

Marsh Chapel Sanctuary Event

by David H. Cutcomb (1968-1988)

In 1968, as an FBI Agent assigned to the Boston Office and a Marine veteran of the Vietnam conflict, I was selected to go undercover at the Marsh Chapel on the Boston University campus, where students, et al, were harboring two military deserters — one a Marine (Thomas Pratt) and the other, a soldier (Raymond Kroll).

Boston was my first office, and at the time of this event, I had been there, assigned to Jack Kehoe's Fugitive Squad, only a few months.

To provide a typical example of my work during the six months I was on that Squad, I participated in apprehending 91 fugitives. Most of that work involved looking for fugitive violators wanted for felony-level crimes, including one from the Ten Most Wanted List. I also participated in apprehending a handful of military deserters. I mention all of that as background, and to put the nature of the workload in perspective.

While deserter cases were generally low priority and often routine, some of the most deadly encounters fugitive investigators have faced, were at the hands of military deserters. I encountered a couple of that ilk, later in my career.

Working those cases, it became obvious that some deserters were senselessly willing to assault or kill to avoid capture. At first glance, one would believe otherwise, considering the relatively light punishments that awaited deserters as compared to the penalties facing felony violators. I suppose a certain percentage of deserters were mentally unbalanced and found life, especially military life, traumatic, or beyond anything they could tolerate. Then too, being in a fugitive status naturally creates a potential for panic and thus, illogical and unpredictable behavior.

In this case, however, we never developed any indication that we might be dealing with irrational subjects, or their supporters. On the other hand, in any arrest situation, one should never say "never."

A few years later, leading to the time of the "All Volunteer Army," the military ceased looking for AWOL and deserter subjects. Instead, they began discharging them,

thus relieving federal law enforcement from dealing with deserter cases.

The Bureau's primary concern in this nationally publicized "Marsh Chapel Sanctuary" event was to evaluate what was involved before attempting any arrests, in order to avoid confrontations that might result in violence.

I was one of two Agents sent into the Chapel in an undercover capacity, tasked with contributing to the aforementioned evaluation. I was there, day and night for five days, until the last deserter (Private Kroll) was apprehended. I believe the other Agent, whose name I can't recall and with whom I had only occasional contact, was actually one of two or three who rotated shifts.

For this assignment, I didn't shave and dressed carelessly, wearing or carrying a Marine Corps utility jacket. I slept on, or under, one of the Chapel pews and generally just tried to fit in, with varying success.

I was unarmed and carried no identification. With only a few dollars for fast food and telephone calls, I would occasionally check in with one Agent or another who would meet with me during a quick meal, or on the street outside the Chapel. I sometimes used a pay telephone to report pertinent developments, of which, most days, there were few.

Other Agents, usually dressed in coat and tie, occasionally looked in for short visits during their work day and blended with the crowd. The entire scene included a diverse group, mainly consisting of young, college-aged sanctuary supporters and curiosity seekers, with older folks coming and going.

It was there that I first heard the African folk song, "Kumbaya." As a folk music fan, I immediately loved that song which has remained a favorite over the years. I quickly learned the song's simple words by watching and listening to the younger folks, who knew them well.

Speakers appeared, reputedly from out of town, to

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encourage attendees and offer insights concerning how to conduct a sanctuary event. Some were gifted communicators. My assignment did not involve attempting to identify those speakers, their background or what they advocated.

Special Agent John Ross, a pleasant and intel-

ligent man I came to know during the 11 months I served in Boston, was the Case Agent, if I recall correctly. John would know if there was any investigation that may have concerned potential violations beyond the fugitive cases I was there to deal with.

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It was suggested, when FBI Agents arrived to apprehend the protectees, that those wishing to do so should crowd, en masse, into the aisles to passively block and impede the Agents' progress, forcing them to revert to using force in order to advance. More than one speaker cautioned against initiating violence. On the other hand, it was clearly implied that the anti-war cause would be enhanced if any of the Agents could be provoked into becoming violent.

There was some discussion about the legality or morality, on the part of law enforcement, of violating the sanctity offered the deserters by the church. The ultimate conclusion was, law enforcement would likely not hesitate to violate what the protesters considered were ethical standards and religious precedent.

Speakers warned that the FBI or police might employ tear gas and offered basically useless information about how to survive and reduce the impact of a gas attack. Many there seemed unaware that the fugitive case was under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, though the FBI was frequently mentioned. Boston police officers were primarily tasked with managing traffic and maintaining order outside the Chapel.

During one of the programs, while everyone was standing (singing "Kumbaya"), looking around, I noticed an attractive young lady, standing with a group in the pew behind me, and to my right. She was glaring . . . at me.

While pretending to ignore her, in my periphery (she was, after all, attractive), she was squinting with lips pursed and clenched jaw. It was apparent she didn't care for what she saw in a disheveled 30-year-old non-student interloper. And she was willing to show it.

Eventually, I turned, smiled, and asked why she seemed upset. "Because you don't belong here. You're probably a cop."

So much for the disguise.

"You know..." I intoned, "I'm just a Vietnam veteran, down on his luck, who went through a tough time over there and came thinking I might feel appreciated and maybe support the cause. But what do I get? Hostility! You're not the first to make me feel unwelcome. And I'm tired of the (mild expletive, beginning with a "d") rudeness." This was my disingenuous attempt at portraying a conscripted victim, unwillingly trained to kill by the United States Marine Corps.

"I'm so sorry. Please excuse us. . . Sir," followed by five minutes of small talk between conditionally trusting new friends, who would never meet again.

Something similar occurred more than twice, as the week progressed, obviously because I didn't look like a student, or, for that matter, like someone worthy of admiration or respect. Each time, I would express hurt and resentment for the lack of appreciation extended this Vietnam victim who just wanted to join in, striking a blow against unconscionable government policies.

Tall, healthy-looking male specimens, students I presume, were designated as security personnel and wore white armbands (handkerchiefs?) above the bicep of an arm, to announce their authority. On two or three occasions, I was confronted by one or another of those fellows, while attempting to surreptitiously explore the premises, or just find a restroom.

In so many words, envisioning themselves in charge, they would somewhat tactfully begin an inquiry about what my business there was. Out would come one indignant variation or another of the hurt and disgust felt by this down-on-his luck, non-student visitor and sanctuary supporter. And each time, we eventually parted as potential comrades.

To pass the time, while seeking acceptance, I engaged in conversations with several willing attendees, many apparently there just to say they had been. In addition to small talk, we might have discussed the event, the draft, military service, Vietnam, etc. I kept in mind that I was not there to convert anyone's convictions. I was exposed to a variety of opinions and beliefs from the unique and usually interesting people I met — some smart, some impressive, others not. In all, it was a fascinating and generally enjoyable duty assignment.

I was able to respond to questions naturally and generally without hesitation, since I could fall back upon true experiences in my life, especially those from military service. That, while offering only my (true) first name and omitting any reference to current employment, made it an easy task. In spite of the role I was there to play, I deliberately avoided corroborating anyone's negative opinion concerning the Bureau or the Corps, by simply changing the subject.

At one point, early in the week, one of the speakers warned the audience that there were probably FBI Agents in the Chapel at that very moment.

Suddenly pointing to a man in a coat and tie, apparently observing the show over the top of an open newspaper, the speaker raised his voice and dramatically exclaimed, "In fact. . . that may be an FBI Agent standing right over there... RIGHT NOW!"

Well, it was an FBI Agent.

In for a visit to check out the festivities.

Startled, the Agent reflexively raised the open newspaper, concealing his face for a moment.

The whole place erupted!

Jeering, pointing and clapping!

Including me!

A delightful and wonderfully hilarious moment.

The Agent smiled, folded his paper and using it to salute, waved farewell and walked out of the Chapel.

Essentially, the Marsh Chapel event involved providing “protective sanctuary” for two military deserters, in protest of the Vietnam conflict. I was later told that the Marine turned himself in, to someone, somewhere off premises, early in the week (I had no part in that) — leaving only the soldier, Private Raymond Kroll, USA deserter.

On Saturday, the next to last day I would be in Marsh Chapel, I met and visited with a friendly fellow, as he, another undercover Agent and I stood chatting together.

Having sympathetically listened to my contrived history following small talk about the event and the guest of honor, he surprisingly announced he was one of only three people on the Chapel floor who knew where “Ray” was hiding. When no one immediately asked where that might be, he wondered if we wanted to know. I said, “Yeah.”

He confided that the honoree was in an upstairs room, which, as I recall, he referred to as the “Chancellery Office.” He pointed to what he described was a small window above the altar, which I failed to visually locate, but took his word for. That window, he said, allowed anyone up there to observe the entire Chapel floor, and would serve to warn Ray when a threat to his freedom and well-being might appear.

I was surprised to hear that Private Kroll was “hiding.” I only knew I hadn’t seen much of him beyond an occasional appearance. And I assumed he was probably surrounded by supporters, lounging



SSA Jack Callahan (wearing hat) and SA William Boland escorting Raymond Knoll from the Marsh Chapel. Photo courtesy of Jack Callahan's son Mike Callahan

in one area of the chapel, or another, attempting to relax from stressful times.

I thought it was amusing, if our friendly informant was correct, that only five people now on the floor of the Chapel allegedly knew where Raymond Kroll was “hiding,” and two were FBI Agents.

I later called and relayed the unverified intelligence we stumbled upon to the Boston FBI Office. I was subsequently advised that Private Kroll would be apprehended in the coming early morning hours.

I went to sleep, using my folded USMC utility jacket as a pillow, under a pew on the extreme front right-side of the Chapel, near stairs I surmised would lead to the second floor “Chancellery Office.”

Hours later, I was startled awake by a loud voice coming over a loudspeaker, on a too early Sunday morning.

My instant reaction, upon being rudely awakened, was “Something’s seriously wrong!”

“This is the FBI. Everyone clear the aisle.” Firm, clarifying instructions followed and were repeated.

I immediately realized it was ridiculous to have been startled, since I was expecting FBI Agents and was the guy who called them.

But, in spite of that, I noticed my heart rate had increased preparing for whatever was going to happen next.

It was an unpleasant way to be awakened and I recall realizing later, everyone, including me, had been caught off guard at that early morning hour.

Apparently, it took me a few seconds to mentally remove myself as a participant in the event and become an FBI Agent, once again. I had to chuckle at myself and vowed never to admit it.

Many (perhaps 30) FBI Agents, all without neckties, filed into the Chapel down the center aisle. And one Agent after another stepped up to block each row, as others continued forward. I remember being impressed with a plan I hadn’t been made aware of, before witnessing it.

When the first Agent arrived in the front right corner of the Chapel, I was waiting to direct him to the staircase I believed might lead to where the fugitive was “hiding.”

When the Agent saw me gesture toward the entrance to the staircase, he seemed to wonder why this disheveled person was trying to get his attention. From my smirking expression and shaking head (enjoying the dilemma he faced), he apparently recognized me through a week’s worth of beard and stepped over to confirm his conclusion.

He led a small group of Agents in ascending the stairs, while I remained below, out of the way. A short while later, two Agents came down the stairs with the fugitive between them, each holding one of Raymond Kroll’s arms in a “come-along” position.

They traveled together, turning in front of the altar and then back down the center aisle. As they passed, Agents who had been blocking each row of pews, peeled off and followed the parade out of the Chapel.

From my point of view, I was pleased to note there was never

a need for any force to be executed by anyone. The “come-along” technique, while tolerably uncomfortable, was one that would inflict no pain on the subject unless he attempted to resist.

I learned later that the fugitive may have attempted to kick one of the Agents, outside the chapel. And he quickly found out how the “come-along” hold worked. I also learned that none of the Agents in the Chapel had been armed.

It’s highly unusual for an on-duty FBI Agent to go anywhere without wearing a concealed sidearm. The formal policy requires all Agents will be armed in any situation where a firearm is needed. But the responsibility for that decision is left to the discretion of the Agent. In other words, if an Agent is ever in a situation that legally requires him or her to need a firearm, he/she will have one. There are obvious exceptions to the policy, e.g., undercover work, inside a secure area, etc.

To avoid the risk and serious consequences of violating the common sense of that policy, all Agents in a duty status almost always choose to be armed, obviously because it is impossible to always know in advance, when a firearm will be needed, until it’s suddenly obvious. The point being, the Agents inside the Chapel that Sunday morning, must have been specifically directed, by competent authority, not to arm themselves — a commendable decision, in my opinion.

Shortly after the Agents left with their prisoner, and I was the only law enforcement officer still around, I was approached by a young lady and one of the white arm-banded security guys.

She excitedly exclaimed, pointing at me, “That’s him. He’s the one.”

I recall being momentarily surprised and confused about what she was talking about.”

“He’s the one I saw talking to the FBI!”

The security guy gently grasped my arm, inviting me to face him. He then leaned forward and asked if and why I might have been conferring with the FBI.

Reclaiming my arm, while deliberately ignoring him, I turned to the girl and indignantly asked, “You saw me talking to the FBI?”

“Yes! Yes you were. I saw you!” she said, still excited and apparently thinking I was going to deny it.

“You saw me talking to the FBI?” I tediously repeated.

“Yes, yes you were!”

“Did you hear me tell the guy he was violating the sanctity of the church and did you see him push me aside? . . . and you did nothing about it? I could have used some support. Where were you, when I might have needed a witness?” Feigning disgust, I went into my disgruntled Viet Vet routine emphasizing my disdain — tiring of the game, but still playing it.

And they both apologized.

On my way out, I stopped briefly to watch some young people wrapping slings and bandages on limbs and bodies of other young people, who were obviously not injured. I had the impression those applying the bandages were trained and knew how to do it — medical students, perhaps.

Leaving the Chapel and stepping toward the street, I saw a man walking briskly toward the Chapel entrance. Noticing me, he diverted and came over. We were practically alone, standing together outside the chapel.

He said he was with some newspaper or media outlet, which I didn’t catch, and excitedly asked, “What’s going on? Has the FBI been here?”

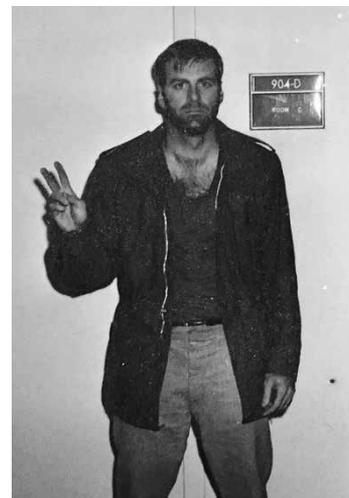
I said yes, they had, and for the last time, went into a short version of my disgruntled veteran speech. Responding to his questions, I related how I had come to support a protest and, instead, became disgusted by the nonsense that included bandaging people who were not injured.

I told him how disillusioned I felt with the entire facade that came off as an amateur night. I couldn’t resist mentioning how begrudgingly impressed I was that the FBI had conducted themselves in a professional matter that resulted in no violence.

The guy indicated that he appreciated my eye-witness summary. He said something about believing my account was consistent with what he suspected. I don’t know, he may have been as glib as I was.

An Agent who had been waiting for me, gave me a ride to the office where someone asked me to pose for a picture and suggested I flash a “peace symbol.” I did it, feeling silly.

Well, I was tired.



Former SA David Cutcomb

Dave Cutcomb wrote this first-hand account of his experience during the Marsh Chapel Sanctuary Event in response to a request by historic mystery novelist April Smith. April has written several novels including her most recent *Home Sweet Home*. She was a student reporter for the Boston University newspaper and was in attendance at the Marsh Chapel during the historic event, around which she is centering her latest novel.