

Army Orders Trial Of Sergeant Linked To Bribery at Clubs

WASHINGTON, July 24 (UPI) —The Army ordered today a general court-martial for M. Sgt. William E. Higdon, a decorated 23-year veteran of military service accused of theft and bribery while in charge of servicemen's clubs in South Vietnam.

It was the Army's first move toward military prosecution of a group of career sergeants implicated last year in Senate hearings on alleged misuse of thousands of dollars from overseas clubs through kickbacks, rakeoff and thefts.

Sergeant Higdon, 40 years old, the father of three children, was charged last March on two counts of stealing a total of \$7,200 and three counts of accepting more than \$25,000 on bribes as custodian of clubs for noncommissioned officers and enlisted men at Long Binh, Vietnam, in 1967-68.

If convicted, he would face a maximum penalty of 19 years imprisonment, forfeiture of pay and a dishonorable discharge. The Justice Department is studying the possibility of civilian criminal proceedings against him and some other sergeants who have retired.

Sergeant Higdon, a native of Canton, Ga., who wears four Bronze Stars and three Good Conduct medals, is stationed at Redstone Arsenal at Huntsville, Ala., where the court-martial presumably will be held.

Edward L. Hopper, a civilian Huntsville lawyer who will defend Sergeant Higdon along with Capt. John B. Mayes of the Judge Advocate General's office said he did not expect the trial to begin for three months because many witnesses would have to be brought from Vietnam.

Sergeant Higdon is one of five men accused of forming the Maredem Corporation, a private organization that made \$1.2-million in sales and \$132,000 in profits its first 11 months by selling and buying for the clubs the men managed.

The Army said charges connected with the corporation had been referred to the Justice Department and that Sergeant Higdon's court-martial involved only "separate allegations against Sergeant Higdon alone."