

Report to NEC on Howard Petrick Defense - April 21, 1967

by Lew and Susan

The initial response to the defense of comrade Howard Petrick has been encouraging. The Pfc. Howard Petrick case has the potential to become one of the largest and most popular in the antiwar movement. It is the most clear cut case to date involving the rights of GIs. Through the case we again have an opportunity to educate the antiwar movement on the attitude it should take toward GIs. We also again have the opportunity to take the facts of the war and the case to GIs.

Previous cases, with the exception of the Lt. Howe case, have involved either the refusal of an order or a pacifist stand. The Petrick case involves none of these. His is a case of simple democratic rights -- the right to think, believe, and talk about what one wishes.

There is a prevailing mood in the antiwar movement that once in the armed forces all hope is lost; that the military is just a machine that dehumanizes individuals. The Fort Hood Three case helped to cut across this mood. The Petrick case can go even further as it demonstrates that it is possible to maintain radical views, and moreover to gain a hearing for them in the armed forces.

The legal situation has not changed. The only difference is that the threat to Howard now comes from higher authority. Initially the threat of charges and a court martial by Fort Hood authorities was imminent, necessitating an immediate campaigning response. The charges were delayed when Howard's military counsel left the base for a few days with the agreement that no charges would be brought until he returned. Evidently the constitutional issues and the initial response were too much for the Fort Hood authorities. They have since passed the whole affair on to the Pentagon, where decisions are now being made. The military brass in Washington have the results of Howard's investigation, are reviewing the case, and in about a month will make a decision. This military war council has the right to take any action they deem fit, and we must assume they will want to go the limit.

Hence, the threat of a court-martial is very real, and a vigorous defense is needed.

Howie is in fine spirits. He has made new friends in his new unit and is getting along well. He reports that he is being treated like other GIs, except that he cannot get a leave to go more than 100 miles off base. Military Intelligence has told him that they are returning his literature and other personal items. Howard reports that he has received a great deal of support from his fellow GIs, and many have seen the Militant and are impressed with the defense effort.

The response in the antiwar movement has been as good. Reports indicate that the case evoked a sympathetic reaction on April 15. The defense committee literature table in Sheep Meadow got a good response and some contributions. Since then leading antiwar figures and others have given statements of support. Moreover, statements of support and sponsorship are beginning to come in from antiwar committees. Howard's parents are supporting him and have made a statement.

The New York Times picked up the case and gave it a prominent place in the April 16 edition. (Unfortunately the article was outdated when it was printed and gave the impression the case was over.) The National Guardian has shown an interest and has printed a small article. The Emergency Civil Liberties Committee has publicized the case and will be sending a mailing to their entire list soon.

The defense committee was set up on a provisional basis, to be made permanent pending further developments. It is now to become a permanent defense committee, under the name of the Committee to Defend the Rights of Pfc. Howard Petrick. The address of the committee is, PO Box 569 Cooper Station, New York, New York, 10003.

The defense committee has sent representatives to visit Howard and his parents. It has issued two press releases and an interview to the radical press, the daily press, antiwar committees, and campus newspapers. The fact sheet (12,000 printed) is now out of print.

In the coming weeks the committee plans to issue a pamphlet containing the facts of the case, the interview with Howard, and statements of support. This pamphlet, selling for 10¢, will be widely circulated. The fact sheet will be up-dated and re-issued this week. A button is being designed now. Sponsor cards will also be available soon. And finally a Statement of Aims of the committee is being prepared.

In the initial letter sent to the locals on the case we proposed that an experienced comrade should be given responsibility for the defense and that we must begin to launch a campaign. That perspective still holds. There are several tasks that should be carried out at this point.

1. Through the defense material, as it becomes available (at this point only the fact sheet), the facts of the case should be taken to the antiwar movement. We want every activist to become familiar with it.

2. The defense committee has asked that statements of support from prominent individuals and antiwar committees be sent in for release to the press.

3. Antiwar committees may want to set up Pfc. Howard Petrick defense sub-committees, GI leafleting committees, or general defense committees, where YSAers should play active roles.

4. The defense committee is anxious that the defense be endorsed by the antiwar movement. Therefore it is important for antiwar committee officers to become sponsors of the defense effort.

5. The defense committee is in urgent need of funds in order to cover the initial cost of publicity. The committee is already in debt.

6. YSAers who spoke to groups prior to April 15, now have the opportunity to go back to those groups to speak on the Pfc. Petrick case.

7. Finally, the comrade responsible in each area should send regular reports to the defense committee, telling what is being done by supporters in each area. Orders for the planned material should be sent to the committee.