

Friends of New Orleans Sniper Recall Bullying by Whites at Coast Navy Base

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SAN DIEGO, Jan. 00 —Two years in the Navy, where he experienced racial bullying and harassment such as he had never known back home in Emporia, Kan., produced in Mark (Jimmy) Essex a deep and festering hatred of white society.

That, at least, is the recollection of several blacks who were his friends at the Imperial Beach Naval Air Station here.

They believe resentment over his treatment by white enlisted men and petty officers became such an obsession that it finally drove him to seemingly senseless murder and death at the age of 23 on the roof of a New Orleans hotel two weeks ago.

During the last six or eight months of his enlistment, before the Navy court-martialed him and dropped him from the service as a chronic troublemaker in February, 1971, Essex became "an entirely different person, sullen and bitter," acquaintances said.

One black who was his boatmate quoted Essex as saying:

"There is no place in this white man's Navy for a self-respecting black man."

'First Time Away From Home'

"He was a kid from Kansas and it was his first time away from home when he came to the Navy boot camp here," said Fred Allen, a 23-year-old black who was Essex's bunk mate and buddy after their assignment to the Imperial Beach Naval Air Station 13 miles south of San Diego. Both had gone through basic training at the naval training station here early in 1969.

Mr. Allen became an airman, Essex a dental technician and the only black on the 11-man staff of the Imperial Beach Navy dental clinic.

"Essex came into the Navy expecting to be treated in the same decent way he had always been treated back in Emporia, and he found it wasn't like that at all," said Allen, who left the Navy a year after Essex. "It wasn't long before he wanted out of the Na-

vy, as most of us blacks did."

Mr. Allen said he last saw Essex in March of last year in Kansas City, where Allen was visiting his parents shortly after leaving the Navy.

"He seemed more bitter than ever about his Navy experience," Mr. Allen related.

At the Imperial Beach Naval Air Station, close by the Mexican border, officials acknowledged that "something went wrong" with the slight, good-looking youth.

Returned to See Friends

He received an involuntary special discharge, not an honorable one, after a court-martial on Jan. 15 for 28 days of unauthorized absence. During that time, according to Mr. Allen, he went back home to Emporia to "talk things over with friends" about his treatment in the Navy.

Last week the Navy produced two white persons who described a personality change that came over Essex soon after he became 21 on Aug. 12, 1970. About this time he was recommended for promotion to third-class petty officer.

During a Navy-run press conference, Mrs. Alma Montano, a civilian receptionist at the dental clinic, said that from a happy-go-lucky youth "who was laughing most of the time" he became withdrawn and she found it difficult to talk with him.

But neither she nor Paul Valdez, 21, dentalman third class, who worked with Essex at the clinic for about three months, mentioned anything about Navy racism or the youth's resentment of the Navy's treatment of him. He was friendly, they said, with both black and whites.

Navy officials said that Essex's disciplinary troubles had no discernible racial overtones. They refused, however, to identify any blacks who had been friendly on the base with Essex.

Further inquiry, independent of Navy public information officials, produced a somewhat different version of the change that came over Jimmy Essex. This different version was offered by both blacks and

whites.

'Intelligent and Good Fun'

C. B. Wilson is a black third-class petty officer assigned to helicopter engine overhaul at the Imperial Beach Air Station. He works during off-duty time as a bartender in the enlisted men's club, the Jolly Rotor. Mark Essex spent many of his evenings at the club, at a table with other blacks.

"I used to spend quite a bit of time with Essex. I liked him," said Petty Officer Wilson. "He was intelligent, jolly and good fun to be around. We often went to the movies together."

Mr. Wilson said that when he became acquainted with Essex, shortly after he returned from a six-month Vietnam tour of duty in January, 1969, the young man did not appear to have any real "hang-ups" about whites or anything else.

"But the racism, the discrimination and the hassling finally got to him and before he left here after his court-martial he was a really torn-up young guy," he added.

Told that Mrs. Montano and others had speculated that Essex, after the summer of 1970 and before he had gone on unauthorized leave, had fallen in

with some bad companions on the base, Mr. Wilson said:

"That's a damned lie, the usual Navy cop-out. All the young blacks around the base were being hassled, and Essex felt that he was getting a particularly rough deal and that he wasn't going to take it lying down."

Seemed a Favorite Target

Both Mr. Wilson and Mr. Allen said Essex had seemed to be a favorite target of gibes by white sailors in the enlisted men's club, some of whom regarded him as a "cocky nigger" because he was always laughing and telling jokes.

"They would sit, a group of Negroes at one table, Filipinos or Chicanos at another and the whites by themselves," Mr. Wilson related. "Then before you knew it, some white boy would call a black a 'spade' and like a firecracker it would touch off an explosion."

"But what really burned Essex up was the riding he got from petty officers and other officers," Mr. Wilson said.

"They would write him up for the smallest infraction and usually he would get a captain's mast while the white got off scot free. We all had that sort of experience."

"They seemed to be laying for him, grabbing him for special duty and every kind of dirty job. Finally he started talking back, telling them to go to hell and of course that meant another captain's mast."

Mr. Wilson said that Essex,

during the last two or three months he was at the station, tried to organize a movement to "get the black brothers together" and insist on equal treatment with whites.

"That didn't make him very popular with the brass," he added.

'An Explosion Was Coming'

Fred Allen, who remained in the Navy a year after Essex and who pleaded family hardship to get an honorable discharge on Jan. 18, 1972, was an airman third-grade and said he was "probably as close as anyone to Jimmy Essex while he was on the station here."

"I could see that an explosion was coming," Mr. Allen said, "and I warned him about it but in late 1970 and early 1971 he was all churned up inside over his treatment, and with good reason too."

Mr. Allen said that he was with Essex one evening when they were going to the galley for supper and that in a passageway Essex was attacked by two white enlisted men. Essex was brought before a captain's mast, he said, but no charges were preferred against the whites who attacked him.

On one occasion, according to Mr. Allen, Essex and a group of other blacks brought several black girls to the enlisted man's club. A group of whites came over to their table and insisted on dancing with the girls. A fight started and it was the blacks who were punished, Allen related.