

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

Dale Hanks, a National Guardsman in Little Rock in 1957, describes his recollection of the events at Central High.



AFTER A MOB of a thousand outraged segregationists gathered at Little Rock Central High on September 23rd, 1957, and the police slipped the Nine in through a side entrance, a volcano of hate erupted in the rabble. By noon, the Little Rock police chief had quit. The President ordered the military into action, and by the end of the following day, 1,100 men from the 101st Airborne Division had arrived. These federal troops deployed around the school to enforce orders for integration of the school.

At the same time, President Eisenhower removed the Arkansas National Guard from Governor Faubus's control. The 101st Airborne troops were meant to be a temporary measure until National Guard units could be assembled to replace them. Eisenhower wanted these units to come from outside Little Rock to avoid cases of 'brother against brother'—and that is how my soldiers and I came to be at Central High.

Most of our troops lived either in Walnut Ridge, or Hoxie, 130 miles from Little Rock. Practically all of our soldiers were born and raised in northeast Arkansas as were their parents and grandparents. Our roster included rice and cattle farmers, laborers, truck drivers, mechanics, construction workers, gas station attendants, and other such jobs. All were male and white. Proud to wear their National Guard uniforms, they were committed to serving their state and country. They grimaced at the thought of 'federal interference' with their public schools.

As we made our way to Little Rock, it seemed that our troops' animosity was directed not so much at the blacks seeking school desegregation, but toward the federal government's efforts at 'race mixing.' In light of Governor Faubus's recent actions toward federal authority, it was not implausible that he intended to use the National Guard forcefully to remove the US Army troops from Central High. Such a move would have been catastrophic, but there was no doubt in my mind at the time that our

National Guard soldiers would do their duty.

But, sadly for some, the match-up was not to be. We had been federalized and were now part of the US Army, no longer under the control of the Governor. I was relieved, but it was a pity for the radical element that itched for a fight with the Feds.

Our simple mission was easier said than done: 'To enforce the orders of the Federal Courts with respect to the attendance of the public schools in Little Rock of all those who are properly enrolled, and to maintain law and order while doing so.'

It was clear that the US Army's commander of the Arkansas Military District did not trust us and had conveyed his distrust to the regular army soldiers. I sensed a considerable amount of tension between us and the 101st troops as we met in a change of command ceremony.

As long as the National Guard kept the Nine out of Central High School, we were heroes to those opposed to desegregation. However, the day we arrived in Little Rock to be used as an instrument of school integration, we became traitors and turncoats. We were prepared for our military mission, but not for the abuse that was soon heaped upon us. Die-hard segregationists across the state grew to hate us with a passion.

Our new status was made public on a beautiful Thursday morning, October 3rd. As a young First Lieutenant, I waited to move out with a detachment of twenty Guardsmen, sons of the South who had grown up in a culture where racial segregation was socially respectable. Our soldiers, like most white Arkansians, agreed that if God had intended the races to be mixed, he would not have made people different colours.

As the nine students got out of the station wagon, our troops formed a V-shaped configuration

White segregationist students kick an effigy hung from a tree, hours after the black students gain entry to the school.

The National Guard escort the students back to their transport at the end of the school day.

like a wedge. This riot formation allowed the students to walk double file inside the V and to be protected from all sides. I was confident that my men had the physical capabilities to manage a mob, but I couldn't shake my concern about their mental readiness to take those nine black kids into the school.

These young Guardsmen were now closer to a black person than they had ever been. And they were about to commit the most appalling act of aiding and abetting racial integration while the whole world watched. After a lifetime in a deep-rooted segregationist culture, this was a bitter pill to swallow. Despite whatever misgivings my troops may have harboured, when I gave the command to move out, the sudden, determined look in their eyes told me that I had worried unnecessarily. They were ready.

Our adversaries, a pack of angry, white male students sporting fashionable duck-tail haircuts, saddle oxfords, white socks, and trademark jeans were digging in on the front steps of the school. They were ready to defend it head on. Like us, they had put their big guys up front. The large doors at the main entrance had become an important symbol of resistance. The previous two mornings they had successfully blocked the black students' access through the main entrance. The Nine finally gained entrance through a side door.

But this day, it would be different. As we set out on our course across the campus, I took my place





Dale Hanks during his National Guard days.

behind the students inside the formation to cover their backs. Most of these National Guard kids were not much older than the black kids they were protecting, and close to the age of the white students they would soon confront. I was in my twenties, but feeling like an old man.

The hecklers grew quiet in disbelief that fellow Arkies would use brute force to take black folks into a white school. Not a sound could be heard but our marching feet.

With rifles at port arms and sheathed bayonets attached, we moved up the steep, wide steps and came face to face with the junior mob. If the hatred in their eyes could have killed, we would all have been instant casualties. We continued on through the fifty to sixty sullen students. One by one, they grudgingly gave way.

When we reached the front entrance at the top of the steps, the 101st troops inside the building opened the doors and assumed charge of security for the black students as they moved about the school during the day. An hour later a group of white students walked out of the building and set fire to an effigy of a black person on Park Street in front of the school.

The reaction to these events was violent: I was pursued on my way to a football game by four or five tough guys in a beat-up green Pontiac, and the next day a grim-faced guy in a big black Buick slammed into my rear and took several other runs at me. But the animosity toward us was age and gender-free. A few days later, I took twenty soldiers to a barber shop for haircuts. We were approached by two little old ladies who proceeded to rebuke us every step of the way for two whole blocks.

Their language was rich and full-bodied. 'You no-count sonsabitches.' 'You dirty, rotten, lowdown, goddam, traitors.' 'You turncoat bastards'. In the midst of this chaos, my guys kept their wits about them, and remained true to their mission. They never quit.

It was not until February 23rd, 2007, that the Little Rock School District was released from federal court supervision of its desegregation efforts — almost fifty years after my young men and I escorted the Little Rock Nine into Central High School.

I moved to Virginia. I have been to Little Rock since, and likely will go there another time. But I can tell you this: next time I visit and talk to the folks there, I still will not divulge this small claim to fame.

lost the battle to keep the black students out of the school, segregationists turned their attention, and tried to encourage white students to do the same, to making life for the nine so unbearable inside the school that they would withdraw voluntarily. They failed. One student, Minnijean Brown, was expelled for retaliating to her tormentors in February 1958, although no white students were ever expelled for their actions. The rest of the nine survived the school year. In May 1958, Ernest Green became the first black student to graduate from Central High. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. attended the graduation ceremony in support.

Outside school, the adults in the black community were also subject to white hostility. A number of parents of the nine were dismissed from their jobs. The Bates' home was regularly attacked. State agents of the Internal Revenue Service began to take a special interest in their finances. Arkansas Attorney General Bruce Bennett applied pressure to try to get Daisy Bates to identify NAACP members, which she resisted on the basis that they would be targeted for 'reprisals, recriminations and unwarranted hardship'. The hardest blow segregationists struck was in encouraging white advertisers to boycott the newspaper co-owned by the Bates, the *Arkansas State Press*, which led to the paper's eventual collapse in October 1959.

In early 1958, attention switched back to the courts. The school board appealed to the District Court for a two-and-half-year delay of their desegregation plan, by which time they erroneously believed Faubus would be out of office. On June 21st, the court upheld the request. On August 18th, the Appeals Court overruled that decision. School board attorneys then indicated that they would take their case to the US Supreme Court. On August 28th, the Court met in a special session to hear the case. On September 12th, in the landmark ruling of *Cooper v. Aaron*, the Court said that violence and disruption were not justifiable reasons for delaying school desegregation.

Governor Faubus again intervened. He called a special session of the Arkansas General Assembly and rushed through a battery of pro-seg-

regation legislation. One bill allowed Faubus to close any school forced to integrate by federal order. With the school closed, voters in the local district would then participate in a referendum to decide if the school should reopen on an integrated basis. On the day that the Court ordered integration to proceed, Faubus closed all of the city's schools. In the referendum held on September 27th, the governor handily stacked the cards in his favour by providing a stark choice between keeping the schools closed or accepting 'complete and total integration'. By a margin of 19,470 to 7,561 votes, the electorate decided to keep the schools closed.

The disarray finally prompted Little Rock's white elite to mobilize to rescue the schools from the segregationists. At the referendum election, a group of influential white women had organized the Women's Emergency Committee to Open our Schools (WEC). Though unsuccessful, they continued to pressure white businessmen and professionals to act, not least on the grounds of the negative financial impact events were having on the city. Prior to September 1957, Little Rock's economy had been booming. Since then, outside investment had dried up altogether. The WEC successfully lobbied for a slate of business-backed candidates to stand against segregationist candidates at the school board elections in December 1958. The results produced a divided board of three segregationists and three business-backed candidates. In May 1959, segregationist school board members proposed not to renew the contracts of forty-four school district employees perceived as unsympathetic to their cause. This precipitated a recall election at which business candidates finally wrested control out of the segregationist's hands. The new board then drew up plans to integrate schools on a token basis in August 1959. When August arrived, five black students peacefully integrated two city schools.

The re-opening of schools was a victory, but not an end to the struggle over school desegregation in Little Rock or elsewhere. Numerous plans for achieving meaningful desegregation were debated nationally through the 1960s. The next major milestones were two US

their poise and discipline under those conditions. To my knowledge, no injuries were reported inside Central that year. In fact, while the youngsters called the Little Rock Nine are cited as heroes, I think the Central faculty and student body were equally heroes in their own right. Those mobs and bomb scares threatened everybody inside Central, not just the Little Rock Nine.

Many teachers were harassed at home for just doing their job and not openly defying the court decision. The faculty and students, black and white, were equally heroes. Those black kids had to walk through that line, but once they were in the building, every student was treated the same as far as the teachers were concerned.

Clyde Hart, Head Track Coach

Voices From Central High: National Guardsmen and Airborne Troops

VOICES FROM CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL, 1957-59

The paratroopers stood almost shoulder-to-shoulder armed with M-1s and bayonets in the middle of the streets surrounding the school. The segregationist mob soon discovered the paratroopers would respond to personal attacks by swinging the butt of a rifle against the assailant's head.

Joe Matthews, Class of 1958

Since this time frame was before most buildings were air-conditioned, classroom windows remained open a good bit of the time. I'll never forget the day in our English class when Miss Piercey stopped leading our group and had us listen to what was going on outside. A group from the 101st was marching around the school, singing a normal cadence of theirs which contained inappropriate language. Miss Piercey was incensed and went directly down to the office to report it to Mr. Matthews. I don't know who talked to the commander, but there were no more lyrics sung during school hours while the guys were marching.

Margaret Johnson Swaty, Class of 1958

I remember hearing "Here they come," and I saw black students coming down the street escorted by our troops. The other students showed up and went to school, wondering what all the fuss was about. I felt

they were relieved to see federal troops in place of the National Guard. I didn't see or experience any of the media's "reported" problems from any of the students. What was "not real" was blown out of proportion, and what was "real" was very calm and efficient.

During the fifty-six days that I spent in Little Rock, the students and local Little Rock citizens treated me and my fellow troopers with respect and dignity. The most fulfilling memory I have is one of seeing the smiles on the faces of the children from St. Joseph's Orphanage during the Halloween Party that we put on for them at Camp Robinson.

Chuck Christman, 1st Airborne Battle Group,
327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division

The day school opened, it was interesting to see the National Guard troops on the campus. There were several of them who had graduated from Central only three months earlier and who had planned to go to college about this time. Here they were, on active duty in front of some of their friends from the previous school year. We made fun of them and it was a relaxed atmosphere. There was no discipline among the National Guard members and it was more of a circus atmosphere. Everything was very casual.

Craig Rains, Class of 1958

I do remember the Arkansas National Guard troops standing around, seemingly without a mission or a leader, and thinking that we might be in for some tough times if we were counting on them to defeat the Red Menace. However, they were friendly and did not cause any harm.

Later they were replaced by the 101st Airborne and I remember thinking this was the real reason the Russians had not tried to invade us. Those guys were fit and ready to handle any task their commander assigned to them.

Charles Oakley, Class of 1958