

The New York Times (and every other news outlet) Discovers Fort Carson

All these radical changes were taking place and affecting the attitudes, not only of the lowest rank soldiers on post, and the skeptical traditional NCOs and Officers but also was leaking out across the city of Colorado Springs into the civilian community at large. But to that point - 1970 - it had been essentially a 'local' and inside-the-Army and Colorado Springs story.

That held until a New York Times reporter who was in Denver covering a financial story heard about radical changes taking place at Fort Carson. He contacted the post, and LTC George Barante the Public Information Officer responded to his call. In short order Barante filled him in on the radical changes taking place, providing him a copy of the fifty-seven changes already made. The reporter broke the story in a long piece about the 'New Army' starting up at Carson.

Every major newspaper in the country, and the news services picked up on the story. Network television news organizations - NBC, CBS, ABC - rushed to Fort Carson to tape visible evidence of the 'changes', interviewing soldiers, NCOs, officers and 'experts' about the Army. Foreign news sources - and their defense departments who had to deal with 60's revolution youth - picked up on it. Commentators - some of them long time 'military affairs' columnists - rendered opinions about the 'new Army' before they had even a chance to visit the post. Suddenly Fort Carson was big national news.

Since the controversies, protests, - over the Vietnam War - mixed in with changing Administrative policies and Congressional debates about the future military were already news, Fort Carson with real soldiers coming from and going to Vietnam with what many considered a 'radical' lifestyle while at the Fort became the focus of

much sociological and military reporting. And endless jokes and cartoons about the 'hippies' in uniform.

Public Incidents

Several noteworthy events happened as Fort Carson came into the Limelight.

Fort Carson staged the first Rock Concert ever at Fort Carson, and probably the first on any Army Post.

Then Jane Fonda, the controversial actress who opposed the war and had permitted herself to be photographed sitting in a North Korean Army Anti-Aircraft Artillery weapon seat while shot down American pilots were still Prisoners of War in Hanoi - an act that forever after earned her the scorn of all but a tiny minority of US Military personnel - came to Fort Carson. She was with a rag tag group of civilians from the area - some undoubtedly ex-soldiers.

Instead of stopping her at the gate - as other Posts would have done - she was graciously

invited into General Rogers office to meet with him. She claimed his Stockade was a 'Political Prison'. He said he didn't think so. Would she like to visit it and talk to any prisoners? She never had been close to, much less inside, such a place before. But she said yes and visited the barbed wire Fort Carson Stockade - not yet a permanent-construction military jail. It was all wooden barracks and barbed wire.

She talked to any prisoner she wanted, and was not so sure they were just there for political reasons. (Most were for there for simple military crimes reasons.)

General Rogers also invited her to come back with her Anti-War group and he would give her the stage in the Main Post theater, let any soldiers who wanted to, hear her.

She came out to the barbed wire - other side of which was her scruffy friends and announced that "General Rogers was the nicest general she had ever met"

She couldn't handle the openness and candor, and never came back again.

One of the other 'Open Dialogue' policies Gen Rogers implemented was to invite to Fort Carson, and give them the stage in the large Post Theater whomever more than a handful of enough soldiers wanted to hear - key national and controversial figures. Not only Labor movement leader 'Corky Gonzalas' and Ralph Nader, but also - from the right "William J Buckley" (for there were also soldiers with quite conservative political views on the post). And even local, new Colorado Springs Symphony Conductor Charles Ansbacher spoke on the stage to an appreciative enlisted audience. He was frankly stunned at the 'cultural' level that existed on post. Like others with no contact with the US Military since WWII, he only had a wooden view of soldiers of the US Army.

Racial Bloodbath Averted

Then a potentially major incident happened, the details of which were classified for several

years. The local press never covered it. Its outcome proved that there had been real progress made in 'trust' of key members of the Fort Carson Chain of Command by black soldiers. 'Mediators' between militant blacks and whites some of which had run 'community' programs in volatile cities sprung up. One was white Specialist 5th Class Rosendahl, who had the ear of the General and even a small office with a telephone in the headquarters. In civilian life he had a degree in sociology. His job was circulate around the Post, to listen, talk to soldiers, report, and sometimes arbitrate racial 'attitudes.'

He was so successful, with national publicity of his role, no less than John D Rockefeller III visited Fort Carson in April of 1971 and ended up hiring Sp5 Rosendahl as he left the Army, to help him serve as a 'troubleshooter' in his youth-oriented Charities working out of Rockefeller Plaza in New York. For just as the Army was having difficulty dealing with - or even 'communicating' with 1960's youth, so was

Rockefeller's Philanthropic organizations having trouble getting the 'trust' of troubled, and black youth. The Army was teaching civilian institutions how to handle them!

This major racial incident started off post when there was an ugly incident when a white soldier moonlighting as a gas station attendant was confronted by a group of blacks who entered his station - he thought to rob him - so he pulled out a gun and shot one of them. Since the blacks had been working for the black Lieutenant Governor of Colorado and were driving a State Car, the news went national.

About a week later, I was asleep at about 2AM, when my bedside phone rang. It was a black 'brotherhood' soldier - Hilson Edwards - who had been attending the Racial Harmony Council meetings and was beginning to know he could 'talk' to senior white officers, including me.

He opened with - and I never forgot it - "We - have a problem."

He went on that a carload of Black Panthers had snuck onto the post from the southern, less manned, entrance to Carson in a car which had loaded rifles in the trunk. They had pulled up at one end of a long slightly curved street called 'the banana' that went through the troop barracks area AND was next to the Enlisted Service Clubs - which were permitted to sell beer on post and stay open until 2AM. A large collection of black soldiers were milling around in the center of the street, blocking the little vehicle traffic at that time of night. The Military Police had been called and a section of them, armed with .45 caliber pistols under the command of an MP lieutenant was in a v formation at the other end, trying to clear the roadway of mostly black soldiers - many of who were intoxicated.

Pvt Edwards said the 'brothers' wanted the MPs to fire the first shot and then they would pass out the rifles and turn it into a deadly riot.

It was a set up.

I immediately called the Provost Marshal and ordered him to stop the MPs from trying to clear the road and hold fast. Only fire if they were assaulted.

Then I called white General Dewitt Smith the Assistant Division Commander, who quickly drove down to the Brigade Area, and with black soldier Hilson Edwards at his side walked slowly through the crowd, which gave way and slowly dispersed without incident. The Brigade Commander of the area was brand new and had hardly learned how we handle racial problems. He was not called until later.

Edwards went around to the rear of the crowd and saw the Panthers, their effort at inciting 'guerilla street action' frustrated (I knew by then most of the tactics of insurgents and by ordering the MPs to stop, their plans went awry) pack up and get back off post the way they came in.

No shots were fired. Even though the city newspaper criticized - from one MPs' complaint

that they were not permitted to 'do their job.' Of course the MPs had no clue what the Black Panthers had planned. We did not answer that complaint.

And the next day was payday. Drugs were coming into Colorado Springs. So Edwards with SP5 Rosendahl set up a kind of telephone command post in his office, close to my Chief of Staff's office, while a handful of black soldiers downtown listened to the rumors, and called Edwards from payphones, that the Panthers were in the downtown and were going to go into Fanny Mae Duncan's "Cotton Club" - where blacks hung out and try to start things that could end in violence.

At the critical moment I called the Chief of Police in Colorado Springs and said "The Black Panthers are coming in the back door of the Cotton Club. You better go in the front door."

The Chief, utterly unaware of what was going on (and had no black policemen on the force), did that, the Panthers backed out, left town, and

never came back. Twice we defeated that violent group in their attempts to create a big incident.

One or two bloodbaths were averted - largely because of the trust that had been built up between key black soldiers and key officer in top of the white chain of command. The observant blacks - like Edwards - realized that the only people on Post who would be hurt, would be their fellow black soldiers. So in the end they trusted us more than the Black Panthers - to 'take care of the soldiers.'

This incident on post was classified for a time. But its reports got all the way to the Secretary of the Army, who, in a meeting with the Secretary of the Air Force was asked whether he could send some 'Fort Carson' officers to Travis Air Force Base in California, where the Air Force was having 'black political problems' in its jail. Irony. The Army helping out the Air Force over their racial problems.

When General Smith asked Hilson Edwards

why he, the general, was not verbally or physically abused when he walked through that crowd of black soldiers, Edwards answered "You were with me."

Interestingly, these kinds of experiences, the high-level (for soldiers) dealing with senior white officers, and the various crises that were met with a degree of cooperation between blacks and whites, became memorable events in the lives of many of those soldiers.

One example was that Hilson Edwards, who had musical talent, after he left the Army and led a successful black band in New York, actually came back to visit Fort Carson with some black band members, asked to see me, and with tears in his eyes told them all the things good that happened at Fort Carson when he was there having me confirm it. And some members of the Enlisted Council learned how things work so well, that a number of them went back to small towns and ran for mayor, and councilmen. They became involved.

That did not mean everything went smoothly.

On one occasion, the big bull Provost Marshal Colonel of Fort Carson came into my office and pounded on the desk, that a 'Specialist Hare' had been stopping his Patrol Jeeps and upbraiding them for their littering from the jeep. From the experience of the Council of which he was Chairman at one time, Hare had learned 'responsibility' and was taking it when he saw that other soldiers were not as self-disciplined as he had become. He was reinventing what NCO do in the Army. When soldier or junior officer 'suggestions' were made to the Chain of Command - right up to General Rogers - and they were acted upon, the next lesson was learned - with authority, comes 'responsibility'. When Junior rank enlisted men and junior officer's 'ideas' were implemented they began to act more responsibly themselves - helping the entire command improve. Self discipline and not just outward conformity.

Then there was an Hispanic officer who left the

service, and went to work in one of the Post administrative offices as a civilian employee where my own brother in law, Ernie McCoy had worked for years. When the time came to promote one, McCoy was promoted on the merits by the Post Civilian work force top administrator and not the Hispanic man. He later ranted and raged that I had promoted the white relative, though I had nothing to do with it. And he tried to poison Hispanics in Colorado Springs against me after I retired. (I never let Ernie know that)

Popular Endorsement

One other noteworthy incident came when the great World War II cartoonist, Bill Mauldin came to Carson to see the changes. He too visited the Fort Carson Stockade. When he got to the soldier PFC Gaxiola whom General Rogers offered - in the Fort Carson Coffee House - to be a 'counsellor in his stockade' - Gaxiola told Mauldin that the big reason many soldiers were in the stockade is that they had no education.

That what is needed by him to help educate them is an Encyclopaedia Britannica.

So Mauldin called his Publisher in Chicago and said "I want you to send an Encyclopaedia Brittanica to the Fort Carson Stockade. If you won't pay for it, I will."

It was delivered.

Then Mauldin drew a classic cartoon that made Life Magazine Cover, with his iconic, typical WWII grunt soldiers 'Willy and Joe' figures musing over the 'changes they saw. But also made a series of very laudatory remarks about the changes - saying we were 'bridging the generation gap, way ahead of the rest of the country.'

The Publicity for Fort Carson started shifting from outright skepticism by professionals, pundits, and other parts of the Army, through recognition Fort Carson was 'keeping up' with the times and youthful American culture, to rate praise, such as from Bill Mauldin.

While the Army at Fort Carson was solving the problems of dealing with disaffected hippie and racial minority soldiers - the get the Army working the way in needs to, we were pioneering ways that civilian society could learn from.

Colorado Springs PD started recruiting black police officers from some of the discharged black soldiers.