

Antiwar Vets Acquitted of Conspiracy

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GAINESVILLE, Fla., Aug. 31—Eight members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War were acquitted today of charges that they planned to start a riot at last year's Republican National Convention. Theirs may have been one of the last political conspiracy trials growing out of the anti-Vietnam war movement.

The jury deliberated less than four hours before deciding to free the long-haired, fatigue-wearing defendants, who had claimed during the five-week case that the government was prosecuting them in an attempt to discredit the VVAW and justify the Watergate break-in.

"They had nothing on those boys," said juror Gerald Bennett, 33, a utility company lineman here.

Only two jurors even felt a need to discuss the case before voting on a verdict, according to one other juror. They had requested to see transcripts of some specific testimony, but changed their minds after the judge told them it might take several days to locate that portion of the transcript because of a change in court reporters during the trial.

Fourteen U.S. marshals stood in the courtroom to prevent any disruption as the verdict came in. When the first verdict of "not guilty" was read by the courtroom clerk, smiles began erupting all around the defense table.

As the not-guilty readings continued, defendant Stanley Michelsen walked over to defendant Alton Foss and hugged him tightly. But the defense waited most anxiously for the verdict on accused ringleader Scott Camil, a bushybearded ex-Marine sergeant who was charged with possession of "destructive devices" as well as conspiracy.

When Camil was acquitted as well, defense attorney Larry Turner stepped back from the table and put two

clenched fists into the air.

After the last verdict was read, U.S. District Court Judge Winston E. Arnow called all eight defendants and six defense attorneys to the front of the court to officially release the defendants from the indictment. They stood silent, with arms around each

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other, as Arnow told them, "This case is concluded," while U.S. Attorney William Stafford and his assistant, Jack Carrouth, stood about five feet behind them.

"I don't want to comment at all. There will be no comment," Stafford said later.

"Oh, I feel all right about the case. I have a job to do," said Carrouth, who did practically all of the courtroom work for the government in the trial.

Defense attorneys, defendants and their supporters walked up to the jury box after Arnow released them, and began shaking hands with or hugging jurors, who had all been watching with broad smiles as the verdict was read.

"The verdict is obviously a verdict for the people," said defense attorney Morton Stavis. "I hope the government gets the message and puts an end to this type of prosecution."

The case was presented to a grand jury last summer by Justice Department prosecutor Guy Goodwin, who was the agency's main prober of radical activity during the last years of the antiwar movement.

Goodwin, who brought many indictments, including ones against the Berrigan brothers in Harrisburg, Pa., and 28 persons accused of breaking into a draft board in Camden, N.J., returned to Washington in the middle of the Gainesville trial without making an appearance in court here after the trial began.

Goodwin has been criticized in the past by civil libertari-

ans for using the grand jury system for using the grand jury system for political purposes. Defense attorneys in the Gainesville case had continued that criticism and expanded it to include the local U.S. attorneys that were now trying the case, saying it was a "political trial."

They contended that many of the statements allegedly made by defendants about an attack on the convention with a bizarre arsenal of weapons ranging from wrist-braced slingshots to crossbows, may have occurred. But, as defense attorney Brady Coleman said during closing arguments, "... you can't convict someone for talking."

The government, meanwhile, had continued to believe that its string of 28 witnesses had proven that those discussions had ended with an agreement to actually "cause havoc" at the Republican con-

vention, a possibility that was averted only with the defendants' indictment and arrest.

Five of those witnesses were paid government informers, and a sixth was an undercover policeman. Three of the informers had risen to high offices within the VVAW, and the defendants did not even know that two were informers until they took the witness stand.

The defense often moved unsuccessfully for mistrials, and had charged governmental misconduct on several occasions. The most memorable mistrial motion came the day the trial began after two FBI agents with electronic gear were found in a telephone wire room adjacent to a defense attorney meeting room.

The agents claimed they were "checking out FBI lines" for bugs.

At least three other groups

—the prosecution, press and the jury—later made serious claims about possible wiretapping. Telephone company checks did not show any evidence to back those charges.

After the government spent four weeks presenting witnesses, the defense surprisingly decided to call only one witness. That witness was a chemical expert who said the homemade "destructive device" that Camil was charged with possessing would not have caused an explosion.

After the verdict, the defendants, their attorneys and their supporters exited into an afternoon thundershower for a courthouse steps press conference and victory party.

Later, defendant Peter Mahoney said:

"In spite of all this joy and elation, I still can't forget that the government put me through 14 months of hell."