

Wounded Knee : Besieged, Tense

(As told by Richard La Course, American Indian Press, in a phone conversation to the Tundra Times, Tuesday, March 6, from the site of Wounded Knee Massacres of 1890)

WOUNDED KNEE I'd like to give you the mood of Wounded Knee. The mood has been oscillating out here a great deal. Right now it is a mood of a very much hardened situation. The people are holding the Wounded Knee site. The

number, in my judgment, is about 160 people in the village and there would appear to be about 40 to 50 security guards.

There is a shortage of food, with an airlift slated for later today. They have had problems

with fuel and it is quite cold here. Food is being dropped through the courtesy of the State Council of Churches.

Today is the eighth day of the seizure of the property. It is an extremely complex situ-

ation. To put it in a nutshell, it is one set of Indian issues against another set of Indian issues.

In a whole sequence of Indian militancy since 1969, it is

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the first time that a group of Indians have seized a facility which was already in the hands of Indians. So it is different from the Trail of The Broken Treaties, it is different from Alcatraz, and others.

The American Indian Movement (AIM) leaders say they seized Wounded Knee because the government failed to negotiate seriously with them on serious matters when they took over the BIA in Washington last November.

Since the return home of the various "caravans" to different parts of the country, one group arrived in this area led by Russell Means who is an Oglala Sioux and this (Pine Ridge Reservation) is an Oglala Sioux reservation.

Since November, they have been in various parts of Nebraska and then in January and February they swung up through 6 or 7 communities in the Black Hills, South Dakota. There were disturbances in various towns.

The town of Custer had suffered some damage to the first floor of a court house, and there was the burning of a chamber of commerce building, and the burning of a gas station.

Eight days ago they moved into Wounded Knee. Approximately 240 federal marshalls are here right now, as well as an undetermined amount of FBI agents, and in addition, there are tribal police from surrounding reservations, so the police presence is quite large.

Both sides are heavily armed and once the occupation began,

federal marshalls threw an encirclement around the very small village. The village of Wounded Knee lies in a draw, in a small valley, and the perimeter extends into the uplands on practically all sides of the village. There are no mountains here. It is a kind of rolling plain and the valley dips down maybe 100 feet or so, but they're very soft hills, not sharp, and there's a small Catholic church just to the north. Just behind the church is the mass grave of the people who were killed here in 1890. There were about 300 people killed here at that time it was on a Sunday and it was winter.

The mass grave is approximately 50 feet long and about ten feet wide. I was up in the graveyard today and the people, AIM-led, but representing about four different definable groups, have completely cleaned out the graveyard, all the pop bottles, stuff, and trash that you might find there and they've dressed the graves. (There are veterans of the different wars and others who have lived and died in the community buried there also.)

The purpose of the seizure of Wounded Knee was to highlight the mistreatment and injustices suffered by Indian people and was intended as an

effort to further prod the government into genuine response.

The leader of the American Indian Movement takeover of Wounded Knee is a Sioux and the political opponent of the president of the Oglala Sioux tribe, Richard T. Wilson, age 39. Wilson and Means have been at odds over various issues. The Oglala tribe administers the area of Wounded Knee.

The occupation is an intrusion upon tribal sovereignty. With the arrival of AIM here 8 days ago, all constitutional pow-

ers of the tribe were suspended, including that of the president, and in its place came the federal marshalls and the Justice Department, calling the shots on everything. The powers of the local BIA officials, including Superintendent Stanley Lyman have been in abeyance.

Two days ago, the Justice Department in its first meaningful offer to the people who are holding Wounded Knee made a four point proposal and that was this: That they would be permitted to leave between 8 a.m.

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after sunup and 6 p.m. just before sundown in observance of the following conditions:

The names of women and children would not be taken.

No arms could be borne approaching the exits but that arms would be tagged and labeled for later recovery by members of the occupying group.

All non-residents, all Oglala Sioux who did not live in the area at the time of take-over would have to depart.

No criminal charges or arrests would be made at that time but would come at a later date with the convening of a federal grand jury.

The response to the offer by the Justice Department was one of rejection. The paper presented to the village was burned approximately 40 hours ago. Yesterday negotiations took a serious turn in another direction.

The group holding Wounded Knee asked to negotiate with the Interior Department rather than the Justice Department. If they could take care of the serious issues which they've raised both locally and nationally, they would consider abandonment of the site.

On orders from the Interior Department, the request was rejected and today, the Justice

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Department is very much in evidence and very much in charge.

At eleven o'clock today, the people holding the village had a town hall meeting. They said they want to force the government to lay down its arms rather than the Indians laying down their arms. And they asked that those old people at Wounded Knee who may number between 30 and 40, and an equivalent number of the very young be permitted out of the area in case gunfire occurs.

When I left, things appeared very, very tense. Out at the checkpoints, there was evidence that new faces of FBI and agents were on hand. There are approximately 15 armored personnel carriers, APC's, located about 47 miles away. In addition, surrounding the village, there are about three APC's visible. They resemble a tank. Reportedly, they do not have any armed cannon on them but they do carry 8 to 12 men who are carrying firearms.

This is the second largest Indian reservation in America. The entire atmosphere here is very electric.

The tribal government and their supporters are directly pitted against the American Indian Movement and their sup-

porters and in addition to the possibility of federal gunfire, there is the possibility of serious conflict and possible gunfire between these two Indian groups. That's exactly what the issue is. It's Indian and Indian.

It's terrifying to be here. There are about 15 Indian newsmen and newswomen here and press corps as high as eighty at a time. From what all of us have been able to pick up, plus what the Justice Department says, there has been intermittent fire coming out of the village almost from the time of the seizure very light, occasional, once or twice a day, shots over the heads of marshalls. And only two times that I recall have the marshalls returned any fire.

Senators McGovern and Aboueezk were here last Thursday night and a great deal of work is still being done by the staff of both. In addition, aides of Senators Edward Kennedy and Senator Fulbright of Arkansas

as were here.

There are non-negotiable issues on the part of the tribe which have to do with a feeling of invasion and an usurpation of their own government. This has been a relatively undisturbed society and suddenly they are flooded with media people, they're flooded with Justice Department people, the services they normally receive are at a grinding halt, tribal government is at a grinding halt, and the place is almost occupied with such high numbers of people, both in the area of law enforcement and other officials, the people feel like they're under siege.

From the viewpoint of the people at the community of Wounded Knee (about seventeen families live in the area permanently) they feel like they're dealing with that historic enemy that they've always faced, that they're making a showdown at a very sacred site.