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The Presidio 27

Gerry Nicosia

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THE PRESIDIO 27*

GERALD NICOSIA

I wasn't getting out, I knew I was there—this guy just got killed, and I'm just going, "Shoo! Man, this is wrong! I can't live with this." And so my life, and what happened to us, seemed kind of insignificant, considering what had just happened. We were mindless of our own mortality, or anything else—our safety. I mean we were scared to death, 'cause we knew something was gonna happen, but we didn't know exactly what.

1968 was a year of death in America. Anyone who lived through it as an adult will remember the back-to-back assassinations of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in April, and Senator Robert F. Kennedy in June—two men whose respective crusades, for racial equality and civic justice, had converged fairly near the end of their lives in heartfelt pleas to end the war in Vietnam. King's decision to speak out against the war had occurred a year earlier; Kennedy's challenge to the official Democratic Party support of the war did not occur until after the Party's leader, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, had withdrawn from the 1968 Presidential race, making way for Kennedy to mount his own campaign. The decision of Johnson to withdraw, as well as that of Kennedy to run on a peace platform, were both motivated in large part by the sudden swift increase in American combat deaths in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive. Almost 15,000 GIs died in 1968, the majority killed in the period from February through April.

1968 was also the year America's cities, from Washington, D.C. to Chicago to Los Angeles, went up in the flames of race riots; and many overzealous mayors instituted "shoot on sight" orders against the (mostly black) rioters. It was the year when a Democratic National Convention in Chicago brought thousands of antiwar protesters, led by a few old-time pacifists, a few SDS radicals, and Abbie Hoffman's brand new Yippies (Youth International Party), into bloody confrontation with the Chicago police. But, as Mayor Daley later boasted, though plenty of heads, ribs, and reporters' cameras were bashed, "No one was killed."

1968 was the year that Richard "Rusty" Bunch was shot to death in the Presidio stockade in San Francisco—though it is doubtful whether more than a handful of people still remember his name. But the news of his death, and the subsequent protest, gave a critical boost to the burgeoning GI movement.

* An excerpt from *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans Movement*.

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Rusty Bunch was nineteen years old when he was killed on October 11, 1968. And though he died on the Presidio, one of the oldest military bases on the North American continent, he was a casualty of the Vietnam war as surely as the more than 58,000 men named on the Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

Bunch was a short, skinny, sandy-haired kid from Moraine, Ohio, who looked scarcely old enough to be out on his first date. His parents were both poor Tennessee Baptists who had migrated to Ohio for the steady work, and they did their best to give their son a happy childhood. He was outgoing, played Little League baseball, bowled, and learned to ride a motorcycle as soon as he was old enough. In 1967, at seventeen, he asked his father to sign him into the U.S. Army, and his father complied—though the old man, a World War II vet, felt as if he were signing his son's "death warrant."

Later, in the Presidio stockade, Rusty claimed to have done a tour in Vietnam, but by that time he was so prone to delusory fantasies that his word could no longer be trusted. The next sure glimpse we have of him is in the spring of 1968, when he showed up among the flock of AWOL GIs who were living on the streets of San Francisco's Haight district and camping out in Golden Gate Park. He had taken a headlong plunge into the hippie drug culture, and, in the lingo of the day, had had his "circuits fried" on LSD. He went around in a purple satin shirt and filthy blue jeans, holding two-way conversations with himself and boasting that he could walk through walls and communicate with Martians.

Like most AWOLs, Bunch eventually went home, but his parents couldn't get him to make sense and finally shipped him down to relatives in LaFollette, Tennessee, hoping "the drugs would wear off." When he got no better, they started calling VA hospitals, all of which declined to help. Instead, officials at the VA phoned the police, who arrested Bunch and delivered him to the stockade at Fort Meade, Maryland. Authorities at Fort Meade determined that Bunch needed psychiatric care, but before he could receive it he was transferred to Sixth Army jurisdiction in California, and landed in the Presidio SPD (the Special Processing Detachment barracks for military personnel who have committed minor offenses). Once again he went AWOL, but this time voluntarily turned himself in on September 15. The Army's response was to place him in the stockade, the repository for serious criminals and repeat offenders.

Anybody with an ounce of sense would have had Bunch admitted to the nearest Army hospital—in this case, Letterman General right on the Presidio. He bumped into walls, screamed throughout the night, made incomprehensible notes in a tattered math book, talked gibberish about warlocks and flying saucers, and continually implored his fellow inmates to recommend "easy" ways for him to commit suicide.

The stockade guards thought Bunch's condition was a joke, and they routinely withheld his medicine just for the kick of watching him twitch and beg for it.¹ For the other prisoners it was painful to watch

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Bunch's constant nervous agitation, and one of them, Ricky Dodd, kept trying to get word to the authorities that Bunch should be removed and given medical treatment.²

That September, the Presidio stockade reached its peak of overcrowding. Close to 140 prisoners were forced to inhabit a reconverted bank building and annex that were intended to hold no more than sixty-seven.³ Many of them had to sleep on the messhall tables, and that was the least of the inconveniences. The toilets backed up, excrement floated in the shower stalls, and there was hardly ever enough food to go around.⁴

A lot of factors contributed to this egregious situation. The fierce combat in Nam pushed more and more GIs to run before the almost inevitable assignment to a combat zone; at the same time, the counterculture, with its visions of free love, endless highs, and "strawberry fields forever," was flourishing as never before. Furthermore, the big riot at LBJ (Long Binh Jail) in Vietnam had taken place in August, and after the devastation of the prison there, many of the detainees were transferred to other stockades, including the one at the Presidio.⁵ Antiwar protests were polarizing the country, at the same time as a large number of embittered Vietnam veterans were returning to the States, setting the stage for a very tense confrontation. The relationship between the guards, many of whom were Vietnam veterans, and the prisoners, many of whom openly opposed the war, was exceedingly hostile. No wonder that between June and October, 1968, there were over two dozen suicide attempts among the Presidio stockade prisoners, who used such methods as hanging themselves, cutting their wrists and arms, and drinking lye.⁶ The brass discounted these attempts as "suicide gestures," intended to gain attention and not actually to take one's life—despite the fact that the man who had hung himself, Ricky Dodd, was pronounced dead on arrival at Letterman Hospital and only revived with much effort.⁷

On Wednesday, October 9, Bunch talked with another prisoner, Billy Hayes, about the fact that if this country did not love him, he would just as soon do what it wanted him to, that is, die.⁸ Hayes was one of McNamara's 100,000—a group of GIs with low intelligence and aptitude scores whom the Secretary of Defense had decided to draft, ostensibly to help them gain job skills, but chiefly so that the President would not have to further antagonize opponents of his war policy by calling up the reserves (before the end of the war, the 100,000 swelled to over 300,000). Bunch must have figured Hayes would be sympathetic because Hayes had already tried and failed to commit suicide by drinking Head and Shoulders™ shampoo. Hayes told Bunch that the surest way for him to die would be to tell a guard he was running away and then take off, giving the guard a good chance to take aim and shoot him. They both laughed.⁹

On Friday morning, October 11, four prisoners, including Bunch, were marched out on a work detail by a Mexican-American guard, a Nam vet. The guard had only a few months to go before discharge, and he knew that several guards had already faced court-martial for letting

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prisoners escape. During a break, Bunch began taunting the guard, asking if he would promise to shoot him if Bunch ran. As they left a barracks where they had gone for water, Bunch veered away from the other prisoners. The guard later claimed he had broken into a “dead run,”¹⁰ though by other accounts Bunch was merely “jogging” or even doing just a fast walk.¹¹ The guard claimed that he yelled “Halt!” twice. The other prisoners did not recall hearing him yell anything before he sighted the shotgun on Bunch’s back and pulled the trigger.¹² The shotgun was loaded with double-ought buckshot, large pellets that are capable of killing a man even at a fair distance. The recommended procedure was for guards to shoot at the ground just behind the escaping prisoner—the pellets will then glance up and catch the fugitive in the legs and buttocks, effectively stopping him. The guard’s gun, which he had neglected to check, fired several inches higher than the sights indicated, and the blast came within inches of blowing Bunch’s head off. It made a grapefruit-sized hole in his back and chest, and he died in a matter of moments.¹³

Word of the shooting hit the other prisoners like an electrical jolt, and their reactions ran the gamut from anger and outrage to terror that they would be the next victim of the guards’ sadism. Among those who reacted most strongly was a twenty one year-old AWOL GI named Keith Mather, whose story would become entangled with Bunch’s for the next twenty years.

Mather was raised in a rather traditional Baptist family in San Bruno, California, just south of San Francisco. The most powerful influence in his life, however, was not the Bible, but his loving and sensitive mother, who often told him of her horror while riding troop trains during World War II and seeing the endless carnage of the war—soldiers in wheelchairs, on crutches and stretchers, and so forth.

A handsome and high-spirited youngster, Mather got in trouble almost without trying. He’d been suspended from eighth grade for calling the school bus driver a “motherfucker,” and subsequently telling the science teacher to fuck himself when he gave Keith a hard time over the bus incident. As a result of such troubles, including a car theft bust, Mather didn’t graduate high school until he was almost twenty years old, in 1966. He tried San Mateo Junior College for four months, but couldn’t keep his grades up. On September 17, 1967, he was inducted into the United States Army in Oakland.¹⁴

In many ways Mather was a typical Fifties punk with greased blondish hair and pegged pants, but with one major difference: he knew for certain that he could never take another human life. When he arrived at Fort Lewis, Washington, for basic training, he was given a form asking his attitudes toward war: on it, he wrote that he would never consent to fight in Vietnam. His language was so strong that the CID (Criminal Defense Division of the Army) sent an agent to question him as to whether he would disobey a direct order to embark for Vietnam. Mather told the agent he would deal with such an order when it came. In the

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meantime, he set about finding ways to keep the military from completing his occupational training.

It did not take much effort, for he unintentionally caught pneumonia and then, while recovering, was forced to stand in line in the rain and caught it a second time. When Mather finally recuperated he was slotted for AIT (Advanced Infantry Training), the next step before liftoff to Southeast Asia. At first he tried handling the Army just as he had the unfriendly world of authority at school; but when he flipped off his top sergeant he got a good beating and found “you have to get up the next morning and do the same thing everybody else does.” Eventually, he says, “I had been harassed and fucked with to a point where I figured it was conceivable that I could actually kill people—they had done it, they had succeeded, which really pissed me off. I felt like I had been ripped off.”¹⁵

At Christmas, Mather went home on leave, and proceeded to get stoned out of his mind on acid, pot, and a variety of other drugs with his boyhood friends. In one of those quintessential Sixties countercultural pads, complete with Indian rugs, crystal chandelier, and hookah on the floor, he experienced what—next to Bunch’s death—would be the most powerful revelation of his life. He suddenly felt a horrible weight of depression, and it occurred to him that the reason for it was that none of the others in that room were in the Army, none of them had to face the same life-or-death pressures that he would be subject to in a matter of weeks. And just as quickly Mather decided that he would stop worrying, because he simply *would not go to Vietnam*, no matter what they did to him, and he felt enormous relief.

Mather returned late to Fort Lewis, with an earring in one ear, a non-issue knitted tie, no brass insignias (he’d given them away at the party), black socks with little red crests on the side, and his pockets stuffed with marijuana. Fourteen people in his unit had done roughly the same thing, and the Army put them all together in the same “troublemakers’ barracks,” which enabled them to band together and plot against the military. “That was my first camaraderie I really liked in the military, being able to identify with other people who were experiencing the same thing,” Mather recalls. “It gave us more strength to go on, to continue to fight, because we could all discuss it, and we were becoming very subversive.”¹⁶

Convicted at a special court-martial, Mather received a three month suspended sentence and one-third reduction of wages, then was recycled right back into AIT, into a company where the men were already wearing jungle boots. The unit was full of guys with trick knees, bad backs, heart murmurs, and one guy who had even been drafted by mistake, since he had a wife and two kids, was carrying a full academic load at college, and had a nervous debility besides—but all of these guys (some of whom Mather witnessed crying in their bunks at night) were so buried in military paperwork that their grievances would not be redressed for months, if ever. Mather thus decided to take things into his own hands.

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On a lovely Northwest spring day in March, he put on his civilian clothes under his military clothes, went on sick call, and boarded a bus for town, where he jettisoned the uniform in a garbage can and hailed a cab for Seattle. With money wired from his girlfriend, he got a plane to San Francisco the same night. This time he stayed away only a few weeks, because his father convinced him to turn himself in, and they flew him back to Fort Lewis in chains. Almost immediately he got in trouble again by trying to keep the authorities from getting hold of a letter from his girlfriend containing LSD.

Keith had heard rumors that the Army was dealing with reluctant warriors like himself by simply sticking them on a plane bound for Nam, where they could get “on-the-job training.” Within a few days, he got a bus straight down to San Francisco, and commenced living on the streets and from house to house for about four months. Concerned that the FBI would not stop hassling his parents and friends, he went to the office of the War Resisters League, a pacifist organization dating from just after World War I, for suggestions as to how he might turn himself in. He was now wanted for desertion, a far more serious crime than AWOL (AWOL implies that a soldier still intends to return to the military; desertion means that he has turned his back on it for good).¹⁷

The War Resisters League had been involved in the earliest antiwar protests from about 1963 on, and unlike most of the GIs, who had all they could do to get just a little information on the workings of the military in their immediate vicinity (while embroiled in a daily battle for survival with military discipline), the WRL was cognizant of the larger picture of GI resistance that was beginning to emerge at U.S. military bases worldwide. As early as June, 1966, three GIs (a black, a Puerto Rican, and an Italian) at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas, had refused orders for Vietnam on the grounds that the war itself was undeclared and therefore unconstitutional. Despite sentences of up to five years at hard labor (of which they served two), and the Supreme Court’s refusal—with a notable dissent by Justice William O. Douglas—to hear their case, the notoriety of the Fort Hood 3 encouraged the growing wave of refusal that followed, including such celebrated cases as those of Howard Levy and Louis Font.¹⁸ More recently, in Southern California, there had been several instances of sailors and Marines taking sanctuary in churches in order to keep from being sent to Southeast Asia.¹⁹ Even though military police could arrest an errant GI in a church just as well as anywhere else, the image of war resisters being dragged from churches had undeniable power as a symbol to sway people whose views on the war were still middle-of-the-road.²⁰

According to Keith Mather, the idea for the “Nine for Peace” emerged by chance. The WRL was in touch with seven other men—four from the Army, two from the Navy, and one Marine—who were in similar situations and looking for a way to surrender and yet to guarantee that they would not be immediately shipped off to war. A minister, the Reverend Philip Farnham, offered them the use of his church, Howard

Presbyterian, in the Haight district. A former union organizer in the copper smelters in Seattle, and later a leader in the leftist group No Business As Usual, Farnham wasn't your garden-variety do-gooding man of the cloth, but he helped put the eight servicemen in touch with a more traditional religious antiwar group called Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV, later just CALC), which had been formed in 1965 by Father Daniel Berrigan, S.J., and the Reverend William Sloane Coffin. Together they hatched the plan for the eight men to show up, each chained to a clergyman, at Howard Presbyterian Church, where they would take Communion publicly and issue a statement of their beliefs to the media. Hearing of the demonstration, Air Force Sergeant Oliver Hirsch asked to join them at the eleventh hour. Because of logistical delays they were not able to make their appearance on the Fourth of July, but when they finally took their stand a few days later, the impact could hardly have been greater.²¹

The military viewed the demonstration as a major threat, but it is well to remember that the young men taking part in it were scarcely more than *kids*. Mather recalls that he was hard put to decide whether he should do the demo or forget it and go see a concert by the rock band Cream. In the end, Mather's sense of responsibility to other GIs tipped the balance in favor of going public. Once again, the feeling for others that he had learned from his mother came into play, as well as the obligation he felt to "try to educate and to help the movement from inside."²²

For protection, each of the Nine, with the minister he was chained to, rode to the church separately. When they arrived, each made his own statement. In front of numerous press people, they spoke out against the war in Vietnam, formally resigned from the military, and claimed sanctuary there. Mather stated that he was making a personal decision of conscience and encouraged others to do the same.

After the news conference hit the papers and TV stations throughout the area, a bomb threat forced them to move to St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Marin City. This time military police from all four armed services were waiting to arrest them; though, perhaps because of the presence of two hundred supporters, they allowed them to drink their Communion wine. In one of the rare shows of solidarity between the black and white protest movements, a large contingent of Black Panthers showed up to offer their militant protection for the demonstrators, but the demonstrators had sworn a nonviolent pact and declined the aid of the Panthers' muscle.²³

On the videos that exist of the event, Mather looks like a Springsteen-style young tough, in denim shirt and sideburns, cigarette hanging from his lips, with a deeply serious expression as he holds forth to the press about how "a majority of the men in the service were opposed [to the war], but really didn't know how to voice their opinion."²⁴ Then they all held up their chains "to symbolize the bonds between men, which you can't escape no matter what you do." The symbolism was lost on the

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military, whose enforcers brought out their chain-cutters and shunted the Nine, sans ministerial guard, off to the appropriate jails. According to Mather, "it was pretty emotional, one of the most emotional things I've ever been through. We knew we were all gonna go to jail. They were gonna do to us what they wanted to do to us. They always had."²⁵

Mather was bound for the Army stockade at the Presidio, where he met Richard Bunch and a number of other increasingly intransigent malcontents. From the moment he got there, Mather set himself on a course of noncooperation, figuring that if he refused to work, the Army would have to get another man to do his duties, and that would keep another body from going to Nam. But each time Mather refused a direct order to work, he would accrue one more charge against him, so he decided simply to take off his uniform and go about in a blanket. A soldier cannot be ordered to work while he is out of uniform, and they could only order him *once* to put on his uniform, which they did. And they locked him up in solitary confinement, where he didn't see the light of day for nearly a month²⁶.

Nonetheless, things were happening that made Mather take heart. The press continued to give them highly sympathetic coverage.²⁷ A group of ministers from CALCAV began a 24-hour vigil outside the gates to protest the fact that many of the prisoners, like Mather, were being denied the right to meet with their chosen pastors. Several of the best lawyers in San Francisco, such as Terrence Hallinan and Howard De Nike, volunteered their services to the Nine. Mather faced a general court-martial on a bevy of charges—desertion, refusing a direct order, conspiracy, disloyal statements, subversion. There commenced a waiting game between Mather and the Army, since they wouldn't court-martial him without his uniform on, and for the time being he was satisfied to accept the peace of solitary confinement, which allowed him, perhaps for the first time, to really think about his life and what he wanted to do with it.²⁸

By his own admission, Mather knew almost nothing of the GI movement *per se*, though occasionally word filtered through to him of significant events—for example, in August, 1968, 43 black GIs at Fort Hood refused to be sent to Chicago to do riot duty in anticipation of trouble at the Democratic National Convention, and, in their eyes, to be used most likely against black ghetto rioters. Such incidents, and stories of troops in Vietnam refusing to go into battle, made Mather feel less alone, but the major transformation inside him had much more to do with a strengthening of his own integrity and the larger commitment to humanity that grew out of that. In Mather's words: "You see yourself differently when you're up in your own face in prison." What Mather saw was that when a man confronts injustice, "the only real choices" are to take positive action against it or to "feel like you're compromising your own being." And once Mather had figured out "what really matters and what doesn't," he put his uniform back on and decided to get the worst over with, so he could start living his life again.²⁹

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And the next thing he knew, Richard Bunch was shot to death.

At the mutiny trials that followed, the Army sought to prove that the Presidio 27 were conspirators who deliberately and calculatedly sought to “override the lawful authority” of the United States Army.³⁰ In truth, the so-called mutiny grew out of a joint exercise of conscience, all the more remarkable for the extreme confusion and duress under which it occurred.

Within hours of Bunch’s death, all hell broke loose in the stockade. Cans full of piss were thrown on guards, wires were pulled out of the walls, toilets were stopped up and flushed until water backed up out of every pipe. The prisoners all vowed not to go outside the fences until given some reassurance that they too would not be shot.³¹

The next day, October 12, there was a peace march of over 15,000 people in San Francisco, led by some 500 active-duty GIs and Vietnam veterans. Having had advance warning of the GIs and Vets March for Peace, the Presidio brass denied weekend passes to any soldiers known to be opposed to the war. One such soldier, a Vietnam vet named Richard Lee Gentile, participated in the march anyway. Another participant was Randy Rowland, the twenty one-year-old son of an Air Force colonel, who was willing to serve as a medic outside of combat. When he was ordered to Vietnam, he sought help from the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (CCCO) in San Francisco, and eventually went AWOL. While working on his CO application, he learned that the Army was harassing his wife in order to learn his whereabouts, so he went to attorney Terrence Hallinan for help, and together they worked out a plan for Rowland to turn himself in publicly at the Presidio after the peace march.³²

Despite his voluntary return, Rowland was charged with desertion. The night of October 12, both he and Richard Gentile, who also returned voluntarily, were thrown into the Presidio stockade, where they were caught up in the fear and frenzy following Bunch’s shooting.

Rowland immediately sought out Mather; and all Saturday night both of them, along with some other of the more radicalized young men, began going around the stockade “getting people talking” about how they should respond to the insufferable cruelty and terror that now enveloped them. The key to the whole situation that developed is that these prisoners had been pushed beyond anything a human being should rightfully be forced to endure, and *they saw no way out other than direct action*. There was only one lawful grievance mechanism available to the prisoners, the filing of a DD 510 form, and thus far all such complaints had been systematically ignored. “We knew the penalty for mutiny was death, but in a wildly elated way we didn’t care,” Rowland wrote later. “We were going up against the motherfuckers, we were taking our stand.”³³

Mather’s and Rowland’s efforts were bolstered by the energy and courage of a prisoner named Walter Pawlowski, himself a paradigm of the way the Army at this period was pushing soldiers into rebellion. A

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straight-A student, Pawlowski had to drop out of college for lack of tuition, and when he enlisted in the Army he was promised a non-infantry assignment. Finding himself in AIT, he became so angry that he got violent with another soldier over a pool game. He was so upset over his own aggression that he asked to see a psychiatrist, but the Army offered him a chaplain instead. Pawlowski decided to become his own counselor and headed down to San Francisco with a bag of marijuana. After a short stint of living in the Haight, he went on the road to Mexico and Canada, then was finally arrested back in Florida.

The local police remanded him to the Army at Fort Stewart, Georgia, where Pawlowski got so tired of make-work details (like picking up pine cones for twelve hours a day) that he took off once more for San Francisco. Arrested in Utah, he was sent on to the Presidio and, despite the relative pettiness of his offenses, was put into the stockade. There Pawlowski served as a model prisoner for several months, but he was biding his time, waiting for a chance to escape. After a bungled attempt, he was no longer allowed outside the stockade on work details. From that point on, he began an unrelieved campaign of resistance, refusing to wear his uniform and going on a twenty-six-day fast in isolation in the "box," a six-by-four-foot cell painted black. Originally the Fort Stewart officials had intended to discharge Pawlowski as "undesirable"—a discretionary method for the Army to get rid of unsuitable soldiers—but now the Presidio authorities decided to court-martial him on two counts of desertion plus one count of "disobeying a lawful command" to put on his uniform.³⁴

By Sunday morning the 13th, Mather, Rowland, Pawlowski, and a few others had succeeded in rousing almost all the prisoners to a fevered pitch of opposition. Terry Hallinan showed up that day to meet with Pawlowski, but was effectively prevented from speaking with the entire group. That night there was a packed meeting upstairs in Cell Block 4. Grievances were discussed and Pawlowski wrote them down, and a consensus was achieved to demand a thorough investigation of Bunch's "murder." The black brothers, united among themselves, complained against the blatant racism of the guards, but in the end decided to opt out of any demonstration because they "figured they'd get punished worst." Eventually a plan took shape for a sit-down strike, to begin the next morning at 7:30am when the first name was called at roll call.³⁵ Mather proposed that they all break ranks and sit in a circle in the grass nearest the fence, so media cameras could film them—and thus keep the guards from any brutal overreaction—and that they sing "We Shall Overcome" to signify their nonviolence, as in a civil rights protest. Later Mather went over to the other stockade building, where a second group was meeting, but much to his chagrin he found that this second group had voted down the idea of a mass protest.³⁶

Through the phone call of an informer, the command at the Presidio got advance word of the demo, but did nothing to prevent it, other than to keep away the media. That morning, Monday the 14th of

October, when the first name was called, everyone was supposed to answer "Here!" in unison. But only a few men yelled "Here!" and none started to move out of formation. So Mather pushed aside the guy in front of him and headed for the grassy area, and twenty six others, including two Vietnam vets, joined him. Sergeant Thomas Woodring, almost universally hated among the prisoners for his brutality and bigotry, chased after them screaming that they were committing a mutiny. No one took him seriously (he was drunk much of the time), but they were, one and all, by Mather's account, terrified of the military's retribution. In fact, their fears seemed to be substantiated when, in a few minutes, they were surrounded by both a line of firemen with hoses at the ready, and a tactical squad of soldiers with gas masks and rifles.³⁷

What had pushed twenty seven prisoners to such a reckless stand? Mather answers for himself: "I wasn't getting out, I knew I was there—this guy just got killed, and I'm going, 'Shoo! Man, this is wrong! I can't live with this' And so my life, and what happened to us, seemed kind of insignificant, considering what had just happened. We were mindless of our own mortality, or anything else—our safety. I mean we were scared to death, 'cause we knew something was gonna happen, but we didn't know exactly what."³⁸

Another of the twenty seven, Danny Seals, explained, "Something was just drawing me out there. It was like walking down the street and seeing someone getting beat up. You just couldn't look the other way. It was something that I had to do."³⁹

Pawlowski explained, "People were finally getting together and accomplishing something. For me it was a moment of liberation. We'd been so impotent, so uptight. Now we weren't just going along with everything, we were *resisting*."⁴⁰

The 27 chanted "Freedom! We want freedom!" and sang a variety of songs—"We Shall Not Be Moved," "This Land Is Your Land," "America, the Beautiful"—not so much to make any political statement, according to Mather, as to "keep our souls warm." They also flashed the two-finger "V" peace symbol at CID photographers who were busy recording their action as evidence against them. When Captain Robert Lamont (the stockade commander) arrived, Pawlowski read him the men's list of demands. Lamont, stunned, could say nothing. Finally, in response to Pawlowski's taunt, "May we have a reply, sir?" Lamont read them Article 94, "the mutiny act," out of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). The 27 just sang louder to drown him out. Lamont retaliated by reading the article again over a loudspeaker atop an MP sedan, and then gave the men a direct order to return to their cells. Most of them returned voluntarily, though Mather, Rowland, Pawlowski, and a few others had to be carried.⁴¹

The charge of mutiny refers to the action of two or more soldiers who act in concert to overthrow the military's power structure and its ability to exercise control over enlisted men. It was a ridiculous charge for Lamont to have brought. Captain Jesse C. Jones, head of the police

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detail that had been called to the demonstration, said he would simply have listened to the men's complaints, asked for a representative to come to his office, and dispersed the rest. But the Army, in the person of Sixth Army Commander General Stanley R. Larsen, insisted on following Lamont's poor judgement through a series of outrageously unfair trials well into 1969. Later Larsen reputedly explained, "We thought the revolution was starting, and we were trying to crush it."⁴²

Tales of the Presidio 27 hit the presses almost immediately, and for months they made front-page headlines, both in the United States and around the world. (Mather even claims there were prominent news stories in China.) The Presidio 27 became a phenomenon on so many levels that it warranted a book—and got a fine one—*The Unlawful Concert*, by Fred Gardner, a key activist in the GI movement.

First and foremost, it was a personal tragedy for almost all of the men involved. The first man to be tried, and the first to be convicted, Nesrey Sood, received a sentence of fifteen years at hard labor in Fort Leavenworth Military Prison. He had had only one day left in the military when he decided to join the demonstration. With three children to support, Sood should never have been drafted. His anger over that led to so much drinking and fighting that the Army finally agreed to give him an unsuitability discharge, but before it was processed he heard that his children were being neglected and rushed from Washington to San Francisco to check on them. He was picked up for being AWOL and put into the Presidio stockade on October 12. On Monday he was scheduled to be taken back to Fort Lewis to receive his discharge, but that morning he felt compelled to protest with the others. Then, on top of everything, while he was awaiting trial for mutiny, the Army failed to give him a summons to a custody hearing in Oakland, and as a result he lost custody of his three-year-old daughter Darryl.⁴³

The next two men to be tried, Louis Oszepinski and Larry Reidel, received fourteen and sixteen-year sentences respectively.

Further adding to the injustice, the Army refused to try the 27 individually, but grouped them into various irrational clusters of defendants, which made a systematic defense impossible.⁴⁴

Some men did not wait for the Army to take their life away. Before Keith Mather came to trial for mutiny, he was court-martialed and convicted on his previous charges, and sentenced to four years at Leavenworth. Pawlowski, who by this time had become a friend and mentor to Mather, was also tried on his previous charges in the interim, and sentenced to two years at Leavenworth. They were both certain that as "leaders" the Army was certain to make examples of them—and though the death penalty had been ruled out (it is usually applicable to mutiny only during a declared war) they both might well receive life in prison. Both of them took the opportunity of a minimal guard on Christmas Eve to escape and, helped by the "underground railroad" of antiwar people, they made it safely together to Vancouver, Canada, a few days later.

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The decision to leave was not as easy as it might seem, for Mather felt a great responsibility to the men he had convinced to demonstrate with him. But he was “freaked out by the possibility of having to spend the rest of my life in prison.” Moreover, he had serious doubts about his ability to survive in jail. Enormous hatred was directed toward the 27: the stockade doctor actually prescribed “paint thinner” for Mather, when he developed a high fever, “for that yellow stripe down your back.” Even so, through twelve years of hard living in Canada, he was often tormented by guilt—to the point where he had to willfully put his entire past life out of his mind. And yet, his past still pursued him. In 1980, he returned with his wife and family to live in Half Moon Bay in California, near where he’d grown up, but a lost wallet led to the Army laying hands on him again, in late 1984, and putting him in prison in Fort Riley, Kansas, until Congressional pressure on the Secretary of the Army effected his early release.⁴⁵

What may have made all this suffering worthwhile for these men was the knowledge that their action was a pivotal event in the fashioning of the GI movement, and eventually in the ending of the war itself. By late 1968, underground antiwar GI papers were springing up near military bases around the country, and almost all of them seized on the Presidio 27 as a rallying point. Furthermore, those 27 showed the rest of the peace movement, as well as the whole nation, that, in Mather’s words, “the soldiers that are fighting the war are not doing it because they want to, but because they’re forced to. And they shouldn’t be looked on as the enemy [by antiwar people], because here were soldiers fighting against the war, and putting their lives on the line in a different way, in a different war—the war against the war. It flew in the face of everything the military stands for.”⁴⁶

Hal Muskat, who began his activism in the U.S. Army in Europe in the late Sixties and is a leading veteran activist to this day (and whose lobbying in Washington helped gain Mather’s release in 1985), states the case even more forcefully: “The Presidio 27 was the best thing that ever happened to the GI movement—it put us on the front page. It made civilians realize that there were antiwar GIs within the military. Which is very important. Because the civilian antiwar movement was mostly middle-class, and *we were working-class*. So it was able to provide a bridge, and it was very significant, probably one of *the* most significant trials and cases, for that reason.”⁴⁷

Proof of that bridge came in early 1969 with tens of thousands of war protestors marching from the Civic Center in San Francisco to the gates of the Presidio, trying to break into the base to free the 27. Though they were repulsed, images of the *mêlée*—which looked like the ragtag mob attempting to storm the Bastille—were cast on picture tubes all across America.⁴⁸

The shakeup within the Army was equally profound. Some observers felt that the roots of the whole debacle lay in the Sixth Army Commander’s professional failures *vis-à-vis* the war in Vietnam. In

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1966, General Larsen (right-hand man to General William Westmoreland) advocated an extension of the war into Cambodia, in direct opposition to the current policy of the State Department. Larsen's claim that the Cambodians were harboring six North Vietnamese regiments nearly precipitated a hostile confrontation between Cambodia and the United States, and Westmoreland quickly dissociated himself from his erstwhile friend. Larsen was transferred back to the States soon thereafter. It may well be that by ramrodding the first mutiny charges through the American military court in 78 years, he felt he was alleviating the shame he had helped bring on the faltering American military.⁴⁹

In any case, the public furor over the unconscionable severity of the first three sentences caused the Secretary of the Army, Stanley Resor, to cut them down to two years apiece even before the other men went to trial. A number of Congressmen—including Senator Alan Cranston of California and Charles Goodell of New York—demanded an investigation of conditions at the Presidio stockade, and almost at once the place was cleaned up and refurbished, and the number of prisoners set at a permanent ceiling of 103. Resor also established a Special Civilian Committee for the Study of the U.S. Army Confinement System.⁵⁰

The long series of trials—even though convictions became fewer and sentences progressively lighter—did lasting harm to the image of the military, and that alone upset Congressmen like John E. Moss of Sacramento, Jeffrey Cohelan of Berkeley, Don Edwards of San Jose, Allard Lowenstein and William Fitts Ryan of New York, and William S. Moorehead of Pittsburgh, who all put their protests into the Congressional Record. The trials added to the reputation of Terrence Hallinan as a headstrong crusader for justice, and they made the reputation of a young captain and JAG (Judge Advocate General's Corps) lawyer named Brendan Sullivan, who would come into the public spotlight again twenty years later as Colonel Oliver North's defense counsel at the Contra-gate hearings. The guard who did the shooting was adjudged to have committed "justifiable homicide," fined a dollar (the price of the shell he "wasted") and transferred to a base nearer his home. But in the end, the meaning of the Presidio 27 cannot be evaluated merely in terms of its effects on individual men's lives or even on the role of the military.⁵¹

After having their lives blown off course by a rocket blast as traumatic as any launched by the Viet Cong, the men involved have mostly managed to survive and put new lives together. In late 1988 there was a reunion of some of them, at which "conspirator" 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!" Randy Rowland stressed the positive effect of the ordeal even more forcefully: "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 to break us, but the only break was *with them*."

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The military, of course, has survived too—as it has for the past five thousand years—minus the draft and many of the Mickey Mouse disciplinary demands that landed the majority of the prisoners in the Presidio stockade.

The thing that was being born partly at that impromptu sit-in at America's oldest existing military installation was a rare and precious glimpse of the postwar future. In the words of Keith Mather, what the Presidio 27 had earned for the movement was “dignity” and “credibility.”⁵² And those two intangible yet real qualities, which the war in Vietnam was rapidly draining from American life, opened wide the door between what had been rigid and unfeeling in this so-called land of the free, and a future of limitlessly renewable humanity, where virtually anything seemed possible, including the abolition of war and recognition of one man's right to say that for now and for always he did not wish or intend to harm another.

¹ Keith Mather, interview with the author, 26 May 1989.

² Fred Gardner, *The Unlawful Concert* (New York: Viking) 1970: 26.

³ Mather interview.

⁴ Gardner: 52.

⁵ Mather interview.

⁶ Gardner: 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 27-30.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 78.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 73.

¹¹ Mather interview.

¹² Gardner: 72.

¹³ Mather, interview; Gardner: 72, 75.

¹⁴ Mather interview.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?* (New York: Doubleday) 1984: 86-87; and, Louis Font, interview with the author, 16 November 1988.

¹⁹ Ken Cloke, interview with the author, 13 December 1988; and, Donald Duncan, interview with the author, 20 March 1989.

²⁰ Mather interview.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Collection of video clips pertaining to the Nine for Peace and the Presidio 27, in the possession of Keith Mather, all without dates or other references as to their origin.

²⁵ Mather interview.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Hal Muskat, interview with the author, 21 May 1989.

²⁸ Mather interview.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

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- 30 Gardner: 106.
31 Mather interview.
32 Gardner: 10-12; and, Randy Rowland, "The Presidio Mutiny," *Storm Warning!* 10 (October 1988): 16.
33 Gardner: 54, 87; and Rowland: 17.
34 Gardner: 15-16, 21-23.
35 *Ibid.*: 85-89
36 Mather interview.
37 *Ibid.*; and Gardner: 91-92.
38 Mather interview.
39 Gardner: 90.
40 *Ibid.*: 92.
41 *Ibid.*: 89, 92-93; Mather interview.
42 Gardner: 7, 94; Rowland: 18.
43 Gardner: 65.
44 *Ibid.*: 163.
45 Mather interview.
46 *Ibid.*
47 Muskat interview.
48 Gardner: 178.
49 Gardner: 7-8; Muskat interview.
50 Gardner: 117, 150, 153-154, 168.
51 Gardner: 154.
52 Mather interview.