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national news

Marines found not guilty of bashing

Against all factual evidence, a judge in Wilmington, North Carolina acquits three Marines.

by Keith Hartman

On Wednesday, April 14, following the longest misdemeanor trial in North Carolina history, Judge Jaqueline Morris-Goodson found three Marines not guilty of simple assault. Lance Corporals Patrick Cardone, Colin Hunt, and Walter Watkins had been charged with pulling Crae Pridgen from a gay bar in Wilmington and beating him on the sidewalk in front of the bar while chanting, "Clinton must pay!" and "All faggots must die!"

The verdict came as a surprise to many observers. There were nearly a dozen witnesses to the beating. The Marines bragged to the police about having beaten up a "fag" both before and after their arrest. J.K. Nedley, one of the arresting officers, testified that Corporal Cardone asked how one of the men he had sent to the hospital was doing. Nedley responded that he didn't know and said that Cardone replied, "I hope he dies."

As in the Rodney King beating trial, one might wonder how anyone could have mounted a plausible defense under the circumstances. One strategy the defense used was denial: "It was just a bar room brawl, not a gay bashing." The defense maintained that the three Marines had no idea they had gone to a gay bar, and were about to leave when a brawl erupted. The prosecution responded by recalling a witness who testified that she had met Cardone earlier in the day, and told him that Mickey Ratz (the site of the beating) was a gay bar. Another defense strategy was role-reversal: "The victim deliberately incited the brawl to promote his gay agenda."

In the weeks following the beating, Pridgen met with U.S. senators and representatives, attended a meeting with Pentagon officials, and appeared on several talk shows to speak out against homophobic violence. The defense has suggested that Pridgen deliberately started the fight to gain sympathy for his political agenda.

Defense attorney Ed Bailey quoted Pridgen in a speech he made after the beating, in which he urged gay men and lesbians to "stand up and fight." He asked if Pridgen was fighting that night in Mickey Ratz.

Pridgen said that he meant "fight" in a metaphorical sense. "We've been denied our rights for too long, sir. This type of gay bashing... has been going on for too long. I'm not going to let myself be violated the way I was and not do anything about it."

The defense also attempted to paint Pridgen as a media hound, who had exaggerated the nature of his injuries to get attention. Pridgen suffered a torn ear and the loss of a tooth in the attack. Defense attorney John Burney reminded Pridgen of a story he related to the news media about the footprint the attackers left on his chest. Holding up a photo of Pridgen that was taken after the attack, Burney demanded of Pridgen, "Show me the footprint that you've been telling the press all about."

Pridgen admitted that he could not find the footprint in that photo. The old defense standard often used in rape trials was heard: "He brought it on himself." Amanda Lopez, the woman who picked the three Marines up from Camp Lejeune and drove them to Wilmington for the evening, testified that Pridgen walked up to them in the foyer, introduced himself as a gay man, and stated that he enjoyed oral and anal intercourse with other men.

Pridgen denies having made any such comment, and stated that he never had any verbal interchange whatsoever with the Marines. He says that he was simply trying to leave the bar and avoid the situation altogether.

Louis Raith, a fourth Marine from Camp Lejeune who was not charged in any way, testified that he was at the bar. He said that Pridgen attacked him and he responded by kicking Pridgen in the face.

"He ran at me and grabbed me. He was going to hit me."

The defense has argued that the police were grossly negligent—that they didn't give the three Marines a chance to explain their actions. "Who talked to them? Who got their side?" asked Burney.

Police officers who were on hand testified that the Marines were drunk and raving, and were in fact bragging about having just beat up some "fags." One officer recalls their saying, "If the president hadn't put the homos back in service, none of this would be happening." Another officer testified that "I heard them state that Clinton's going to pay... They stated that they hated all faggots. They wished all faggots would die."

Burney reminded Pridgen of his meetings with U.S. senators and representatives in the two weeks following the attack. He then asked pointedly, "Did you tell them about your criminal record?" and pulled out a long roll of paper which he let dramatically fall to the floor.

As it turns out, Pridgen was once arrested for driving under the influence, and was later arrested for driving after his license was revoked.

"Have you ever fought for your country?" ask Burney.

"No, sir," responded Pridgen.

"What have you ever done for your country besides get arrested?"

In another line of attack, Burney asked Pridgen if he was gay.

"Yes, sir, I am," responded Pridgen.

"What unnatural sex acts do you perform?" asked Burney.

That line of inquiry was met with an objection from the assistant district attorney, which was sustained by Judge Morris-Goodson.

If convicted, the three Marines would have faced a maximum sentence of 30 days imprisonment or a \$50 fine. Pridgen has filed a civil suit.

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