

# Navy Demoralization: Familiar Signs Reappearing

## ALTERNATIVE FEATURES SERVICE

Is the U.S. Navy in for the same fate that destroyed the American Army as an effective fighting force in Vietnam? For the past eight months, the Navy has been doing the bulk of the fighting and the familiar signs of disintegration have all appeared—increased anti-war dissension, racial tensions and riots, acts of sabotage, and growing use of hard drugs. Even if the fighting stops soon, it will take years for the Navy to recover from the "Vietnam curse" that has demoralized the American military.

Serious racial clashes on aircraft carriers have received wide publicity recently, but the Navy

views as more ominous the rash of sabotage incidents keeping U.S. warships immobilized and away from the Gulf of Tonkin. Since the air war has intensified, mysterious explosions have ripped through several huge aircraft carriers stationed just off North Vietnam. Millions of dollars worth of repairs have been done on these ships, and others deliberately sabotaged in other parts of the Pacific.

The carrier USS Ranger, while stationed at Alameda Naval Station, suffered more than two dozen documented acts of sabotage in two months. These included cutting of fire hoses, telephoned bomb threats, plugging of a fire main, pollution of the ship's fresh

water with aviation fuel, fire in the auxiliary room, flooding of a gun compartment, and assorted damage to the generators and oil pumps. But the most spectacular sabotage was done to the ship's reduction gear. Someone had thrown a paint scraper and two bolts into the gear causing \$800,000 worth of damage and keeping the 78,000 ton 4600 man ship idle for four months.

The Navy has singled out a 21-year-old ship's fireman, Patrick Chenoweth, as the culprit and charged him with "wartime sabotage" a crime carrying a 30-year sentence. Chenoweth is a quiet, unassuming sailor from Puyallup, Washington who grew up in a foster home. He has never

been active in any kind of political group. Presently he is in the brig at Treasure Island, where he has been held without bail for four months while the case is going through its preliminary hearings.

"The Navy has an incredibly shaky case," says Eric Seitz, attorney for the young sailor. "There are no eyewitnesses, fingerprints or any other physical evidence linking him with the act. The prosecution case rests entirely on statements of three witnesses who claim Pat admitted doing the sabotage, but two of them say they thought he was joking. We have evidence that many of the men on the ship talked like this—bragging they

were responsible for keeping the ship away from Vietnam."

Seitz says his investigation has shown that some 350 men had access to the room that was sabotaged. "I believe there is so much sabotage on the ship the Navy is frustrated and looking for anyone to serve as a scapegoat," the attorney says. "The charge of wartime sabotage is being used to boost the punishment and to make my client an 'example' to the rest of the crew."

A similar sabotage trial was completed last month in Norfolk, Virginia. In that case, a military judge found Jeff Allison, the son of an Oakland, California highway patrolman, guilty of setting a \$7.2 million fire aboard the air-

craft carrier USS Forrestal. Although the maximum penalty could have been 350 years, Allison was sentenced to five years of hard labor.

But while the Navy is putting on the "show" trials, the reports of sabotage persist. The USS Constellation, scene of the mutiny by 120 black sailors, reports that some of its sensitive equipment has been "tampered with." Other small scale acts of sabotage go unreported in the American press, but rumors of them spread as ships pull in for unscheduled repairs at US bases in the Pacific.

Racial problems such as the riots on the USS Kitty Hawk and the oil carrier Hassayampa, and the mutiny by 120 blacks on the USS Constellation, are new to the Navy simply because the Navy has had a long tradition of excluding blacks. When Admiral Elmo Zumwalt took over two years ago, he publicly stated he wanted to change "the lily-white racist image of the Navy." He instituted a number of changes, ranging from relaxed rules on hair and dress to the active recruitment of more blacks into the service. Still, the percentage of blacks on the ships is only 5.8, much less than any other branch of the military and less than one percent of the officers are black. At the officer training college at Annapolis, 131 of the 4400 in the new class are black. Most of the whites come from conservative small towns and have little or no experience in dealing with minority groups.

The Navy's reaction to racial dissatisfaction has been to use swift repression. In the case of the sit-down mutiny by black crewmen on the Constellation, the Navy has quietly showed most of them out of the service. The

blacks accused of rioting on the Kitty Hawk have been dealt with more severely. They are being court-martialed, with some receiving prison sentences. Such outward symbols of black solidarity as the fist salute have been banned. No whites have been punished in any way for their part in the riot.

Because of the reactionary way the Navy is dealing with the situation, more racial fights are expected by most sailors. Crewmen on the Coral Sea, which sailed for Vietnam in November, said that both blacks and whites are arming themselves with knives and that tensions are high. "Every brother is getting harassment from these big fat white petty officers," said a black sailor. Both black and white crewmen said there was a big factor in the tension, something the Navy brass has yet to mention. Grass, opium, and increasingly heroin are used widely on the ships, with both races competing for the best prices and highest quality. This dope dealing on the confines of a ship has led to numerous fights and beatings, most of which go unreported.

The racial inequality, dissension, sabotage, and drug abuse have brought the Navy's morale to its lowest point since Pearl Harbor. Yet, surprisingly, the congressional committee which is investigating the Navy's problems is only dealing with these issues in a peripheral way. Chairman Edward Hebert, a hard line hawk who heads the committee is focusing on "permissiveness" as the root cause of the Navy's malaise. With this kind of diagnosis, and the continuing war, it will be a long time before the Navy will recover from its Vietnam experience.

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