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SERGEANTS AT SENATE HEARING: M. Sgt. William Higdon, at left, and Sgt. Maj. William O. Wooldridge at the hearing on service clubs. They refused to answer questions.

4 ARMY CLUB MEN REFUSE TO TESTIFY

Cite 5th Amendment Before Senate Panel—Wooldridge Loses Command Status

By **FELIX BELAIR**

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 23 —

The first Sergeant Major of the Army and three other custodians of enlisted men's clubs consistently invoked the Fifth Amendment today as Senate investigators sought to link them to a "pattern of systematic pilfering" that allegedly took hundreds of thousand of dollars from the service facilities.

One witness, Sgt. Maj. William O. Wooldridge, was stripped of his command status. Until his refusal to answer questions today before the Senate's Permanent subcommittee on investigation, he had been command sergeant major at the White Sands, N. M., missile proving ground.

The other witnesses who refused to respond to questions beyond giving their names and

addresses were M.Sgt. William Higdon of Huntsville, Ala., and Narvaez Hatcher of Pensacola, Fla., and Seymour Lazar of Anaheim, Calif., who are retired sergeants.

Although he had been notified in advance that the men would answer no questions,

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Senator Abraham A. Ribicoff acting chairman of the panel, and other members went through the motions of asking the witnesses to identify checks allegedly deposited to their accounts in Swiss, German and United States banks and to describe their roles in setting up a private company that supplied service clubs.

At the beginning, Sergeant Major Wooldridge, after giving his name and address, was asked to tell the inquiry about his military background. His consistent reply to this and 37 other questions was: "On advice of counsel, I decline to answer the question on the ground that it might incriminate me."

After this initial response, David L. Thomas, attorney for Sergeants Wooldridge and Higdon and Mr. Narvaez, explained that he felt obliged to advise his clients for their own protection to refuse to answer questions because of "the accusatory nature" of the hearing.

He said he had cautioned the men that they might ultimately be defendants in criminal proceedings and that each response they made at this time "could become a link in the chain of evidence being prepared against them."

Status Withdrawn

About the time of Sergeant Wooldridge's first refusal, Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor was announcing at the Pentagon that the former highest ranking enlisted man, the first man to be named Sergeant Major of the Army, had been "involuntarily released" from the Army's Command Sergeants Major program.

This was an administrative decision entailing no reduction in pay or rank but depriving of his status as a senior enlisted adviser on staffs from the battalion level to that of a full Army.

Without referring specifically to the Senate investigation, Mr. Resor said in his prepared statement that he was acting because of "Wooldridge's involvement in certain irregularities while serving as a sergeant major with the 24th Infantry Division in Europe during the period 1963-65."

The Secretary added that Sergeant Wooldridge's "participation in the irregularities would have precluded his acceptance in the Command Sergeants Major Program had it been known at the time of his entry in the program in 1968."

At the hearing, the witnesses were confronted with bundles of canceled personal and cash-

ier's checks and money orders as well as affidavits purporting to show that the men had profited from the "skimming" of slot machines and had received kickbacks from suppliers of the service clubs and from agents for entertainers appearing in them.

'Conspiracy' Charged

Senator Ribicoff said, "A conspiracy was formed, and members of the conspiracy realized illicit profits from their fellow soldiers."

Staff investigators for the committee testified in detail today about an hour, they said, the four men put up part of their alleged illicit profits to form a private concern, Mare-dem, Ltd., which sold bar and club supplies to servicemen's clubs in Vietnam. Sergeant Hatcher and Mr. Higdon were reported to have ordered \$790,000 worth of supplies for their clubs from Mare-dem.

One of the panel's investigators read an affidavit he obtained from a retired Army sergeant, Louis R. Crooks, which said that in service clubs in Germany:

"I observed Sergeant Higdon with other managers while clearing the slot machines, making illegal entries on the tally sheets. They would first figure out how much the machine was supposed to have paid out, and then take the biggest part of the profit."

Mr. Crook's affidavit said that he had reported this to Sergeant Major Wooldridge and that he had been told "to go on about my business." Mr. Crooks said that three days later he was reassigned to the post engineers section and removed from the club systems rolls.

Another affidavit by a retired sergeant, Ed Jones, told of a "pattern of systematic pilfering" that he said had enabled Sergeant Higdon and Mr. Hatcher to buy expensive cars, give expensive parties and gamble for high stakes.

Senator Charles H. Percy, Republican of Illinois, appealed to Sergeant Wooldridge near the end of the hearing to respond to a "higher duty" and help throw some light on the allegations and remove the cloud of suspicion from honest operators of service clubs.

Senator Percy called Sergeant Wooldridge "something of a Jekyll and Hyde" in that the battle ribbon and decorations he wore reflected years of valiant service to his country while the service club scandals "portray you as a discredit to the very uniform you wear."

Except for 114 repetitions of the Fifth Amendment response, the witnesses remained silent. Each made the same reply to Senator Ribicoff's final appeal that they reconsider and reply to questions.

At the end, the Connecticut Democrat announced that as

acting chairman of the group he was forwarding a transcript of the hearing with supporting evidentiary documents to the Pentagon and the Justice Department for appropriate action.