**KING RIOT’S IN DC**

**Memories**

Thursday 4- Monday 8 April 1968

I was a Sergeant in the Drum & Bugle Corps at the Marine Barracks 8th & I Sts., S.E., Washington, D.C. My wife, Ruth worked for one of the 3 civilian Judges at the US Court of Military Appeals at 450 E St NW, Wash, DC in Judiciary Square in downtown DC. The D&B was in rehearsal and on break when I received a phone call from my wife, very unusual as we didn’t bother each other at work normally. When I got to the phone she told she had been on a late lunch break shopping in the downtown Hecht’s Store when a brick, followed by several others came crashing through the plate glass windows of the first floor of the store. She looked and saw crowds of black people in the street breaking windows and pulling displays from them so she left the store and returned to the Court. On the way, she observed others groups rioting and looting but was not confronted or harmed. She informed the judges who shut down the court and ordered everyone to go home. She called to inform me of it. I asked her about it and she said that there were several large buildings on fire already and I told her to take her car and go home and I’d be alright.

I grabbed a set of binoculars and quickly climbed the ladder up through the attic from the Drum Major’s Office and on up onto the roof of the center most and highest section of the Barracks. Once I got on it without the need of binoculars I could easily see several large columns of black smoke rising up into the sky from the down town DC area. I distinctly recall thinking that I had seen scenes like that in Vietnam and in Movietone News at the movies during WWII & Korean wars but NEVER in our nation!

I scrambled down and informed Top Toole who told me to run down and advise the CO, Colonel Feagan. I rushed down, knocked loudly on his hatch and won enter rushed in. I told him of my wife’s phone call, and what I had observed from the roof. He summoned his XO & S-3 Officers along with our SgtMaj to his office immediately. When they very quickly arrived he asked me to advise them of what I had told him and I repeated it. When I finished he began to issue orders when his phone rang. He picked it up and listened then advised the caller the Barracks was already in the process before receiving the call of reacting! He hung up and advised us that that had been the Office of the Military District of DC issuing an Alert Order to stand by for possible Riot Control Duty. I was thanked and dismissed retiring to the D&B which had secured rehearsal and already orders had arrived ordering the Gates secured and no one to leave until further orders.

A few of the D&B members had collateral duties as H&HS CO’s Riot Platoon which was ordered to draw and equipment and weapons then form up on the south troop walk while e MCI’s Company’s Platoon formed up on the north troop walk.

At a briefing down at the H&HS Co Office along with other SNCO’s & NCO’s I was assigned as NCOIC of a small immediate reaction force to reinforce as needed or backup the Main Gate Post #1.

I was assigned I believe around 6 troops from the D&B, of which LCpl Roy Zanni was one and I believe LCpl Joh Marinko was another, but the rest of the names escape right now. We went down to Supply and drew gas masks, helmets, pistol belts, canteens, and 36” riot control sticks. We then took up our assigned position in the Band Hall and the inner glassed-in portion of the Porch with orders to maintain a low visibility.

Only a couple of months earlier the entire Barracks had undergone a series of training on Riot Control duty, even playing Riot Control Problems down in the Navy Yard after it closed in the evening. We went into the old gun factory building area and 2 companies acted as Riot Control Troops while the other company was Rioters! Of course being Marines the troops decided to “win” and were inventive in the methods used. I recall observing when Ceremonial Guard Company being led by their Company Commander Major Sheehan (ret Gen USMC) who I had first met in Vietnam in 63, in their front rank antagonizing MCI’s Marines performing as Riot Control troops. MCI was using our M-14 rifles with sheathed fixed bayonets. Gd. Co. had located a 4” firehouse and had attached it to a nearby fire hydrant alongside a building at a “T” intersection. When MCI Company's front rank was within a pace or so from it they suddenly were halted by the hose being drawn tight by Gd Co Marines, who were hiding unseen down the “leg” of the “T” intersection. This prevented MCI Company from begin able to advance without cutting the house or getting to those rioters holding the hose, which they couldn’t do. Maj Sheehan was wearing a heavily starched utility cover and was really verbally abusing the front rank of MCI Marines while the MCI Officers were shouting to advance. Maj Sheehan removing his Utility Cover began striking at MCI’s front ranks with it and he hit one young PFC or LCpl a stinging blow. Instantly that young MCI Marine returned the favor with a downward slash of his sheathed bayonet which stuck the side of the Major’s face. Instantly, the S-3 Officer and his “judges,” halted the exercise and separated the Marine rioters from the riot control Marines as tempers were flaring. Major Sheehan, regained his feet under him, picked up his dropped cover, walked over to the young MCI Marine who had slashed him and complimented him on his stoke and literally reached over and patted him on his shoulder. That classy move of outstanding leadership broke the tension.

The following week when roles were reversed I recall some rotten eggs being dropped by (never identified) rioting Marines from building tops down onto Gd Co (now the Riot Control Marines) and a bunch of the D&B SNCO’s & NCO’s deployed water pistols against the Riot Control Marines displaying keen marksmanship. That training was played out with all the vigor and enthusiasm possible with numerous injuries and sickbay visits to prove it. But it turned out to have come at the perfect time.

By now it was around 2 or 3 pm on a nice sunny warm day and the Main Gates of the Barracks and the Navy Yards had been secured.

From our assigned position we had probably one of the best ringside seats of the rioting down 8th Street S.E. At first, we saw an increased flow of traffic both north and south on 8th St and much of flowing at above normal speeds, groups of kids and adults in the streets and sidewalks. Directly across from the gate was the Laundry we all used, next up from it a furniture store and then the “Uniform and Tailor” shop we all used adjacent to an alley across from the CO’s house. Around 3:00 pm while we were watching it all to our surprise the glass in the double front doors of the furniture burst out onto the sidewalk in a loud noise. We saw a 25” (large in those days) beautiful real mahogany wood console TV had been used as a battering ram by a black lady sliding it on it’s top out through the glass doors, and right on down the sidewalk as fast as she could push it. This was quickly followed by several groups of people running from the store with pieces of furniture, pictures, lights and other things obviously stealing it. A DC Police Cruiser came sliding to a halt with its lights and siren on in front of the business and officers blew whistles and shouted for everyone to go home and get away. Then off they went at high speed.

We quickly discovered that the riot was spreading across the city and Metro DC was only at normal manpower so was unable to respond, or make arrests as they were literally overwhelmed with calls. So the order had been broadcast to all Police to NOT make any arrests unless for Murder, Rape, Use of Weapons or Attempts of any of those crimes. They had determined that they could simply not afford to have officers in the station processing prisoners, but instead maintaining as high visibility as possible on the streets running people on.

In the meantime, Metro PD and all the other Federal and surrounding law enforcement agencies were recalling ALL Officers too immediate duty to come up to maximum strength to respond to the crisis.

It didn’t take the locals very long to figure out that tactic and really begin to “shop” for items they always wanted to have. We saw a lady come strolling out of the furniture store caring a nice Italian coffee table with 2 stone inlays on its top. As she began to stroll down the walk one fell out and broke. She looked at it, then dropped the rest onto the sidewalk, turned and re-entered the store and picked up another one carrying it this time so the stone didn’t fall out and down the walk, she went! A little later a Lady, assisted by her young kids were piling up her furniture selections on the sidewalk while getting more from inside when up pulled a 1 1/2 ton stake bed truck with a local plumbing company name and phone numbers professionally painted on its doors and 4 males in that company’s uniform. The men got out and took every piece of that lady’s loot loading it onto their truck, and even took a few more pieces along with it all while she screams dead threatened them to no avail. They left with a full load on their truck. The looting of that furniture store continued until it was either stripped clean, or its contents were lying broken and shattered on the floor, sidewalk and street outside.

The Cleaners was looted of clothes, including many of our uniforms and then the Uniform and Tailor Shop was looted. That business was set fire too but the City Fire Department was unable to respond. A group of senior SNCO’s (8’s & even a MGySgt) had been detailed as the Barracks Fire Response Team and had a 2-inch water hose hooked up to one of the Barracks Fire Mains on arcade near the center of the Barracks. They were alerted to the Uniform Store Fire and charged across Center Walk up to the maximum extension of their hose. Back came the order to turn on the water as several of those SNCO’s braced for the expected high power surge of water, only to have it trickle out the end a few inches in front of the end of the hose nozzle! With all the demand for water fighting fires across the city, there was no pressure in the water mains! So we watched the building slowly burn and I believe it was 3 stores tall. Later on after dark an Oxon Hill Maryland Volunteer Fire Department Pumper Truck arrived and began using its pumps to charge their hoses and remained until they managed to extinguish the fires across the street from the Barracks, but by then there were only shells remaining of those former businesses.

Early on Col Fegan passed the word for each company to begin allowing it’s Marines who had cars parked not the streets, or behind the barracks in our parking area to depart, get their vehicles and drive them down to the Navy Yard and park them in the Chief’s Club parking lot. Then they would be ferried back in our large (bread truck like) vans and this repeated until all had their vehicles safely parked there. I retrieved my pickup truck undamaged yet and parked it riding back in one of those vans. All of us who had vehicles had pretty much excepted we had lost them to the wanton destruction ongoing around us so when Col Fegan initiated that action for us we would have stormed the Gates of Hell of him with toothpicks!

The MCI and H&HS Co Riot Platoons were laying in formation on their packs on the parade deck waiting for the call from MDW to deploy. Evening chow was served in shifts. From our "ringside seats," we watched in disbelief all the destruction in near disbelief we were not permitted to go out the gates and make safe our street, but MDW orders to Col Fegan were implicit we were NOT to do so!

Around 2000 hrs Col Fegan and our XO, a Cpl from MCI Company with a radio on his back arrived at the main gate. The Col and XO were in greens and overcoats while the radio Cpl was in Utilities. They took a “stroll” around the block and as they came back down 8th street several local makes jumped in front of them bragging about how they were going to burn down the Barracks and kill Marines. Col Fegan stared them straight in the eyes and in his menacing command tone asked them to, “**STEP OUT OF MY WAY BEFORE I INSERT MY HAND INTO YOUR CHEST CAVITY AND EXTRACT YOUR HEART!**” I had seen them confronting our Colonel and was reading my group to charge up the street to the Colonel’s rescue only to see the “gentlemen” decide they had things to do elsewhere that demanded they depart at a high rate of speed! Only later did we learn from the shaken Cpl who had been their radio man what had occurred.

Around 2300 hours that evening Metro PD finally had all off-duty officers back possible to get back so that they had 3 full shifts on duty. Then the order was passed to resume making arrests. The first arrest we saw was a when a Metro DC cruiser stopped a nice new car immediately at the south edge of our main gate entrance drive.

Out of the cruiser came 4 officers, with one being a uniformed motorcycle officer with helmet and baseball bat. They surrounded that car full of rioters and ordered them to get out. The driver demanded to know why “We ain’t doing nothing wrong!” At which the baseball bat broke out both headlights as if that motorcycle officer was Babe Ruth swinging for the fences. That got them out of the car where they were slammed, none too gently, onto the sidewalk and pavement, cuffed then stuffed into a passing paddy wagon and they all departed. There sat that car with the doors wide open, lights still turned on (with exception of broken out headlights) and keys in ignition with radio playing until the battery died down later and next day it was towed away.

Once it had gotten dark from the band hall porch we could easily see the reflection of fire in the sky to the north of us and around the city skies.

Finally, around 2330 to midnight MDW ordered the Barracks to secure the Capital Building and its grounds as well as the Capital Power Plant. We quickly unchained the main gates, opened them up and out at the double time, rifles at Port Arms with chrome plated gleaming bayonets fixed, came the two riot platoons of MCI and H&HS Co. As I gazed down to the Navy Yard Old Gates they burst open and the same thing was occurring with Ceremonial Guard Company bursting out both gates pouring out picture perfect double timing formations that only 8th & I can attain. From up and down with street, we heard the locals shouting, **“RUN! RUN! THE MARINES ARE COMING! THE MARINES ARE COMING!**  It was as if the Wizard of Oz had waved his magic wand as the streets were instantly empty save for our double timing Marines!

I was later told by several of the Marines I knew who ended up guarding the Capitol Power Plant, which was adjacent to an older black neighborhood of owned homes, that an hour or so after they arrived a delegation of ladies from those residences approached them with fresh baked cookies thanking them for showing up and protecting their neighborhood. They also said the cookies were delicious and they were kept supplied as long as they were there.

That first night, after midnight and our Marines, had gone out the gate, the police began heavily using Tear Gas up and down 8th Street at the slightest sign of anyone on it. It hung in the air like a dense fog and it was so bad, even inside the band hall my detail slept with our gas mask on for relief from the fumes.

Ceremonial Guard Company was folded into a battalion formed primarily by Quantico Marines convoyed up and under that Bn’s CO, a LtCol. He apparently had a “thing” for 8th & I Marines and went out of his way to nitpick them. Later on one of Col Fegan’s visits, and after he had spoken with his troops, that LtCol handed Col Fegan a stack of “report slips” on our troops for things such as, “Failure to have right bootlace over left” and other crappy, petty like charges. And here those Marines were being billeted beneath the Capitol building in near dungeons like rooms that had not been used since the Civil War, sleeping on cold marble floors and such. Col Fegan not only tore up those report chits in front of the LtCol but also expressed to him his concepts of troop leadership and his expectations of MY Marines being taken care of OR ELSE LtCol! After that, I was told they had noted a marked change in their treatment.

The Next morning we began to see Army Troops marching guard posts up and down 8th street. The one across from the barracks came over and asked if he could use our “men’s facilities” and we let him use our head! By then the chains and been removed from the gates and they were even opened. I stuck up a conversation with the soldier who turned out to be a Staff Sergeant from Ft Lee, Va and in the Quartermaster Corps who had been conveyed up. He told me he was normally assigned to a Heavy Tent Repair Company!!!!

Another story we picked up form the DC police Officers was that over in Anacostia, which had really had troubles, another Army unit was flown into Bolling AFB. It was a Bn of the 82nd Airborne which had been in the process of just having returned from a tour in Vietnam of turning in their equipment to go home on 30 days leave. They were not happy campers. Right in the middle of that process they had been ordered to redraw their weapons and equipment and boarded onto planes and flown up to Bolling AFB. They were very unhappy campers. The Wheeler Road Apartments had several incidents of shots fired from buildings at patrolling police cruisers. On one of the early patrols by those 82nd troopers, a gunshot rang out at them in that location. A black Sgt chambered around in the pedestal mounted.30 cal machine gun and he “dusted” off the brick top edge of the roof. Then when a local attempted to approach his “Brother” to discuss things that Sgt advised that local he wasn’t any brother of his and aimed the machine gun at the local. Anacostia and especially those areas patrolled by the 82nd were the quietest of all the previously trouble areas in the city.

When Martial Law had been declared in the City at about the same time the police began making arrests a curfew had been declared from sunset to sunrise no one permitted on the streets and all businesses closed. An unforeseen effect of that was all the places to eat, or purchase food was closed so where were the police to eat? Again Col Fegan stepped in and had our Post #1 and we helped him tell all the police we could that they could eat for free in our mess hall and it was open 24 hours a day. That was unbelievably appreciated by Metro PD Officers. I recall one group in particular that had an older black officer who was around 6-03 or 04 that would arrive. We’d always greet them and ask them for info on what was happening and they would stop and chat with us. He would always ask me “Sarg what are they serving today?” Early on it was steaks and meats but when that ran out they switched to softer foods. I told him we were down to soft foods and his buddies were a bit unhappy while he grinned from ear to ear! I asked him why he was so happy and he said, “**I LEFT HOME SO FAST I FORGOT MY FALSE TEETH SO SOFT FOOD IS GREAT!**”

The Sunday after the Riot’s were over was Easter Sunday. Never did I ever see so many nice new clothes as were worn by our neighbors and none of us had a doubt where they had come from!