

Vets Acquitted in Conspiracy Trial

Gainesville, Fla.

Eight members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War were acquitted yesterday of charges 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-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, a 33-year-old utility company lineman.

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

HUG

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 alleged ringleader Scott Camil, a bushy-bearded 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.

Camil said "outta sight" as tears coursed down his face. He said later that he now intends to give up his leadership role in the VVAW.

After the last verdict was read, U.S. District Judge Winston E. Arnow called all eight defendants and six de-

fense attorneys to the front of the court to officially release the defendants from the indictment. They stood silent, with arms around each 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.

COMMENT

"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, defen-

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dants, 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."

GOODWIN

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 anti-war 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., had returned to Washington in the middle of the Gainesville trial without ever making an appearance in court here after the trial began.

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Goodwin has been criticized in the past by civil libertarians 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, believed that its string of 28 witnesses had proven that those discussions had ended with an agreement to actually "cause havoc" at the Republican convention, a possi-

bility the government says was averted only with the defendants' indictment and arrest before the convention occurred.

INFORMERS

Five prosecution 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 of them were informers until they took the witness stand.

Arnow spent an hour yesterday instructing the jurors.

"The testimony of an informer must be weighed with greater care than any other witness," he told them. "You should consider whether the informer may be prejudiced against one or more of the defendants."

"You should first determine whether a conspiracy existed," Arnow said. "Next you should determine whether each of the defendants wilfully became a member, and then whether one or more of the defendants committed an overt act."

Washington Post

Joy in Gainesville



AP Wirephoto

Defendants Stanley Michelsen (left) and Alton Foss (right) and their supporters sang a victory song after the not-guilty verdict.