THE PARTY CRASHERS

A college student gets a little help from his friends on Main Street in Zap. This photo was taken at 7 p.m. on Friday night. The party had only kicked off at 4 p.m. and already the town was littered with beer cans and broken wine bottles. (Photo Courtesy of The Williston Herald)

By Sgt. Eric W. Jensen
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Forty Years Later, Retired N.D. Guardsmen Reminisce About Restoring Order to the Little College Spring Party That Turned Into One Big Disaster — The Infamous "Zap-In"

Memories of "Zipping to Zap," N.D., might be a little murky for the nearly 3,000 drunken college students who descended on the small, coal mining town in May 1969. In fact, many of the now retired N.D. Guardsmen who chased this mob across half the state aren't certain about every detail of the ordeal. Forty years makes it easy to forget things. But memory doesn't linger on detail; just the focal points, and the collective memories of these retirees lead them to one anecdote in particular — seeing or hearing about the inebriated student who took a sharp bayonet to the rear end after antagonizing a tired and irritated Soldier. This confrontation would be one of a few these Guardsmen would face on a drill weekend that had them crashing the largest spring break beer bust the state had ever known.

FORT LAUDERDALE OF THE NORTH

The "Zap-In" started as an innocuous joke published in the North Dakota State University student newspaper, The Spectrum, inviting the collegiate world to convene at the small town of Zap – population just less than 300. The article suggested that Zap would be a new haven for students to retreat to during spring break; a "Fort Lauderdale of the North." Mayor Norman Fuchs reacted enthusiastically to the idea, assuring prospective attendees that Zap would be ready and willing to host. Soon, the idea of "Zipping to Zap" gained momentum in college newspapers throughout the region and even the national news media picked up on the story.

"THERE WERE KIDS SCATTERED ALL AROUND; SLEEPING ON PEOPLE'S PORCHES AND IN THEIR YARDS." - Retired Brig. Gen. Jerry Engelman

There was huge potential for the event to entice a larger crowd than expected, one that Zap might not be able to handle on its own.

N.D. Gov. William Guy along with N.D. National Guard Adjutant General Maj. Gen. LaClaire A. Melhouse and Superintendent of the State Highway Patrol Ralph Wood met to discuss taking precautions to react to any emergencies that might arise from the Zap party. It was later determined that the Guard would provide assistance to law enforcement officials in Mercer County, if needed, drawing on five companies led by the 164th Engineer Group with the 141st Engineer Battalion in reserve.

Soldiers assigned to these units would report for weekend drill May 9 through 11 to coincide with the "Zap-In." They would remain on a federal drill status unless called to state active duty, with drill beginning at 7 Friday evening.

Retired Brig. Gen. Jerry Engelman remembers commuting to Bismarck from Grand Forks where he attended school at the University of North Dakota.

"I came into town with my girlfriend, Linda, now my wife, and I remember that we were going to go to Zap with some of our friends."

A second lieutenant at the time, Engelman instead joined his unit, the 816th Engineer Company, to review civil disturbance training. The climate of the Vietnam era had put the National Guard

in a variety of events involving civil disorder and Soldiers had, at times, performed unfavorably.

"There had been student rallies that got out of control," Engelman said. "The Guard nationwide was directed to get a few hours each year of riot and crowd control training annually."

As training ended at about 11 that night, the Soldiers were told to be prepared to report back to the Bismarck armory in the event the Guard would be called to respond to any situations in Zap. An hour or so later, Engelman and more than 500 other Guardsmen were told they were moving out to evacuate "Zap-In" rabble rousers. The town, almost literally, was on fire.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

By the time the Guard was called out on Friday night, more than 2,000 drunken college students had laid waste to Zap. The streets were littered with beer cans and a few of the local businesses had been vandalized. Alcohol compounded with sub-freezing temperatures drove students to tear apart an abandoned building on Main Street to fuel a huge bonfire.

But those who hovered around the fire in Zap were not the only ones trying to shield themselves from the cold. Engelman remembers convoying to one of four staging areas around Zap in an old MA151 jeep with side curtains and no heat.

"My driver and I had parkas on along with every piece of clothing we had been issued," he said. "Plus, I had my fart sack (old sleeping bag) around me and so did my driver who drove with one foot out; just enough to step on the gas to drive."

Engelman and his driver arrived in Beulah at about 3 in the morning. Retired Sgt. Maj. Chris Doll, who was a platoon sergeant with the 164th, remembers stopping there as well.

"We were freezing our buns off. We stopped and warmed up in the basement of the motel in town," he said.

The Guard had been ordered by the governor to move the entire crowd out of Zap at daybreak. While units grouped in various staging areas, there was already chatter about the town being in shambles.

"We heard all kinds of things on the radio," Doll said. "People were saying the whole town was burning."

Duane Dehne, who was the training officer for the 164th Engineer Group and the vehicle driver for Col. William Tillotson, commander of the 164th, remembers the caution taken while developing the rules of engagement for the operation.

"The decision was made to not put any ammunition into the hands of the Soldiers. We didn't want to have any casualties," he said.

While the Guardsmen would be unarmed going into Zap, precautions were made to have a sniper-qualified marksman in Tillotson's vehicle. In addition, the entire force would march in with fixed bayonets.

"They (the Soldiers) got very energetic when that order was issued," Dehne said. "At the same time, they were told that you do not use the blade of that bayonet on anyone. It was just used as a method of intimidation."

At 6:30 a.m. on Saturday, the Guardsmen entered Zap and rousted hundreds of college students camping throughout the town.

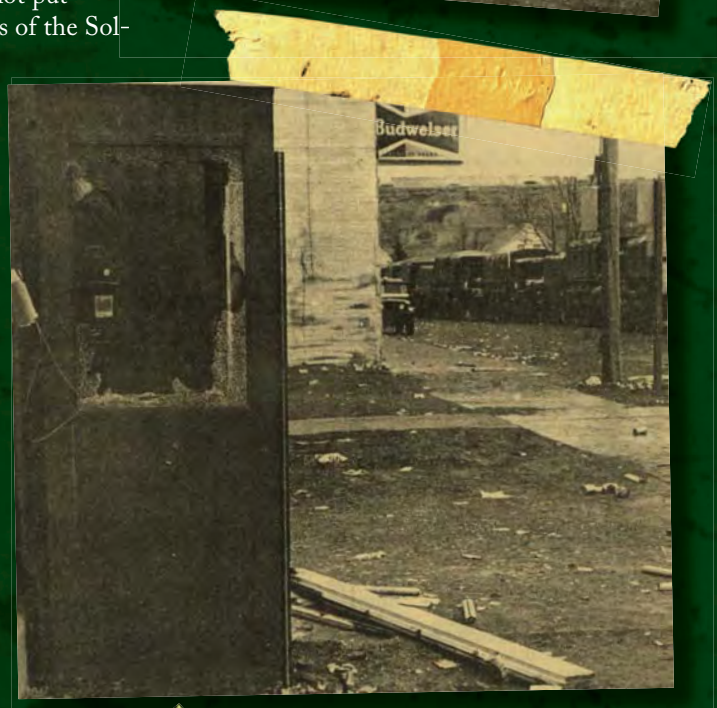
"There were kids scattered all around; sleeping on people's porches and in their yards," Engelman said.

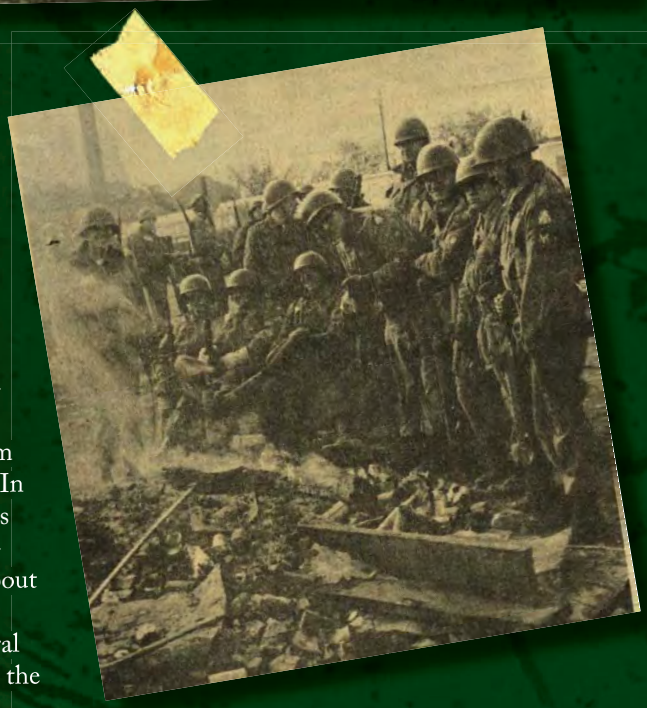
About a hundred or so partygoers remained on Main Street, many of them drunk or hungover, as the Guardsmen made their way through Zap.

Doll remembers the poor condition the town was in.

"You could see smoke rising from town as we approached," he said. "(In one of the bars) the Sheetrock walls were all gone. It was totally demolished. The empty beer cans were about knee-deep in there."

The citizens of Zap, an older, rural community, looked on dismayed as the Guard cleared their streets.





Top and bottom photos, Guardsmen look over the aftermath of the "Zap-In." Damages were estimated to be in the thousands. Middle, the front door of Lucky's Bar is demolished. A few of the local area businesses suffered extensive vandalism during the drunken melee. Reports suggest that some of the college students were set-off by price gouging. In particular, one of the bars had raised the price of beer from 35 cents to 50 cents a bottle. (Photos Courtesy of The Williston Herald)

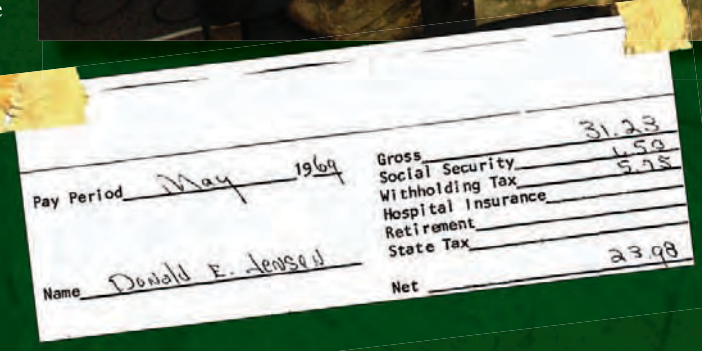
"We saw townspeople looking out their windows wondering what the heck was going on. I'm sure they didn't get any sleep that night," Doll said.

As for the college students, it seemed as though they were ready to pull up stakes and go home. The Zap operation appeared to be a success with virtually no incidents.

"Getting them out of Zap was no problem," Doll said. "We thought it was all over with."

But the party was far from over.

Bill Prokopyk



Top, Sgt. Eric W. Jensen visits with retired Guardsman, Don Jensen, (no relation) who worked as the supply officer for the 164th Engineer Group. Left, Don Jensen's pay stub from the "Zap-In" weekend. A major at the time, Jensen earned $23.98 for a 3-day drill weekend.

THE MOB GOES WILD

Retired State Command Sgt. Maj. Ron Hopfauf, a squad leader with the 816th Engineer Company, remembers a few party-goers stealing a beer truck from behind one of Zap's two bars before the inebriated mass made its way to Beulah. No one is sure what prompted the change of venue, but the college students were still up for partying down. Civil authorities, including the Highway Patrol, followed the crowd along with the Guard.

"By the time we got to Beulah, they (college students) were passing free beer out from the beer truck … anyone who wanted to drink it," Hopfauf said.

With the change of location, came a shift in attitude. The crowd had diminished since being kicked out of Zap, but they had also grown agitated and affirmed their disdain for the Guardsmen by yelling obscenities and hurling anything they could at the group of Soldiers.

"There were people on top of buildings throwing down tires and beers," Hopfauf said. "If there would have been anyone in that crowd with a gun, they could have sat on top of one of those buildings and started plunking away like you wouldn't believe."

"People were calling us names and throwing rocks and all sorts of stuff," Doll recalls. " …beer cans; whatever they could get a hold of."

Eventually, the crowd dispersed only to reform and convoy 10 miles east to Hazen. The chase would continue and the surly crowd met the Guardsmen head-on in the town's Main Street area.

Engelman remembers moving down the street doing the "riot shuffle," a formation learned during civil disturbance training in which a Guardsman would move forward with the left foot, then drag the right foot up to meet it while lunging forward with a bayonet.

"There was kind of a rhythm to it," he said.

The crowd grew more and more violent the further they were pushed down the street, yelling anti-war epithets and throwing trash at the Soldiers. Engelman even remembers one student producing a light-weight log chain and snapping it like a towel, occasionally hitting the Guardsmen's bayonets.

Dehne, along with many others, vividly remembers what happened next. One of the students had finally crossed the line, taunting the wrong Guardsman and took a bayonet to his posterior.

"One of the guys in our formation decided he was going to make a point," Dehne said. "Well, he decided to make that point right up the guy's rear end."

The wounded student was taken to a medical tent that had been set up by the Guard while trying to contain the mob.

Engleman now chuckles about how much preparedness went into the operation.

"I mean this was a full-blown war! This was like M*A*S*H," he said referring to the television series from the '70s.

Finally, the Soldiers were able to block off all streets leading into Hazen's main intersection. From there, county sheriffs and highway patrolmen began making arrests. Remnants of the crowd made their way to Riverside Park in Bismarck where they were permitted to continue partying as long as they did not leave the area.

The exhausted Guardsmen who, for the most part, had not slept all weekend were relieved by Soldiers of the 141st Engineer Battalion. The unit and law enforcement monitored the gathering to ensure it didn't turn into another calamity.

By the time Sunday afternoon rolled around, the crowd had vanished.

"It was time to go back to school. The party was over," Engelman said.

The "Zap-In" had turned into a 24-hour affair for the North Dakota National Guard. Dehne believes the outcome for the Soldiers was positive.

"They felt that they had done the job that they were asked to do and they felt good about it," he said. "They felt they had given back the town of Zap."