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The Heroes of San Rafael: Black August 1970

written by Fred Goldstein

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Ruchell Cinque Magee #A92051

#T 115

California Medical Facility

Post Office Box 2000

Vacaville, California 95696-2000



FREE RUCHELL MAGEE

In the momentous political event that marked “Black August,” freedom fighter Jonathan Jackson, at the age of 17, burst into a San Rafael, Calif., courtroom, armed, to free his brother, George Jackson, along with Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette, on Aug. 7, 1970. The three “Soledad Brothers” were being tried and faced execution — despite a lack of evidence — for killing a white prison guard at Soledad prison following another guard’s murder of three African American inmates.

George Jackson had been imprisoned for over 10 years for a \$70 robbery and faced an “indeterminate” [read life] sentence. He was a leader of the Black Panther Party, vanguard organization of the Black Liberation movement, founded in October 1966 in Oakland, Calif.

Jonathan Jackson was joined by San Quentin prisoners James McClain, Ruchell Cinque Magee and William Christmas inside the courtroom, where they took a judge, district attorney and three jurors hostage and demanded the Soledad Brothers’ immediate release.

As Jackson drove away, court police and San Quentin guards opened fire on the van, killing him, McClain, Christmas and the judge. The rest survived, including Magee, who has been incarcerated since 1963, currently the longest-held U.S. political prisoner.

Republished here is an article written in August 1970 by Fred Goldstein, who was, at that time, a leader of Youth Against War and Fascism and a supporter of the Panthers, and is the author of the books, “Low Wage Capitalism” and “Capitalism at a Dead End.”

August 7, 1970, shall go down in history as the day of the heroes of San Rafael. On that day, four courageous Black liberation fighters gave the world a truly awe-inspiring demonstration of revolutionary heroism and self-sacrifice in the struggle against the racist tyranny of U.S. imperialism. Their deed has already become an

imperishable part of the revolutionary heritage of the Black Liberation struggle and of oppressed people everywhere.

Three of these heroes were prisoners of war — captives in the war of the master class against Black America. The fourth was a young revolutionary whose brother was being held prisoner in the concentration camp called San Quentin.

On August 7, 1970, they tore loose from the very jaws of the monster. In a blaze of glory, these prisoners of war broke the iron grip of the slave master, struck him a surprise blow and captured the enemy in his own lair. By a stroke of historic justice they were able to capture a judge, a prosecutor and a juror — representing the three elements of the capitalist frame-up system which has consigned an endless procession of helpless victims to perish, to die a slow, agonizing death in the dungeon-graveyards of iron and cement. Fate could not have planned a more fitting circumstance.

Died for the people

“We are revolutionaries,” they proudly proclaimed. “We want the Soledad brothers free by 12:30.” Their deed was performed for the people and for history.

They showed the people that they were not afraid to die for liberation. They showed the people a black-robed tyrant torn from his throne and trembling in the hands of Black revolutionaries.

They proved before the people, the exploited and oppressed Black people everywhere, that the jailer can be taken prisoner; that the prosecutor of the people can be forced to reckon with the people’s justice; that the hangman can be made to beg for his life; that those who torture and torment the people, those who remorselessly show no mercy and turn a deaf ear to the cries of pain and suffering — that these brutes turned loose in society by the master class can be struck down by

determined and revolutionary representatives of the people. This is what the heroes of San Rafael wanted the people to see. This is what the people saw. This is what they will remember.

In a flash of revolutionary daring, the heroes of San Rafael breached the fortress of the enemy where he thought he was impregnable — in the court. They assailed that onerous organ which has been held sacred and inviolable by ruling classes throughout history. Since the dawn of class society, this institution has served the rich, the exploiters, as the arena of class discipline, where the poor are held to account for every act of rebellion, be it large or small, personal or political, against exploitation and class domination. In all areas of life there is no place where the master class has grown so accustomed to submission as in the courts.

Therein lies a great political, moral and psychological victory won for the Black Liberation struggle at San Rafael. Political because the example has been inscribed indelibly into the minds of thousands of as yet anonymous revolutionaries who cannot but be inspired by such a heroic exploit. This example alone has already prepared a future augmentation of the forces of liberation.

Morally, the people cannot but contrast the heroic self-sacrifice of the brothers with the bestiality of the ruling class, which used overwhelming numbers to slaughter its own devoted servants rather than permit Black men to be free.

Psychologically, the slave masters have been terrified by the boldness and innovative tactical conception. The tension in the ruling class must increase tremendously as a result. No court is safe any more. Blind passivity and fatal acceptance by its victims can no longer be taken for granted by the enemy. Every prison has become a veritable cadre school of the oppressed. The courts will have to become armed camps. The bourgeoisie will have to show the people its teeth in every “hall of justice” across the country.

Rulers sacrificed own stooge

Only those who fail to see the power of the people's revolutionary potential can see a defeat in San Rafael. True enough, they did not achieve their tactical objective. But this was unavoidable. Even the most seasoned revolutionary could not have predicted that the enemy would, without remorse, without a moment's hesitation, slaughter its own judge, prosecutor and jurors. In this deed the pigs exceeded their previous record for brutality.

Who could have foretold the complete overthrow of all rational procedures of warfare? Who could have gauged that fear and rage would drive them to devour their own? These brave warriors were hardly naïve. On the contrary, having lived the caged existence of the dungeon, these fighters were on intimate terms with the system in its most brutal and sadistic aspects.

The tactic of San Rafael flows directly from the present stage of the struggle. The revolution, the war of liberation has sunk into the bones of the people. There is a universal desire to struggle. But the people have not yet created an army capable of dealing the enemy blow-for-blow on an equal basis, capable of smashing the power of the oppressor.

Under those conditions the people are forced to begin the struggle sporadically and against vastly superior forces. At these junctures, groups and individuals scale the heights of revolutionary heroism against the most overwhelming odds. Being unable to select the terrain of battle, being unable to commit large-scale forces to equalize the conditions of battle — in fact, being powerless to exercise control over any of the decisive elements which influence the military outcome of any major struggle, the people are nevertheless determined to fight and die for liberation. Therefore, they must begin the struggle under conditions handed to them by the class enemy — that is, under circumstances which must inevitably be unfavorable.

It is at such moments in history that the most fearless and determined representatives of the oppressed people come forward to do battle. They form the vanguard and their deeds become the inspiration and the foundation for future struggles and for ultimate victory.

It is to such an illustrious category that James McClain, Jonathan Jackson, William Christmas and Ruchell Magee belong. Their courageous sacrifice deserves nothing less than the highest tribute. The only tribute worthy of their example is to build a revolutionary fighting force which shall not only equalize the battle but which shall carry out a relentless and implacable struggle for the revolutionary destruction of imperialism and the capitalist foundation on which it rests.

Epilogue: A year later on Aug. 21, San Quentin guards murdered author and revolutionary George Jackson. Enraged at his assassination and protesting racist "brutal, dehumanized" prison conditions, 1,200 inmates of New York's Attica Correctional Facility rebelled on Sept. 9, 1971. Four days later, Gov. Nelson Rockefeller ordered 600 state and National Guard troops to storm the prison. Within 10 minutes, they fatally shot 29 prisoners and 10 guards. Surviving prisoners were ferociously beaten, many injured were left untreated.

Soledad Brothers Drumgo and Clutchette were acquitted by a San Francisco jury on March 27, 1972.



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