

Fort Dix Riot Trial Starts

Liberation News Service

1969

But in two days of court martial proceedings (Nov. 4 and 5), the Army has been able to get only two scared young GIs—both of whom admit having been threatened with charges of their own if they refused to help the prosecution—to testify against Jeffrey Russell, first of the four to come to trial.

The Army's other two eyewitnesses, Pvt. Alan Farrell and Airman. John Lisk, brought shocked and angry flushes to the faces of the Army's two ambitious young prosecutors when they refused to testify against Russell.

"I forgot what answer they told me to say," said Farrell in answer to prosecution questions about Russell's actions before the rebellion. Farrell said he had talked to Russell on the night of the outbreak, but he explained, "I have a very bad memory and I don't recall the conversation."

Farrell, who is himself faced with lesser charges arising out of the rebellion, explained that the Army had offered him immunity if he testified against Russell.

He explained that previous statements he made to Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID) agents were made under duress. "I said everything they wanted me to say," he replied to prosecution questions about his earlier statements.

Airman Lisk pleaded article 31 (the Army version of the 5th Amendment) when asked about his knowledge of Russell's part in the rebellion. The Army, however, granted him immunity from prosecution for the rebellion, thus depriving him of his 5th amendment rights.

The most serious testimony against Russell—who is charged with riot, aggravated-arson and solicitation to riot—was given by Pvt. Joseph Pettet. Pettet claimed to have seen Russell throw the first foot locker out of the barracks window, and yell, "Okay you guys, let's go."

He also claims to have seen Russell set fire to various pieces of paper placed around the barracks.

Defense cross examination reduced Pettet's testimony to a pathetic jumble of contradictions. Pettet, who has been court martialed three times and says he has been AWOL (for periods exceeding 30 days) about eight times, once since the rebellion, admitted that, "CID said it would help me if I told them what I saw."

Pettet, shuffled from barracks to barracks by the Army, joined Russell's cell block only three days before the rebellion. He says he never talked to anyone in the cell block and knew the names of only three men in the block—Russell, Bill Brakefield, and Thomas Catlow—coincidentally all three are among the four defendants picked to be scapegoats by the Army. Pushed by the defense, he could not produce the name of a single other GI from among the other 65 confined in his cell block.

Asked how he learned Russell's name, he said he had heard it at roll call. Russell, it turns out, had been absent from roll call that day.

By any standard, the Army's case is weak. The problem, however, is that the Army may not need a case.

The Dix stockade rebellion—which involved 150 angry GIs, and led to a march of 10,000 protesters right onto the fort itself—has embarrassed and angered the Army. And the judges who will decide the case are almost all high officers personally picked by the Ft. Dix commandant, General Collins. They are the main people responsible for maintaining the Army's control over its men.

The Army's strategy has been to make an example of four of the most politically vocal GIs, and to bribe and threaten other participants into testifying against them.

The fact that the brass was only able to get two of the 150 GIs involved in the rebellion to testify against their brothers is a tribute to the courage of the stockade rebels.

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