

The Presidio mutiny, 1968 - Randy Rowland



A personal account by a participant of the Presidio mutiny, a sitdown protest of soldiers in military prison against the killing of an inmate during the Vietnam war. 27 mutineers then faced the death penalty, which triggered national outrage.

The San Francisco newspaper merely reported that a prisoner at the Presidio Stockade had been shot and killed by a guard. It was Friday, October 11th, 1968. Knowing that I would most likely end up in the stockade the next day, I was asked to investigate what was going on inside, and report it to the anti-war movement.

Saturday a massive demonstration was to be held in San Francisco: "GIs and Vets march for peace." 10,000 or more people would march in the demo. Four of us, AWOL from the military, were to turn ourselves in to military authorities at the end of the march.

The Brass, worried about the growing GI anti-war movement, tried to prevent active duty GIs from going to the demo through harassment and blatantly restricting whole units to base for the weekend. In spite of this, many GIs and vets marched in the demonstration. Afterwards there was a small ceremony at the gates to the Presidio Army Base and I stepped over the line, into the custody of the awaiting MPs. I had been on orders to go to Vietnam (a common unofficial punishment for having applied for noncombatant status). On the advice of my lawyer, I had gone AWOL to avoid shipment. I hadn't been on a military base in over 3 months. I was nervous-word on the street was that there was a lot of brutality going on in the stockade.

Much to my surprise, the military authorities decided to put me in a holding company instead of confining me in the stockade. By now it was early evening, and I tried to think of how to

deal with this unexpected development. I couldn't find out what was going on in the stockade if I wasn't in it. The Sergeant on duty in the orderly room was the kind of guy all the jokes about military mentality are based on. I walked in and announced "I'm refusing to sweep this floor on grounds of conscience!" It didn't occur to the Sarge that nobody had asked me to do anything. He immediately found a broom and thrust it in my face growling, "I'm giving you an order to sweep this floor, and I don't want lip, just assholes and elbows." I wouldn't take the broom. His face was a study in self-righteous determination as he handcuffed me to a chair. Half hour later, I found myself in the Presidio Stockade.

It didn't take long to hear the story of how the guard had shotgunned a prisoner at close range, how there had been a riot on Friday night in response to the murder. The prisoners were angry, and wanted to escalate the struggle. I found Keith Mather, one of the "Nine for Peace," GIs who had chained themselves to clergymen in a San Francisco church in protest to the war. He and I and a few others started going around talking to prisoners calling for a meeting later at night in the cellblock. People debated the options hotly and finally agreed on a sit-down demonstration in the stockade yard on Monday morning. We drew up a list of demands, including investigations into the murder of the prisoner, protests against stockade conditions, opposition to the war and racist harassment of Blacks. I passed a copy of the list to my lawyer Sunday morning and reported back that he would set up support on the outside. We spent the rest of the weekend debating each other and the rest of the prisoners about why it was important to do the action, how important it was to connect with the civilian movement, and what the likely consequences of our protest would be.

Monday, October 14th, 1968 was a cool but clear day. The inmates stood tensely in morning formation. None of us was sure if anyone else would do it. But on cue 27 of us broke ranks and walked over to a grassy spot in the yard, singing "We Shall Overcome." We sat down, linked arms and continued to sing. The Sgt. in charge was yelling. Moments later the Commandant arrived and tried to order us to return to the formation. We sang louder. He tried to read us the articles of mutiny. We drowned him out, pouring our souls into the song. Walter Polowski, who had agreed to be our spokesman, stood up and read the list of grievances and demands. When the Brass tried to speak, we burst into song again.

A CID photographer came into the compound and began taking our photos for "evidence." We knew the penalty for mutiny was death, but in a wildly elated way we didn't care. We were going up against the motherfuckers, we were taking our stand. They brought firemen up to squirt us with their hoses, but the firemen refused to do it. We kept singing. They brought in a company of MPs with riot gear and gas masks. We feared the worst, but kept singing. Finally the MPs moved in and picked us up one at a time and carried us back into the cells. The demonstration was over, but the storms were only about to begin. We were charged with mutiny, the most serious military offense. As the Regulations put it, "there is no maximum sentence." The reason mutiny is considered so serious is that not only is it going up against the Brass, it is done in concert with others.

The image of GIs facing the electric chair for singing "We Shall Overcome" sent a shock wave through the community. And after the first several mutineers to be tried got 14, 15, and 16 years each, there was a national uproar which contributed greatly to the general disillusionment about the system that was growing throughout the land and especially within the ranks of the military. Once again, the Brass, in raising their hand to beat us down, punched themselves in the eye.

Asked later why he had approved such harsh charges and treatment against a peaceful demonstration, the Commander of the 6th Army replied "We thought the revolution was starting, and we were trying to crush it." The Presidio 27 Mutiny was one of the early big acts of resistance in the military. By 1971, even by Pentagon admission, the U.S. Army had degenerated to the point where it was unreliable. GIs had decided that it wasn't our war and no amount of oppression could crush our movement.

By spring of 1970 the Presidio case had gotten so much publicity and there was such a "Free the Presidio 27" movement that the Brass must have decided to cut their losses. All of us were released within a short time of each other. After a year and a half of imprisonment, the gates of Leavenworth swung closed behind me. I was wearing my car coat that every prisoner gets when they leave. I had my bus ticket, \$25, and a letter ordering me never to step on a whole list of military bases again. I had done time with military resisters from bases all over the world, all of us concentrated in Leavenworth. Twenty years later, I met a couple of the 27 for the first time since we all were in prison together. One of them, John Colip, remarked, "I don't think too much about all the things they did to us, I think about all we did to them. You know what I remember best about those times? We were incorrigible!" The Presidio Mutiny was very much representative of the GI movement. We were mainly working class youth, politicized by what was going on in the world, with our view of America-the-Unbeautiful clarified by the war, the military, and the brutality and outright torture we experienced behind bars. They tried hard to break us, but the only break was with them. Like so many GIs during that time, we really felt that we had nothing to lose, and nothing in common with them or their society. Through it all we kept our spirits, kept our unity, and not only didn't we ever repent, we went out of our way to keep messing with them.

Taken from http://www.vvawai.org/archive/sw/sw31/pgs_35-44/presidio_mutiny.html