Death on a Rooftop—Why?

1-11-73

By Austin Scott
and George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writers

EMPORIA, Kan., Jan. 10—It was three years ago when the parents of Mark James Robert Essex first noticed a change in the thoughts and behavior of their oldest son—shortly after he enlisted in the Navy.

The change was a fairly rapid one, dramatic enough for his close friends and acquaintances to have remarked wonderingly on it when he was discharged two years later.

His parents tried hard to understand what he was going through and to help him through it. They did not imagine, they said, that the enthusiastic, fun-loving, thoughtful, well liked son they had raised would end up as a bullet-riddled body on a New Orleans rooftop, accused of being the sniper who shot and killed seven people.

But they knew that he did not come out of the Navy the same as he went in. And as far as they are concerned, all clues to why their son changed are to be found in the friends he made and the racial conflicts he went through during the two years he was in the Navy, based in San Diego.

"It all started in the Navy—he was all right when he left here," his mother said. "The first time he came out of the Navy, I could tell he

See ESSEX, A6, Col. 1

1968 Photo

MARK J. ESSEX
. . . a changed man

Rooftop Death of Jimmy Essex

ESSEX, From A1

was changed . . . he said you don't know what the blacks go through in the Navy, and he told all the younger blacks around here they didn't want to go in."

Mr. and Mrs. Mark Essex were up most of the night, waiting and thinking and talking for almost two hours just before dawn today about the changes they had seen 23-year-old "Jimmy," as everybody called him, go through.

A family friend, the Rev. W. A. Chambers, pastor of St. James Baptist Church, has been quoted as saying that Jimmy returned from the Navy "hating white folks."

"He went in a good boy but he came out with a militant attitude . . . hostile," said Mrs. Essex, a small, round, dark-brown woman who traces her family's residence in Emporia back to her great-grandfather.

"He wasn't being treated right," she said. "Jimmy was the type of guy who wasn't going to let the white people tell him what to do . . . that was a happy-go-lucky kid that went in; this was a serious-minded man that came out."

The Essexes are not seen by their friends and neighbors as the kind of people who hate.

Emporia is a small town, with only a few hundred blacks in its population of 25,000. And many, like both of Jimmy's parents, have deep roots in this part of the state, going back to settlements of free blacks before the Civil War.

Most of the black families live in modest frame houses in one area of town, but they point out there are whites living there too. Mrs. Essex said the city schools were not segregated when she was attending them, or when her father was, either.

Not that Emporia treats blacks as equals. "You know better than to ask a question like that," one black neighbor laughed.

But they said they thought Emporia's problems were not so much a matter of general white attitudes as the attitudes of individual bigots.

"We had one particular white friend, the husband of one of Jimmy's teachers," his mother said. "Jimmy was leaving the next day, but he took time out to say goodby to this white friend."

The Essexes said they heard no general racial complaints from Jimmy until his regular, every-Sunday telephone calls from the San Diego naval base where he was stationed.

That's when he began to talk for the first time about harrassment, they said—his younger sister, Penny, calls it "oppression": blacks being arbitrarily stopped by police and ordered out while their cars were searched, black recruits forced to ask permission to do things white recruits didn't need permission for, complaints whenever "soul music" was played, refusing to let black friends share the same barracks, letting whites wear their hair long but refusing to tolerate equal-length Afros on blacks.

In October, 1970, Jimmy went AWOL, a detail that Navy officials in Washington did not mention when they said Tuesday that he had been discharged from the service honorably, but for "unsuitable character and behavior disorders" after serving only two of his four years.

When he went AWOL, he came home to think.

"He stayed a month," Mrs. Essex said. He just didn't want to go back."

Asked if they persuaded him to return, Mrs. Essex said "Perhaps we did . . . we told him he was in the service and couldn't run forever. They were bound to catch him."

Ironically, the Navy was picked partly because both parents thought it offered more opportunity than the Army, where, Mr. Essex said, he had endured much prejudice during a tour in Mississippi in 1942.

After a month at home, their son returned to San Diego and, on his own, insisted on a court martial, the Essexes said.

Mrs. Essex had no records handy of what followed, but she said she remembered that "they didn't even find him guilty, but they sentenced him to 30 days and they busted him. He wasn't very high, but what he had, they took away." After 30 days, she said, he was discharged. The Navy lists that date as Feb. 10, 1971.

Family and friends agree that the person who returned to Emporia in 1971 was a very different Jimmy.

"I didn't know him before he went in the Navy," said Randy Fox, who married Jimmy's sister, Penny. "When he came back, to me it seemed like he talked like he was fed up with the way white people were doing."

"It would really hurt Jimmy to see and hear on the news about little black kids starving," Penny said. "He didn't want to see kids grow up to be oppressed by the white man. He wanted to make the world better for them. He really believed in the black revolution . . . he wanted to change it himself, not wait another 500 years."

"It's like there were two Jimmys," said his brother-in-law. "He'd be playing with kids, he might be sitting watching the news, and he'd see something and you could see the expression on his face change to one of concern; he felt for it."

His mother remembers his last month at home as a time when there was still more of the old Jimmy than the new one.

She talked of his taking his young nephews and other neighborhood children to the park to play, of his support for her decision to go back to school and get her college bachelor's and master's degrees, of how he cheerfully did the dishes and the laundry and cleaned the house so she could study.

But he also made a four-to six-week trip to New York City to see an old Navy buddy, she said, and at least one friend from his Navy days lived in New Orleans.

The Essexes are not clear on what friends their son took up with while in the Navy, but they are not sure their influences were wholesome.

"I still say he had someone in there who was feeding him a lot of malarky," said Mr. Essex, who has spent 27 years working his way up to foreman at a local meat packing plant.

Jimmy drove to New Orleans shortly before his 23d birthday, Aug. 12, his parents said

On arriving there last summer, Essex quickly signed up as a trainee in federally funded vocational classes designed for the hard-core unemployed.

Dan Vincent, director of the New Orleans' anti-poverty agency, Total Community Action, Inc., said Essex told them he had been living in the city since 1971 and gave his address as an apartment at 1449 Sere St. in New Orleans' St. Bernard public housing project.
add 12 essex8n

City housing officials said they had no record of his ever having lived at that address. Instead, Essex spent at least part of the time in a $12-a-week back room at 1324½ Pailet St. — across the Mississippi River in suburban Jefferson Parish.

Had anti-poverty officials known of that, Vincent said, Essex would not have been eligible for the program in the city which paid him $50.50 a week while he was studying to be a vending machine repairman.

Essex signed up for the courses Aug. 22 and at-

—Why?

tended regularly until Dec. 22, the last class before the Christmas holidays. He did not come back after New Year's.

"He was a good student . . . probably the best in the class," Vincent said.

Essex moved out of the dark apartment sometime during the week of Oct. 29. He had moved in "five or six weeks before that," his landlady, Ruth Brown, said, and left without notice, still owing, as she views it, $15.95 —the last week's rent plus utilities.

Authorities listed Essex as living a few blocks away in a $120-a-month apartment at 1035 Pailet St., but that was actually occupied by Rodney Frank and his wife. Neighbors said Essex and Frank had met while serving in the Navy together.

Essex reportedly used the apartment mainly to receive mail, although he would often drop in to play cards and chat with Frank. Frank joined the Black Muslims sometime last fall "and they went their own way," said a young mother who lives next door to the Frank apartment and who knew both men.

"He wasn't for no organizations, no nothing," she said of Essax. "He didn't even dig the Panthers . . . If he'd been a Muslim, he wouldn't have been on top of that Howard Johnson's either. The Muslims don't believe in violence. They don't even believe in hitting their own women."

Essex seems to have moved over to New Orleans after leaving Mrs. Brown's. Frank subsequently separated from his wife and they moved out of their apartment, going their own ways sometime before Christmas. A New Orleans police spokesman said this afternoon that authorities have by now contacted Frank "and it appears that he had no connection with the incident at Howard Johnson's."

The Essexes talked to their son last on Christmas Day, when he promised he would come home sometime in January for a visit.

"He sounded very happy," his mother said. "He said he had been in places in the South where you could go in and never see a white face. He was telling us about the South—we've never been South."

The next his parents heard about him was two days ago, when federal agents called to ask about a

New Orleans Archbishop Philip M. Hannan comforts Mrs. Louis Sirgo, at the funeral of her h perintendent sl: