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'Clique' Accused of Bilking GI Clubs

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Washington

A clique of career sergeants led by the Army's former top enlisted man was accused yesterday of a "criminal conspiracy" to steal hundreds of thousands of dollars from United States servicemen's clubs through skimming of slot-machine profits, kickbacks and phony receipts.

The allegations were made before a Senate subcommittee by Ervin E. Beard, a former military detective.

He also said a major general stopped his investigation, buried the evidence and let the offenders "go scot-free" to keep from embarrassing the then Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson.

Both Johnson and the ma-



AP Wirephoto

SGT. MAJ. WOOLDRIDGE
The alleged ringleader

major general, William A. Cunningham III, have since retired. Senator Abraham Ribicoff (Dem-Conn.), acting chairman of the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, ordered that they be given copies of Beard's testimony and offered a chance to rebut.

Beard's testimony centered on William O. Wooldridge, 47, a veteran of three wars whom Johnson selected in July, 1966, as the Army's first sergeant major and highest-ranking enlisted man.

Beard charged that Wooldridge and his associates, in charge of 11 servicemen's clubs in West Germany, were rigging slotmachines, pocketing kickbacks and reveling in hotels and private parties financed from the club till.

They even took a live lion as a kickback from one supplier, Beard said, but got rid

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Bilking of Army Clubs Is Charged

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of it when its upkeep siphoned too much from their undercover profits. He said the same supplier furnished Wooldridge's house so well that the sergeant passed on one gift, a \$1000 Italian sofa, to a colleague.

"They were stealing from the servicemen!" said Senator Karl Mundt (Rep-S.D.). "Yes, Senator," Beard replied.

Secretary of the Army R. Resor issued a statement at the Pentagon disclosing that "a number of individuals in important positions have violated the trust placed in them by having a financial interest in firms dealing with open messes."

Resor said that some persons now on active duty have been relieved from servicemen's club or mess assignments pending completion of investigations.

Also, the Army secretary said a worldwide inquiry by 23 criminal investigators has turned up evidence of "kickback payments made by suppliers of goods and of certain services, particularly entertainment, and of diversion of club supplies for private use."

Resor did not name any names and said it would be inappropriate to do so because criminal prosecutions may grow out of the current investigations.

In an interview yesterday, General Johnson disclosed that Wooldridge and several other sergeants were once caught by U.S. customs officials at Hawaii trying to fly in a load of liquor from Vietnam aboard General Creighton Abrams' personal plane.

Wooldridge, a stolid, crew-cut soldier, and two of his alleged partners sat quietly through Beard's testimony. They refused to answer newsmen's questions after the hearing.

Beard named seven sergeants besides Wooldridge and said a "number of others" also are involved.

"Wooldridge . . . was a leader in the criminal organization," Beard said. "These men were engaged in a criminal conspiracy which involved systematic larceny."

The slot-machine skimming alone, Beard said, yielded the sergeants more than \$300,000.

From Germany, Wooldridge went to his prestigious Pentagon post as Army sergeant major. But a later transfer enabled him to join his old friends in Vietnam. He is now stationed at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico.