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Essex Carries Shootout

By BILL RAINEY
States-Item Staff Writer

EMPORIA, Kan.—What turned Mark "Jimmy" Essex, a onetime Boy Scout who in high school had ambitions to become a minister, into a deadly sniper atop a New Orleans hotel?

Residents of this town where he was born and grew up are as much at a loss for the answer to that question as the rest of the world. Almost to the person they are sure that whatever it was occurred after he left here.

The real answer to why Essex, acting alone or with other snipers, shot six persons to death and wounded 19 others at the Downtown Howard Johnson Motor Lodge, went with him to his grave Saturday in a snow-covered Emporia cemetery. Essex was shot to death on the hotel roof by police marksmen firing from a helicopter on the night of Jan. 7.

Most Emporians who knew Essex were shocked last Tuesday when the 23-year-old was identified as the sniper. The news set off a wave of disbelief in this racially mixed town of about 20,000.

BUT A FEW had known prior to the New Orleans tragedy that Essex somewhere along the line had turned against whites.

In a letter to his mother a week before the killings, Essex had vowed a war against whites.

"Africa, this is it Mom," he wrote. "It's even bigger than you and I, even bigger than God. I have now decided that the white man is my enemy. I will fight to gain my manhood or die trying."

Another who had noticed a change in Essex is the Rev. W. A. Chambers

Secrets to Kansas Grave

who baptised him at St. James Baptist Church 15 years ago.

THE REV. MR. Chambers said he noticed Essex had developed a hatred for whites when he returned from the Navy. The minister said he tried to work with Essex on this newfound obsession.

"His mother tried to work with him, too," the Rev. Mr. Chambers said. "But he just wouldn't listen. He just hated white folks."

Mrs. Essex said the hatred in her son had been building for a long time.

"It's just the little things that made

Jimmy what he was," she said. "You know, you just keep piling snow on snow and pretty soon it is going to break."

BUT IF HIS mother and his pastor had some inkling that Essex had built up this extreme hatred of whites, most Emporians who had been close to him found it unbelievable when the tragic news reached them.

Rex Williams, Essex's former Cub scoutmaster and a long-time friend, said "Jimmy had many friends, both black and white in Emporia, and to

my knowledge didn't hold any extreme dislike for whites."

"He always had fun and had a smile on his face," Williams said.

"He was a little dude just over five feet and wanted to be a minister when he got out of high school," said Renee Greene, a former classmate and a girlfriend of Essex. "He really didn't talk about wanting to be anything else. I know his mother was really happy about him wanting to become a minister."

Former Emporia High band director

Turn to Page 4, Column 6

Monday, January 15, 1973

Continued from Page 1

O. R. Parker said Essex was a good boy. "He was always jolly and laughing and having a good time. I never knew him to get into trouble."

MARK JAMES Robert Essex was born in Emporia on Aug. 12, 1949. He was the second oldest of five children. The family lives at 902 Cottonwood St., a wide, clean street lined with neat, well-kept homes. Most of the street's residents are black, but there are scattered whites.

Essex was graduated from Emporia High S school in 1967. The school's guidance counselor, Robert Lodle, said Essex was an "average student" and at a vocational training school where he studied auto mechanics.

Essex spent one semester at Kansas State Teachers College in Pittsburg, worked for a time in an Emporia garage and in January of 1969 joined the Navy.

He underwent two months of Navy boot camp training at San Diego and attended a three-month school for dental technicians, also at San Diego.

HE THEN was assigned to the Naval Air Station at Imperial Beach, Calif., as a dental technician apprentice.

It was while he was at Imperial Beach that Essex began having the difficulties which family members believe eventually led him to the Howard Johnson's rooftop.

The family agrees that Jimmy Essex changed during his Navy stint, terminated prematurely by a general discharge.

They contend Essex was harassed by white non-commissioned officers who could not get along with blacks.

This harassment, they say, led eventually to his going absent without leave for 28 days and ultimately to a court-martial and discharge.

HIS MOTHER said Essex went AWOL "on an impulse." She said he had an afternoon off and was going to visit a sister in Los Angeles when he impulsively jumped on a bus when the driver left the vehicle. He called the family from Texas and asked for money to come home, she said.

When he arrived home, his mother said, he told her, "Mom, I've come home. I just have to have some time to think."

Her son returned to the Navy volun-

tarily, Mrs. Essex said. A special court-martial found Essex guilty of being AWOL and of other unspecified minor offenses. He was fined and sentenced to the brig, but Navy records do not show he ever was confined.

Essex was discharged Feb. 10, 1971, after spending 25 months of his four-year enlistment.

After his discharge, Essex returned to Emporia and worked briefly at the Fanestil Packing Plant, where his father is a foreman.

HE LEFT on a trip to New Orleans, but returned to Emporia and worked briefly at other jobs. Finally, last summer, he returned to New Orleans. After that he spent a fall holiday weekend with his family here.

On April 11 of last year Essex went to the Emporia Montgomery-Ward store and purchased a .44 magnum rifle. It is the weapon police said was used to kill at least three of the persons slain during the Howard Johnson tragedy and to kill a New Orleans police cadet and seriously wound another officer on New Year's Eve.

Most Emporians feel that if prejudice led Essex to his New Orleans killing spree, he suffered the prejudice somewhere other than here. Most consider their community free of racial bias.

"Not in any way, shape or form," said long-time Emporia businessman Wade Meyers. "I have made a lot of darned good colored friends and I have seen no prejudice."

POLICE CHIEF Merele Hayes agrees. He said he has witnessed no prejudice in his 36 years here, at least "nothing we couldn't settle by sitting down and talking about it."

A few disagree, but say the prejudices are minor and subtle and then only social and not economic. They point to the fact that Marx Essex, the sniper's father, has risen from a common laborer to a foreman in the packing plant where he has been employed 27 years.

The vast majority of the towns approximately 300 black families lives in a northeast section of Emporia or along the Santa Fe railroad tracks where most of the city's Mexican-Americans live.

There is no apparent effort to keep blacks out, but few are seen in Emporia's leading restaurants or lounges.