

Sniper's Roommate Questioned By F.B.I. and Then Released

By MARTIN WALDRON
Special to The New York Times

NEW ORLEANS, Jan. 10 — The police questioned today the roommate of Mark Essex, the slain New Orleans sniper, but released him without charges.

The roommate, Rodney Frank, had disappeared from the suburban apartment that he and Essex had used as a mail drop and occasional home base since last summer, when Essex came to New Orleans from Emporia, Kan.

The police, seeking to establish whether Essex was part of a conspiracy to murder policemen, had sought Mr. Frank since yesterday morning.

The police would not comment and Mr. Frank was not available for comment.

Three policemen, two hotel guests and a hotel employe were killed and 10 policemen and two firemen were wounded by a sniper or snipers shooting from the Downtown Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge last Sunday. Essex was shot and killed on the hotel roof by policemen riding in a helicopter.

Friends reported that Mr. Frank, a Black Muslim, had spent a lot of time in Muhammad's mosque No. 36 conferring with his minister, George 4X, and associates. The religion forbids any wrongdoing by its members, and Mr. Frank first convinced his fellow police that he had nothing to do with his roommate's shooting spree.

Friends said that Mr. Frank had served with Essex in the Navy, where both were dental technicians. Essex came to New Orleans with Mr. Frank in February, 1971, after their discharge from the Navy and returned to live last summer, the friends said.

Funerals for Victims

While the police investigation of the weekend snipings was continuing, families of three slain officers held funerals for the victims.

Deputy Police Superintendent Louis J. Sirgo was buried this morning, and patrolman Phil Coleman was buried this afternoon. Patrolman Paul Persigo was buried yesterday.

An emerging pattern of Essex's behavior indicated that he was a "loner."

A minister in Emporia, Kan., described Essex as a young man who returned from the Navy in 1971 hating white people.

Policemen in New Orleans said they have determined that a rifle found alongside Essex's

body last Monday was used in sniping incidents against the police here on New Year's Eve.

A police cadet was killed at the police station on that night, and two policemen were wounded.

The manager of the Montgomery Ward's store in Emporia, Essex's home town,

reported that Essex bought the .44-caliber Magnum rifle there last April.

Owned 2 Cars

The Kansas authorities reported late today that Essex had bought two automobiles in Kansas since his discharge from the Navy.

Both cars, a 1955 Buick purchased on June 30, 1971, and a 1962 Chevrolet bought last July 29, are still registered in his name.

The police also continued an investigation into the shooting last Sunday morning of a 33-year-old grocer, Joseph S. Perniciaro, who ran a small shop in a negro residential section.

Mr. Perniciaro was reported by neighbors to have been shot by a Negro assailant Sunday morning, and several police sources have said that the authorities believe Mr. Perniciaro was about to identify Essex as the man who shot the policemen and police cadet on New Year's Eve.

The police would not say how seriously wounded Mr. Perniciaro was, nor whether he was still alive.

Neighbors said they understood that Mr. Perniciaro was killed.

No hospital in New Orleans would acknowledge having a patient named Joseph S. Perniciaro.

Linked to Stolen Car

Sources close to the police said that a young Negro shot Mr. Perniciaro with a rifle at his store, then ran northward to a spot near the New Orleans Central Police Station, where he stole a car that had been left at a curb with the engine running.

The owner of the car, who saw it being stolen notified the police, who spotted the car and chased it, but lost it in heavy downtown traffic. The car was found abandoned Sunday night on the fourth floor of the hotel's parking lot.

The authorities would not say whether they had traced several bags of ammunition found on the hotel roof when officers stormed it Monday afternoon.

Mr. McMillan said the same shouts were heard by a Times-Picayune photographer, Phillip Ames, and by Furnell Chapman, a television newsman.

Mr. McMillan said that about 4 A.M. Monday, after police riflemen had fired into a concrete bunker atop the roof, he heard a man shouting, "I'm still here!"

About an hour or an hour and half later, Mr. McMillan said, the man could be heard shouting in a stairwell.

Navy Co-Workers Recall Marked Change in Essex

By EVERETT R. HOLLES

Special to The New York Times

SAN DIEGO, Jan. 10—Mark Essex was described today as a happy-go-lucky youth and "a darned good sailor" until two or three months before his discharge from the Navy two year ago for bad behavior.

At the Imperial Beach Naval Air Station here, where the black recruit served for seven months as a technician in the dental clinic, he was described as a hard worker who, until he became 21 in 1970, was on friendly terms with both blacks and whites.

"Then a very noticeable change came over him, he became withdrawn, his ready smile disappeared and it became quite difficult to talk with him," said Mrs. Alma Montano, a civilian assistant at the clinic.

Moves Off Base

"He stopped living in the barracks and moved into an apartment off base with some other black sailors, some of whom I think were rather bad companions for him," said Mrs. Montano, who has worked at the base for seven years and whose husband is a Navy man.

Paul Valdez, 21 years old, a dentalman third class from Rocky Ford, Colo., worked at the clinic with Essex for three months before the Kansas youth was given an involuntary discharge from the Navy on Feb. 10, 1971, for "character and behavior disorders."

Dentalman Valdez said that for a time, before Essex's discharge, they were "very friendly" and that "he was very friendly in helping me learn the ropes of a new job."

Mrs. Montano and Dentalman Valdez agreed that, despite the change in Essex's manner and attitude, he seemed to have "no real hang-ups" and that they had never heard him express any bitterness toward whites or resentment at his treatment in the Navy.

He merely became less communicative, less cheerful and spent his off-duty time almost entirely with blacks, either off base or at the enlisted men's club.

Mrs. Montano, Dentalman

Valdez and others who remember Essex from his brief two-year career, were puzzled by a statement made by his minister in Emporia, Kan., that he came to "hate white folks" while in the Navy.

Navy officials said, however, that during the last few months of his service, Essex had become involved in disciplinary troubles several times, including trial before a special court-martial for an unauthorized absence of 28 days during which he returned to his home in Kansas. But they said that none of his troubles had any discernible racial overtones.

He also was brought before a captain's mast for disciplinary infractions during the same period and "several other charges" were pending against him at the time he was given an "unsuitability" discharge.

Details of his offenses were unavailable here.

Mrs. Montano said she had been "shocked" when told that Essex had been identified as the New Orleans sniper.

"He was an attractive, happy-go-lucky young man who did more than his share of work, had a high performance rating here and got along well with his white co-workers," she said.

Both Mrs. Montano and Dentalman Valdez said that, to their knowledge, Essex had no connections with any black militant organizations.

"I haven't any idea what happened to him," Dentalman Valdez said. "He was a happy guy, usually smiling, and he never griped about anything. I can't imagine him gunning down anyone."

Family Says Essex Was Seeking Justice

By ANDREW H. MALCOLM

Special to The New York Times

EMPORIA, Kan., Jan. 11—The parents of Mark Essex, identified as the New Orleans sniper who shot and killed six persons there before being killed himself, today pictured their son as a black youth embittered by racial discrimination in the Navy and who lashed out at society in a frustrated fury.

In their first news conference since the 23-year-old Essex died Sunday night, they said that their son had been searching for an elusive justice in a white society.

Asked by newsmen if the six other persons killed in New Orleans had received justice, Mrs. Essex replied, "There was no justice in the whole situation. Jimmy was trying to tell white America you've been sitting too long on your bottoms, and you'd better take notice of us."

She spoke as her son's body was returned to this snow-covered east Kansas town of 23,000 for a burial service Saturday morning.

The service will be held in the St. James Baptist Church four years to the day after Essex enlisted in the Navy. He was trained in San Diego and stationed at Imperial Beach, Calif., as a dental technician.

Parents Tell of Slurs

In letters and conversations, his parents said today, Essex told of racial slights, slurs and snide remarks directed at the few black sailors there by white enlisted men.

These alleged incidents, the parents said, included frequent searches by white naval guards who did not search white sailors, higher-ranking whites calling black sailors "boy" and the barring of allegedly better-qualified black athletes from certain sports on base for no apparent reason.

Once Essex and three other black sailors felt that they had been unjustly accused of playing music too loud by a sailor known for his hostile attitude to blacks.

"The Navy became Jimmy's own private hell," Mrs. Essex said. "He couldn't take it any more. He had to get away."

In October, 1970, Essex was absent without leave. But after 28 days, his parents said, they persuaded him to return voluntarily.

He did and asked for a court-



The New York Times

Mrs. Mark H. Essex, at meeting in Emporia, holds her son's discharge from service in the Navy.

martial. There, superior officers testified to his "outstanding work," his parents said, but Essex pleaded guilty, was fined and discharged after having served 25 months of a four-year enlistment. Family members said that he had come home a different person.

His sister, 22-year-old Mrs. Penny Fox, said, "My brother was a normal guy. But in the Navy, he learned how black people have been harassed in the world.

"After that, if he saw a starving black child on TV, he identified with it. If he saw a black being harassed, he identified with him. His main goal was to change society, to give all people an equal chance."

At one point in the news conference, which was held in the family church, Mrs. Fox said that her brother's actions in

New Orleans were not "extreme."

Later, she said, "I don't agree with the killings. But Jimmy wanted change. And talking hasn't done any good. He was pushed to this. I knew something was going to happen."

Mrs. Essex, who said that she believed her son had not been alone on the roof of the Downtown Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge in New Orleans, asserted that her son's action carried a message.

"I his own way," she said, "he was trying to tell whites that American blacks are not going to take it any more."

She said that she had not known her son purchased a high powered rifle here last April. It was found by his body. And she said that there had been no indication of what he intended to do in New Orleans.

"He called us Christmas, and he talked to everyone in the house," she said. "He was the same old Jimmy."

Essex's association with this town was the biggest news here since March 31, 1931, when Knute Rockne, the Notre Dame football coach, was killed in an airplane crash in a pasture not far from here.

In an editorial yesterday, The Emporia Gazette, long operated by the late William Allen White, cited the family's "terribly painful emotional experience." It said that the Essexes were bearing up "like the fine, gracious people they are. Hopefully, the sympathy and solace pouring from friends and neighbors in Emporia will help heal the wound."

Then, late today, KVOE, the local radio station, announced that it would not cover the funeral Saturday because it was a private family affair as distinct from a newsworthy event like the shootings. To send reporters to the funeral, the station said, would be to create news, not cover it.