said, "I don't have to tell nothing to no nigger."

Repeated inquiries led to nothing but further abuse, so the four blacks turned to leave. Morin then charged Evelyn James. A fight ensued. As described by Sgt. Bracely, a black member of the Security Police force who happened to see the fight:

"Well, how should I describe it. Morin lowered her head like a bull and came for James. But James—I don't know—James did a fancy little side step and when Morin swung, James caught her with a left hook and Morin went down. Three times Morin tried to charge James and three times James got the best of her."

Finally the fight was broken up and all parties were ordered back to their barracks. The four black WAFs obeyed, but Morin and Jones did not.

They went and cried on the shoulder of their Lieutenant, a honky who has since been transferred on orders from Washington because of her blatant racism (Lund, the base commander did nothing about her).

Then they went, probably in the company of at least five to ten other WAFs to the barracks where James, Whitfield and two other friends were in their room.

They entered the barracks and pounded on the door. "You black ass nigger come on out," they screamed, Morin in the lead. For about five minutes they banged on the door and screamed, until the police, called by Whitfield, came to the barracks.

Then, when James and Whitfield came out to explain to the police what had happened, they were ordered back in the barracks, told to stop making trouble, and the whites, not the blacks, were questioned about what happened.

A few days later James was charged with disorderly conduct for the fight with Morin.

Although Morin admitted her guilt and accepted a mild administrative punishment, James, with the support of many brothers and sisters on the base, decided they'd had enough of that shit. They turned down the administrative punishment, and demanded a special court martial.

They then sought out two civilian attorneys, Marc Stickgold, who had previously beaten the brass at Selfridge when they unsuccessfully tried to court-martial an anti-war GI for distributing underground papers, and Herman Anderson, a black lawyer recommended by Rep. John Conyers' office.

Then, together with the white GIs who publish "Broken Arrow," the underground anti-war paper at Selfridge, they began to organize for the day of the court martial. Brothers and sisters were urged to fill the courtroom. A civilian demonstration outside the base was planned. And the list of witnesses, to include Colonel Lund, was prepared.

The court martial was going to become a trial of the racism at Selfridge.

The Air Force freaked out. They flew in a Military Judge from an air base in Florida. They flew in a military prosecutor from an air base in Virginia. They had to borrow a court reporter from the Army.

On October 7, the day of the court-about forty to fifty pickets showed up outside the gate protesting the trial of Evelyn James, racism in the Air Force, and the war in Viet Nam.

The popular slogan "NO VIETNAMESE EVER CALLED ME NIGGER" was the theme. There were probably more different kinds of pigs at that demonstration than any demonstration since Chicago. Air Force Intelligence, Security Police, Macomb County Sheriff, Mt. Clemens Police, all made an appearance.

The first day of the court martial was spent arguing over many legal motions.

The two most important were that the defense insisted on trying the issue of "racism," since only in its full context could the fight between James and Morin be understood.

Second, the defense insisted that a key witness, Eva Griffin, who had been mysteriously transferred to Alaska two weeks after the fight, be returned to testify, since her testimony clearly established who started the fight.

The judge gave in half-way on both motions. He allowed a tape recording of a long distance telephone conversation with Griffin, arranged on his order, to be introduced instead of her actual testimony. And he allowed racism to be an issue so long as it related to the defendant, Evelyn James.

The second day the prosecution pranced out seven witnesses, each one of whom told a completely different story.

The defense attorneys, Stickgold and Anderson, took turns mutilating the stories of the first five. The last two, two black Security policemen who just happened on the scene, told a more truthful story and established that a drunken Morin had been the clear aggressor and that the incident was a racial one. Then the prosecution rested its case.

The first defense witness was to have been Colonel Lund. They were going to establish not only that the prosecution of James was based on her race (you can't let a "nigger" get the best of a white in a fight), but that there was a long history at the base of his overlooking incidents of attacks on blacks, and condoning harassment of blacks.

Evidence was available to prove that the Air Force ordered an investigation at Selfridge some months ago because of the racial trouble, and that the major who visited the base recommended a full-scale investigation. Nothing was done.

Many other such proofs were available to slaughter Lund on the stand. But the defense never got the chance.

After the prosecution's case, the defense moved for a judgment of not guilty on the grounds that the government hasn't proved anything—let alone beyond a reasonable doubt. The testimony was conflicting and obviously full of lies, and the only two witnesses who could be believed fully substantiated James' side of the story.

The judge saw an easy way out. He could save Lund his embarrassment, smooth over the situation temporarily and get back to Florida. He granted the motion and entered a not guilty verdict. James was free.

The case has significance far beyond the courageous black woman named Evelyn James who stood up to the brass' shit and won. It accomplished two very important political goals.

First, it pulled the blacks on the base together as never before. They now fully realize that power comes through mass political struggle, and' are committed to support any brother Who gets hassled.

Second, a previous Understandable distrust of whites, even the anti-war GIs who write the "Broken Arrow," has broken down and the blacks are willing to work with them on political issues.

So the movement in the military grows. Detroiters should realize that it is not only Fort Jackson, Fort Dix and the Presidio where GIs are organizing, but right in their own back yard—at formerly quiet little Selfridge. Support them!

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