

Green Beret Kidnap Lesson Backfires, 8 Put in Ala. Jail

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ALABASTER, Ala., July 26—“Green Berets” who set out to teach fellow Alabamians about guerrilla warfare got a lesson instead in local politics this week.

When they kidnaped a mayor and a police chief, the sheriff jailed eight of them and freed the two officials.

The National Guard's 20th Special Forces Unit made plans months ago to demonstrate Vietcong tactics during the summer training period for guardsmen from Alabama, Florida and Louisiana.

The idea was, guardsmen say, to kidnap the mayor of a small town and show everyone what it's like to live in the Vietnam countryside with the Vietcong lurking in the field.

“The mayor was well aware of the plan,” mourned Maj. Arthur Hathorn today. “He had been contacted six months ago.”

The mayor knew he was to be captured, Hathorn said, but he didn't know when, except that it would be within the two-week drill period.

The police chief and the sheriff also knew an official was to be captured, but didn't know which one. The mayor was even briefed by the adjutant general, said Hathorn.

But military planners failed to reckon with a hard fact of Alabama political life. Both

Sheriff C. P. (Red) Walker and Mayor Willie Mathis of Alabaster are up for re-election Aug. 8. The training exercise that began Tuesday seemed to attract more public attention than the guard had anticipated.

When the summer soldiers showed up to capture him, the 68-year-old mayor told the newsmen later, he was scared.

“They had us covered faster than the drop of a hat,” he said. “We didn't have a chance.”

The mayor was driving around town with his police chief, C. E. (Bull) Carter, nailing up campaign posters. A pickup truck with a camper on it appeared behind them.

Suddenly, five men with M-16 rifles and pistols swarmed out and surrounded them. Carter said later he figured out it was the fake kidnaping because he noticed some of the guns were plugged.

But the mayor said he didn't expect it. “We knew the troops were in the area, and we had heard they would try to take a political prisoner,” he told newsmen today. “But we were told a recruit would be brought in. The recruit would think he was learning my job but later would be kidnaped.”

In fact, there was a young lawyer on summer guard training duty assigned to the office of mayor of this town of 4,000 persons about 20 miles south of Birmingham. But his

job was to keep track of the victim to aid the kidnapers.

The mayor and the chief were silently herded into the camper and taken to a wooded and mosquito-infested area.

When the mayor didn't get home on time his wife called the police. “We think he has been kidnaped,” said the officer on duty, “but we are not sure.” So she called the sheriff.

Newsmen were told later his reaction was, “Something sneaky's going on here. They may try to kidnap someone else.”

With uncanny perception, Sheriff Walker collected deputies and Alabaster policemen and staked out the home of city judge H. L. Hollis.

Sure enough, later that night eight figures advanced on the house. There was a knock at the door. The judge answered it. They grabbed him.

“Not so fast there,” cried the sheriff from his vantage point in the darkness. As related to the newsmen later, his words were: “We can be as sneaky as you.”

The sheriff arrested the eight guardsmen, booked them into the county jail on an open charge and waited.

A call came within an hour. “You've got some of our men,” said an unidentified voice. “We want them released, sheriff.”