

# Fifty years since the Detroit rebellion

## Part two: The explosion

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The Detroit riot of July 1967 was an explosion waiting to happen. The black ghettos of almost every major city had erupted one or more times since the summer of 1963. The biggest upheavals had been Watts, 1965, and Newark, mid-July 1967. The conditions of unemployment, poverty, rotten housing, racial discrimination and police brutality which produced the rebellions elsewhere existed with equal force in Detroit. It was only a matter of time.

It began on a sweltering night, Sunday, July 23, at about 4 AM. The incident was a more or less routine raid by the police on an after-hours social club that sold liquor without a license, known in the local slang as a “blind pig.”

The location was the upstairs of a small printing shop on the corner of Twelfth Street and Clairmount in the Virginia Park section of the city. This was the poorest section of the city. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, thousands of blacks had been forced out of the near east side as a result of the construction of the Lafayette Park housing development and the Chrysler Freeway.

Many settled in the Twelfth Street area, formerly a middle-class Jewish neighborhood, whose residents had moved to the suburbs of Southfield and Oak Park. The area along Twelfth Street, from West Grand Boulevard to Clairmount, had the highest population density, the greatest concentration of substandard homes, the worst unemployment, the lowest school achievement, the highest crime rate and the worst infestation of rats and roaches in the city. Twelfth Street itself was a jumble of shops, bars and pool halls, a commercial district during the day and a red-light strip at night.

When the police raided a party at the blind pig at Twelfth and Clairmount at 3:34 AM, Sunday, July 23, they found an unusually large crowd. Instead of the 20 to 30 patrons normally arrested, brought down to the Tenth Precinct and fined in such raids, they found 82 people jammed into the party. It was a welcome home gathering for two soldiers just returned from Vietnam.

The police wagons that rolled up to the buildings could accommodate only half of the partygoers. Moreover, the usual procedure was to pack people into the police vehicles at the rear of such establishments, out of sight of the night life public of Twelfth Street.

This time, however, the rear door was padlocked, so the operation was carried out before the eyes of people who gathered around the waiting police vans. It took two trips back and forth between the precinct and the blind pig. By the time the police left the scene at about 4:30 AM, hundreds of angry residents had gathered in the street, the first brick had crashed through the rear window of a departing police vehicle, and the riot was underway.

By 5 AM, stores were being broken into along Twelfth Street and Linwood, a few blocks to the west. The first fire broke out at 6:30 AM in a looted shoe store on Twelfth Street. The police blocked off a 12-block area but made no attempt to halt the looting.

By mid-afternoon, a half-dozen fires had been reported. Twenty-five mile-per-hour winds spread the fires from one building to the next. Firefighters called onto the scene were pelted with rocks and bottles.

Some of the stores were torched by people paid by the store owners, who decided to use the riot as a pretext for insurance and pulling out of the area.

Radio and TV stations did not broadcast reports of the riot until late afternoon. Most Detroiters outside the immediate area were not aware of what was happening until 12 hours after the uprising began. But the looting soon became an integrated affair, with poor whites taking what they needed and what they could sell or barter alongside their black counterparts.

### National Guard

At 2 PM, the mayor, liberal Democrat Jerome Cavanagh, called for the help of the state police. At 4:20 PM, he called for the National Guard.

The mayor attempted to mobilize black Democratic politicians, school officials, churchmen and others to convince the crowds to end the rioting. Congressman John Conyers climbed on top of a car at 12th and Hazelwood and used a bullhorn to call on the rioters to stop. A bottle crashed nearby and he quickly climbed down and left the scene. Soon after, he was on the local news denouncing the rioters as criminals and lawbreakers.

By late afternoon, the riot had spread to the west side, to the east side and toward the downtown area. Republican Governor George Romney flew over the city in a helicopter. “There were fires going on everywhere. Grand River, Woodward, the Boulevard. It looked like war,” he said.

By nightfall the sky glowed red from raging fires. National Guard helicopters circled overhead and the random gunfire of the police and guardsmen blasted through the night. The search for alleged snipers had begun.

It was later confirmed that virtually all reports of snipers were false. Most of the “sniper fire” was coming from other police and guardsmen, but the hunt for snipers became a convenient excuse to blast away at houses and apartment buildings, and, in some cases, commit cold-blooded murder.

At 7:45 PM Sunday, Cavanagh imposed a 9 PM-to-5 AM curfew. At 9:30 PM, he ordered all bars and theaters closed. Three Detroit Tigers home baseball games set for the early part of the week were cancelled.

By the end of Sunday, 1,129 people had been arrested. Hundreds of families slept on sidewalks outside of their burned out homes.

One black Detroiter recalled, “Sunday night, I planned to drive out to my parents’ to get away from the riot. I went through downtown to catch the freeway when the Big Four (a four-man patrol car) pulled me over and

made me get out of my car. They stuck a rifle in the back of my head and asked me what I was doing down here. I told him I was on my way home. 'Get the hell down from here,' he told me. 'If I catch you down here again, I'll blow your brains out.'"

By Monday, with the National Guard in place and the state and local police out in full force, the killing began. The guardsmen and police were given the OK to shoot the looters and restore "law and order."

At 2:40 AM Monday, July 24, Romney and Cavanagh telephoned Attorney General Ramsey Clark and asked for 5,000 federal troops. Monday afternoon, 4,700 troops from the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions were flown into what was then Selfridge Air Force Base outside Mt. Clemens. But President Johnson and his top aide, Cyrus Vance, whom he dispatched to Detroit to head up the suppression of the rebellion, were reluctant to deploy the troops. They were unsure of the reliability of the soldiers, many of them black and many veterans of Vietnam, to shoot down black workers and youth in the streets.

At 5:30 PM Monday, Vance, Romney and Cavanagh set out on an automobile tour of the worst-hit areas. They saw fires, but no looting or shooting. Vance observed, "It doesn't look too bad to me." Cavanagh shot back, "Usually the city isn't burning."

By 10 PM, the death toll had risen to 16 and the police had arrested 2,931 people. Many people turned in reports of sniper fire, reacting to National Guardsmen shooting out street lights in response to orders from the police.

Vance ordered the federal troops to be deployed at 11 PM, and President Johnson went on national TV shortly before midnight to make the announcement. At about 1 AM Tuesday, July 25, 1,800 troops were brought onto the streets of Detroit's east side, one of the sites of the rioting but well away from the center of the violence in the Twelfth Street area.

On the third day of the rebellion, the state crackdown began in earnest. After 9 PM, the police picked up anyone in the riot areas caught outside his or her home. National Guard tanks rolled down residential streets and fired into apartment buildings where snipers were alleged to be holed up.

A Wayne County sheriff's deputy who worked in the Old Wayne County Jail described the conditions there. "The cells were just bulging with prisoners. Many locked up were just gawkers. I think they suffered more than anybody else in the riots.

"The conditions in there were horrible. The weather was hot and the air conditioning worked only half the time. It was so crowded that people slept on the floors. The toilets didn't hardly work and there was no toilet paper. It stunk horribly. People couldn't change clothes or wash up. We fed them cold cuts. That's all we had.

"Prisoners were fighting each other. We were tired and working 12 hours a day. We were short-tempered. If someone didn't do what we told them to do, we would go upside their heads. There was a lot of violence in there."

## **Murder at the Algiers Motel**

The most infamous act of police murder during the Detroit riot occurred on the fourth day, Wednesday, July 26. It began in the early morning hours when a combined force of state and city police, National Guardsmen and private security police sprayed the annex of the Algiers Motel on Virginia Park near Woodward with bullets, and then charged inside.

The motel and its annex, a three-story house, were located in the center of the worst riot area. The police and guardsmen had seen two white girls enter the motel with several black teenage males. Inside, they found

another six black youths, along with the girls.

What followed was a racially motivated exercise in sadistic torture and murder. Within an hour, three of the young men, Aubrey Pollard, 19, Fred Temple, 18, and Carl Cooper, 17, were dead, shot-gunned at close range.

The killers, among them Detroit police officers Ronald August, David Senak and Robert Paille, and security guard Melvin Dismukes, left the bloody scene without reporting the deaths. The three bodies were discovered three hours later by other policemen. The police reports described the dead youth as snipers who had been killed in a gun battle with police. But the terrified survivors told a different story.

The police, National Guardsmen and security guards had burst into the motel annex without provocation and demanded to know where the guns were. The residents, including the girls, were slammed against the walls, beaten bloody and reviled with racial and sexual slurs. When one cop broke his gun butt on Aubrey Pollard's head, the policeman complained, "This nigger made me break my shotgun!"

No guns were found in the annex. Nevertheless, the police took the three victims, one at a time, into the bedrooms, forced them to lie on the floor and fired shotguns into the wall just above their heads. When the game ended, Pollard, Cooper and Temple were dead, each shot at least twice at close range. An independent pathologist who conducted an autopsy for the *Detroit Free Press* said Temple and Pollard had been shot while lying down or kneeling.

Later, the cops, August, Senak and Paille, were implicated in the murders and the security guard Dismukes was charged with clubbing one of the annex occupants. None was ever convicted. August and Paille confessed but claimed they had acted in self-defense. Senak remained silent and was never charged.

There followed years of legal motions and appeals, during which one judge threw out the confessions and another attacked John Hersey's bestseller, *The Algiers Motel Incident*, as prejudicing the case against the police. August was tried in 1969 before an all-white jury in a small town outside of Lansing, and acquitted.

On Thursday, July 27, Governor Romney lifted the 9 PM-to-6 AM curfew but reinstated it at 7:15 PM after sightseers flocked to the riot area despite continuing gunfire. State police were withdrawn from the city that day, and Lt. Gen. Throckmorton ordered the federal troops to sheath their bayonets. He declared the situation "under control."

The last major fire erupted on Friday, July 28, on Twelfth Street between Hazelwood and Taylor. Vance announced the gradual withdrawal of federal troops.

Four days before the riot, several Macomb and Oakland County suburbs of Detroit had been hit by a tropical downpour. Forty-eight hours later, President Johnson declared them a disaster area, eligible for low-interest loans, federal grants and other services. When Detroit, still smoldering and standing partially in rubble, made a similar request for federal help, Johnson refused in order to avoid being labeled "soft" on rioters. Instead, he ordered the release of emergency medical and food supplies to riot victims.

Officially, the worst urban social explosion in US history had lasted from 4 AM Sunday, July 23, to 12:01 AM Friday, July 28. However, the army troops were not withdrawn from the streets until Sunday morning and were kept in readiness at the State Fairgrounds in the city and at the City Airport.

It was not until Tuesday, August 1 that three battalions were withdrawn from the city itself and transferred to Selfridge Air Force Base, and four battalions that had been standing ready during the riot at Selfridge were withdrawn to Fort Campbell.

The curfew was finally lifted on Tuesday morning. The remainder of the federal troops were withdrawn from the Detroit area on Wednesday, August 2, and on the same day the National Guard troops were defederalized. When it was over, the final death toll was 43. Injured were

1,189. There were 7,231 arrests, of whom 824 were whites. Estimated property damage was \$50 million. More than 500 businesses were destroyed and 500 damaged and over 1,000 families were made homeless.

*To be continued*



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