

Fort Dix Trial

Liberation News Service

1969

FORT DIX, N.J. (LNS)—The Army has decided to take three years of Jeffrey Russell's life.

"It's a total fraud," says one establishment reporter.

The *New York Post* reporter refuses to stand for the court. One of the MP guards can't quite keep his eyes dry as Cathy Russell screams "Why are you doing this to us!" and starts to climb up to the Judge's rostrum, probably to kill him, if only she could. "You jive mother fuckers," mutters a black GI, and another one, white, runs out of the courtroom screaming "Stinking pigs!" He's arrested.

From the time the grim Court Martial ritual began there was never any doubt that the army was going to hang Russell for his part in last June's Fort Dix stockade rebellion. But in some corner of ourselves we preserve an inextinguishable ability to be shocked.

"They didn't even take the trouble to make it look good," says another stunned establishment reporter.

Forty clenched fists go up, and forty spectators rise to their feet. "Free Jeff Russell! Free Jeff Russell!" over and over again. The courtroom shakes. Outside the chanting continues. One demonstrator is beaten.

The others, encircled by MP's, are dragged into a waiting bus. "Free Jeff Russell, free Bobby Seale, free all political prisoners, free the Fort Dix 38, free the Fort Dix 32,000. GIs are our brothers," they chant from inside the bus. Most of the MP's act as slowly as they can without getting themselves into trouble.

"Most of us don't want anything to do with this shit," one of them had said just a few minutes earlier, "but the day you do what you believe in the Army is the day you go to the stockade."

From inside the courtroom, Cathy Russell shrieks, "They're trying to take him away from me."

Five MP's rush Russell to a waiting car. As the car pulls off, he flashes a handcuffed fist through the back window.

In four days of Court Martial proceedings, the Army could get only three scared young GIs to testify about Russell's role in the rebellion, in which 150 GI inmates of the stockade busted up their barracks, throwing footlockers through windows and setting mattresses afire.

Two of these could testify only that Russell had mentioned that a protest against the treatment of prisoners was in order. The only prosecution witness that claimed to have seen Russell actually do anything (he said he saw Russell toss the first footlocker, holler "let's go" and light fires) was as much an embarrassment to the Army as a help.

Pvt. Joseph Pettet, who said he had been court-martialed three times and AWOL (for more than 30 days) eight times, once since the rebellion, admitted that "CID (the Army's Criminal Investigation Division) said it would help me if I told them what I saw."

Pettet, who was transferred to Russell's barracks only a day or two before the rebellion, could not produce the name of a single one of the 65 GI's in the barracks—"except" as Russell's lawyer, Mrs. Vladick, put it, "he curiously learned the names of three of the four men charged as defendants for the events of June 5—Russell, Brakefield and Katlow."

Pettet said he spent the evening of the rebellion on his bunk reading the Bible.

The most dramatic moment of the trial came when the prosecution's star witness, Pvt. Alan Farrell, was asked about Russell's activities and told the Army's ambitious young prosecutor, "I forgot what answer you told me to say to that."

He said that the Army had promised him immunity on charges of his own, stemming from the rebellion, if he testified against Russell. He explained that his pre-trial statement to CID had been made under duress—"I just signed everything they wanted me to say," he told the startled and fuming prosecutor. The Army does not let Farrell's kind of courage go unpunished. They are going after him with perjury charges.

Another prosecution witness, Airman John Lisk, also defied the prosecution by refusing to testify against Russell, pleading the Fifth Amendment. While the Army's case reeked of incompetence and intimidation, the defense produced five witnesses, with closely corroborating testimony to the effect that Russell had been watching TV when the disturbance broke out; and gotten as far from the barracks as possible as things developed.

But the Army didn't need a case. They're sitting on a powder keg at Dix, and they know only one way to react—pick a few of the most politically vocal GIs out of the 150 rebels and let them serve as a warning and an example of Army vengeance to the rest.

Maintaining that terror is more urgent to them than public relations—in spite of a disgusted press, and in spite of 10,000 demonstrators who invaded the Fort itself last October 12, and vowed to come back if every one of the Fort Dix 38 originally charged for the rebellion was not freed.

Jeff Russell testified about the conditions that brought on the rebellion and about his own treatment in the stockade.

He spent the last five months, since the rebellion, in solitary confinement. For his first five days in solitary confinement he was on the stockade's famous disciplinary diet (3 cups of water a day, a couple of two-inch pancakes and a bowl of dry cereal for breakfast, a small spoon of mashed potatoes and a small spoon of vegetables for lunch), and forbidden to communicate, even by letter, to lawyers, wife or anyone in the outside world. He was in solitary for two weeks before he was told the charges against him.

With unbelievable calm and restraint, Jeffrey told of having mail to wife and lawyers interfered with, of being denied medical care (the Army will give him only temporary filling, "I'm getting cavities within my temporary fillings), of being denied access to the religious articles of his Buddhist faith, of having his visits with his wife denied, interrupted or harassed, and of having been beaten six times in the stockade, twice since the rebellion.

He told of having been beaten and dragged by handcuffs (so tight his hand is still damaged) through the compound by a guard who told him that if others came to his aid, he would be killed.

"He was trying to provoke the guys to help me so he could kill me," Russell said.

Russell, the son of a Protestant Navy lieutenant colonel explained that he became a Buddhist because Buddhism teaches that, "We should be willing to accept that all living organisms have as much a right to live as yourself. Being a Buddhist means that you should never unnecessarily take the life of another being."

Mistreatment of prisoners is not unusual in the stockade. It was, in fact, the beating of one prisoner and the confining to solitary of another (for demanding a water bowl at dinner) that sparked the original rebellion.

"The Army has to have something worse than Vietnam to threaten GIs with, otherwise nobody would risk their life for that damn war," a soldier explained.

In mitigation hearings, just prior to sentencing, a brave Cathy Russell took the stand. She told how stockade officials had refused to let Jeffrey know that he had a baby until days after Jeffrey Russell Jr.'s birth. She told of having to remarry her husband in the stockade, because the Army didn't recognize their Buddhist wedding in dependency allotments, and of having been threatened and physically pushed around during her often-interrupted visits with her husband.

"One Sergeant said he'd make sure I never got to see my husband again," she said. She also told of a sergeant who "said he would drive me to the airport and then drove me all around New Jersey saying he would get Jeff off if I'd go home with him."

The judges look like blown up bull frogs with fangs, as they squat in an identical row behind their bar.

"I don't understand what's inside you. I don't understand the looks on your faces," Cathy Russell tells them. One of them smirks; the other faces remain stone.

It's almost impossible to watch. If you're a revolutionary, you're supposed to know that people aren't born frogs. You try to understand that once they must have been something like Jeff and Cathy's little baby who's sleeping through this important moment in his life. But all you really want to do is beat their expressionless faces in.

The Army has good reason to be uptight.

"Our C.O. told us that if any of us came to watch the Court Martial there'd be more than just the Fort Dix 38 in the stockade" says a GI. "Our whole company is going on sick call Moratorium day," he says. "We're just about all Vietnam vets. One thing we noticed over there is that the Cong are everywhere—like, man, they are the people. Don't nobody want to go over there."

The Army knows enough not to trust its soldiers. When 10,000 demonstrators marched onto the Fort in support of the Fort Dix 38, the Army was afraid that the Dix GIs might not have their hearts in defending the Fort against them. So they had to call in troops from Fort Meade, Maryland, to do the guarding—to "supplement" the 32,000 soldiers at Dix, the Army explained.

"Next time I'll send them out empty," says the man who filled up the tear gas tanks from which the demonstrators were sprayed.

The Army also knows enough to have nine MP's guarding the courtroom and two companies waiting on alert. They didn't know that one of the MP guards asked for a fist button to wear inside his uniform jacket.

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