

ARMY PLANS TO INVESTIGATE EXTREMISTS WITHIN THE RANKS - EFFORT TO ASSESS HATE GROUPS' INFLUENCE FOLLOWS FT. BRAGG KILLINGS

Washington Post - December 13, 1995

Author: William Branigin ; Dana Priest , Washington Post Staff Writers

The Army announced yesterday that it will investigate the presence of extremists in its ranks around the world in an effort to ferret out hate groups that may be gaining influence in American society

Army Secretary Togo D. West Jr. said the investigation, prompted by what police consider the racially motivated murders last week of a black man and woman allegedly by white soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division, will be headed by the Army's deputy inspector general, Maj. Gen. Larry Jordan. An investigative team will travel to bases in the United States, Europe and Asia to examine "the climate throughout the Army among America's soldiers" and determine the extent of involvement in white supremacist and other hate groups, West told a news conference.

He said the investigation would report its findings and recommendations by March 1.

The killings early last Thursday of Michael James, 36, and Jackie Burden, 27, as they were walking down a street in Fayetteville, N.C., after midnight were the latest incident that has raised alarms about the influence of radical right-wing groups in the nation's armed forces.

In the deadliest incident, two former Army buddies who formed their association at Fort Riley, Kan., have been indicted for the April 19 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City that killed 169 people.

In Fayetteville, police charged three soldiers stationed at Fort Bragg with last week's murders. They said the three, who identified themselves as neo-Nazi skinheads, had been out looking for blacks to harass after a night of drinking. Army officials said the investigation would include a look at whether Army officers in charge of the three suspects knew of their extremist associations and acted appropriately to limit them.

"I expect to be in touch with them," West said of the commanders at Fort Bragg.

"There is no place for racial hatred or extremism in the U.S. military," Defense Secretary William J. Perry said in a written statement.

The Fayetteville case also has raised questions about the adequacy and implementation of Army regulations designed to deal with soldiers who belong to extremist groups. Army officials have been at a loss even to explain the regulations in recent days, issuing contradictory statements about whether, for example, displaying a Nazi flag above a soldier's bunk in a barracks was prohibited or allowed.

Spokesmen at Fort Bragg said this week that such a display could be considered an expression of "passive" membership in a hate group, which they said Army guidelines did not prohibit, as opposed to "active participation," which is barred.

"We have to be careful," said Maj. Ken Fugett, a spokesman for the XVIII Airborne Corps. "The soldier still does have his First Amendment rights." However, West said yesterday that displaying such a flag would be prohibited because it would have a detrimental effect on "good order and discipline" in a unit. He conceded Army regulations probably were not clear to some officers.

According to a fellow soldier, one of the accused, Pvt. James Norman Burmeister II, displayed a Nazi flag above his bed in the Fort Bragg barracks they shared before he moved off-post to a trailer several months ago.

Former military officers and members of civil rights organizations that monitor hate-group activity said that while the Army is the most integrated of U.S. institutions, it reflects the problems of society as a whole. Across the country, membership in hate groups, including various skinhead gangs, has been growing in recent years, watchdog organizations report.

In inquiries so far, authorities at Fort Bragg have identified "perhaps a dozen or so" soldiers as members of extremist groups, said Lt. Col. Robert McFetridge, the post's senior legal officer, in an interview on the CBS program "This Morning." He said "these numbers might grow" as the investigation continues.

Police in Fayetteville charged three soldiers -- Burmeister, 20, of Thompson, Pa.; Pvt. Malcolm Wright, 21, of Lexington, Ky.; and Spec. Randy Lee Meadows Jr., 21, of Mulkeytown, Ill. -- with involvement in last week's murders.

The three "confirmed that they were skinheads," Lt. Richard Bryant, a police spokesman, said, but they denied being part of any broader organized group.

"It was just the three of them," Bryant said. "They said they were not trying to get a group together. They just had their own beliefs."

In a search of Burmeister's rented room in the trailer, police found a Nazi flag, white supremacist literature, a bomb-making manual and copies of Resistance magazine, Bryant said.

Civil rights groups said the magazine is published by George Burdi, a 24-year-old Canadian neo-Nazi who formed Resistance Records in Detroit a few years ago to promote white supremacy and market skinhead music. Burdi also formed a skinhead band, Rahowa (short for Racial Holy War), and put out songs, such as a version of the 1960s Nancy Sinatra hit, "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'." In it, Burdi shouts lyrics such as: "These boots are made for stompin'/and that's just what they'll do/One

Burdi is serving a one-year jail term in Canada for assaulting a woman protesting his racist songs at an April 1993 concert in Ottawa.

Floyd Cochran, a former white supremacist who turned against the movement two years ago, said in a telephone interview, "There has been a historic desire by many white supremacists to hook up with active-duty military men. You have some people who might be susceptible" within the ranks to the message of such groups, "and people on the outside who want to recruit them."

The Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal, which monitors hate-group activity in the United States, estimates there are 25,000 to 30,000 "hard-core activists" in white supremacist groups nationwide, including about 4,000 active skinheads.

The center estimates another 200,000 people are "sympathizers and supporters" of white supremacist groups, a figure that excludes an estimated 100,000 militia members, who may not necessarily be racists.

In a 1992 report, the Army's Criminal Investigation Command noted the presence of hate groups at Army bases and reported on the vulnerability of military posts to such activity.

At the Army base in Wildflecken, Germany, a small group of white soldiers formed a hate group that wrote racial slurs on black soldiers' automobiles, the report said. At Fort Carson, Colo., some Army soldiers associated with skinheads and were known to steal weapons and sell them in the Boulder area, it said.

"Because military posts are a reflection of the larger society, it was simply a matter of time before gangs began to infiltrate the military communities," the report said.

Regarding skinheads, the report concluded "no-nonsense law enforcement" was the most effective way to deal with such groups

Caption: PHOTO ap

Investigators will report findings and recommendations by March 1, Army Secretary Togo D. West Jr. tells reporters.

Edition: FINAL

Section: A SECTION

Page: A1

Company Name: 82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION FORT BRAGG FORT RILEY
OKLAHOMA CITY SKINHEADS

Index Terms: NAZI; NEWS NATIONAL; TOGO D. WEST JR. ; JACKIE BURDEN
; MALCOLM WRIGHT ; RANDY LEE MEADOWS JR. ; JAMES NORMAN
BURMEISER III ; Army ; Investigations and probes ; Murder ; Hate crimes ;
Bombings

Record Number: 691929

Copyright 1995 The Washington Post