

The Warning Was Clear: No Mercy for Spies

By JERRY THOMPSON

Bill Riccio, decked out in a green beret, camouflage fatigues and jungle boots, fingered his 45-caliber automatic while holding forth on the front porch of Klansman Tommy Parsons' home.

"When we come to power," he told the Klansmen surrounding him, "we will be the most powerful force in this nation."

ANGER DISTORTED his face, and his chin quivered as he warmed to his subject:

"I can't tolerate — and none of us should tolerate — anyone who would infiltrate any group and gain the confidence and the friendship of the people in it, then publicly turn against us."

I was standing just a few feet from Riccio, a man in his mid-30s who works for an auto dealership in Birmingham. The holstered pistol at his side and the bayonet strapped across his left shoulder were menacing. And I had no doubt he meant what he said.

HE WAS WARNING that anyone who would pose as a Klansman to gain entrance into the KKK — and then "betray" the Klan — should be dealt with in the harshest way.

After months and months as an undercover member of a rival Klan group, I was now a member of the Invisible Empire. I was an infiltrator; a spy. And I felt that Riccio was talking directly to me.

But Riccio was worried about federal agents, not journalists, it turned out. Still I feared his threat would apply as easily to me, who had been a Klan member for a year while working as an investigative reporter for *The Tennessean*.

AS I LISTENED to Riccio I tried to look nonchalant. But the sweat trickled between my shoulder blades.

We met that night at the Hanceville, Ala., home of Tommy and Peggy Parsons — a white frame residence about seven miles south of Cullman, just off U.S. 31. Many of the Klansmen who stood around outside, waiting for the meeting to begin, were armed.

I had been admitted into this Klan just a few weeks earlier. That made me a member of two Klan "empires" at the same time. Months before I had been "naturalized" into the rival Knights of the KKK — and now was participating in both factions.

RICCIO — ALABAMA "Chaplain" for Bill Wilkinson's Invisible Empire — talked to us that night about the conviction a couple of days before of two former top FBI officials, W. Mark Felt and Edward S. Miller. The two agents were found guilty of conspiracy to approve illegal break-ins in a search for fugitive radicals in the early 1970s.

Riccio despised the radicals whose civil rights were violated by the FBI. But he said he also despises "the feds" who would infiltrate any group.

"When we come to power," he said, as we stood around him on the front porch, nodding in assent, "we must never let ourselves slide into complacency and let a fed go. If he is a fed, he is our enemy." Then he said, "We must be prepared to kill the enemy." I could not believe what I heard.

OF ALL THE PEOPLE with whom I came in contact as a Klansman, Bill Riccio disturbed me the most even though our encounters were brief.

The secret handbook of the Invisible Empire describes a Chaplain's office as "sacred" and limits the role as "performing the duties peculiar to his sacred office, and such other duties as may be required of him" by the top-ranking Klansmen.

During the times I was around Riccio I tried to stay within earshot of him because he seemed to me to be the ultimate example of a totally committed Klan member. He not only seemed menacing, he frightened me when he talked about what he thought should be done to Klan spies.

I NEVER WILL forget that the words in the manual of the Invisible Empire give the penalty for violating the secrecy oath of the Klan: "Disgrace, dishonor and death."

It is impossible for the KKK to disgrace or dishonor me. But because I understand what else that manual says, I now am protected by police security.

Riccio struck me as a strange sort of Chaplain. At a speech he made during a street rally for the Klan in Birmingham he kept referring to black Americans as "ape niggers." Brotherhood is obviously not a qualification for ordination to the Klan chaplaincy.

LOOKING BACK on my more than a year as an investigative reporter working under cover in two Klan groups — the Invisible Empire and the rival Knights of the KKK — I am surprised by how simple it was to penetrate their memberships.

In earlier articles in this series I have detailed just how I managed to get Don Black, then the Grand Dragon of the "Knights," to "recruit" me into his faction. He since has become Imperial Wizard of that group and said on Monday he plans to "banish" me at a Klan trial. If he does, it will be done in absentia. I'm not going back to Alabama for a while.

I was able to ease into Wilkinson's Invisible Empire months later because of the heated rivalry between the two organizations.

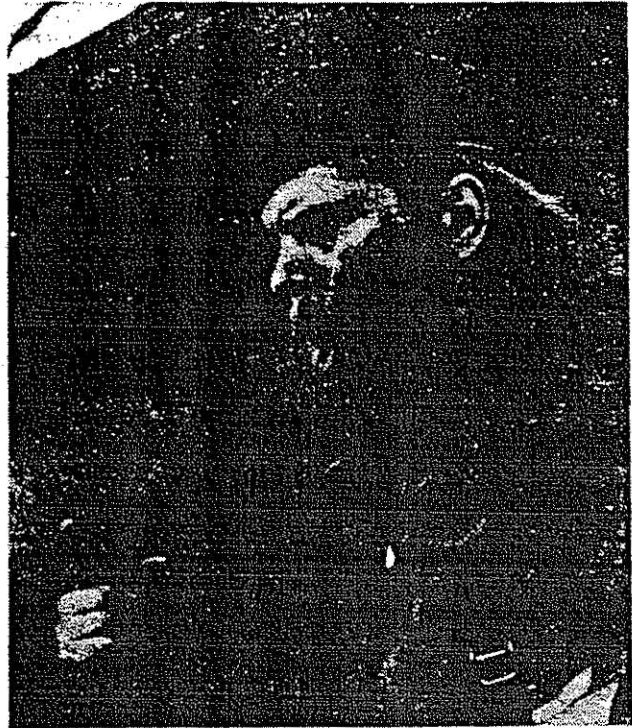
DON BLACK AND Bill Wilkinson don't like each other; their Klan factions don't like each other. When a Klansman from Black's group contacts a leader from Wilkinson's group and offers to defect — change membership to the Invisible Empire — Wilkinson's people are ecstatic.

That is exactly what I did to get into the Invisible Empire.

I called up one of Wilkinson's Alabama KKK organizers and told him I was disgusted with the leadership Black was providing. More than that, I said I thought the officials of the Knights had tried to "sell out the membership."

TO UNDERSTAND how I was able to get away with that, it is important to understand something about the background of these two Klan factions.

There was a time when Wilkinson himself was part of the Knights. He, like Don Black, was a



—Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

Tough Talk on Taking Power

Bill Riccio, Alabama "chaplain" of the Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan, wears the battle regalia of a commando as he tells an Alabama Klan rally that the Klan will be the nation's "most powerful force" when the racist organization "comes to power."

follower of David Duke, the articulate, charismatic racist leader who was, back then, Imperial Wizard of the Knights.

Duke and Wilkinson had a falling out. Wilkinson has said it was over accounting of money. Duke has said that is untrue. At any rate Wilkinson started his own Klan group, the Invisible Empire, which now has more members and more momentum than the Knights.

BLACK, A FRIEND of Duke, stayed with the Knights as Alabama Grand Dragon. In that role he "naturalized" me into the Knights.

The bad feelings between Wilkinson and his Invisible Empire on one hand, and Black, Duke and the Knights on the other, continued until last July when, suddenly, it appeared there would be a reconciliation.

There was a meeting between Duke and Wilkinson at an isolated farmhouse near Cullman. Wilkinson, pretending to be friendly, set Duke up. He invited journalists to conceal themselves at the farmhouse to record and televise his conversation with Duke.

It went like this:

DUKE WAS WILLING to turn over his membership, which he claimed was 3,000 strong, to Wilkinson's organization for \$35,000. He wanted to start something called the National Association for the Advancement of White People. Black was going to be part of that NAAWP. This would leave Wilkinson with control of a merged Klan.

Wilkinson rejected and exposed the "deal" and accused Duke of trying to sell out his members.

And so, when I telephoned Roland Torbert, the Birmingham organizer for Wilkinson, and told him I was leaving the Duke group because of the "sellout," he welcomed me.

MEANWHILE, DUKE had quit the Klan and turned over his Knights to Black. Black called a meeting at a home on the Bippy Brick Yard Road near Birmingham one night and asked about a dozen Klan families if we would follow him since Duke was resigning.

We all told him we would.

Now, three months later, I told Roland Torbert, "I'm tired of this crowd because all we do is sit on our butts and do nothing." I advised him I was making a change in residence from Birmingham to Cullman. Did his organization have anybody in Cullman I could contact?

BLACK HAD TOLD me that Wilkinson had a tough Klan Klavern in Cullman.

Torbert gave me the name of the Cullman den commander, Terry Tucker.

"He is our E.C. up in Cullman," Torbert said, "our Exalted Cyclops." He promised to call Tucker for me. I was elated. I notified John Seigenthaler, my publisher in Nashville. We agreed the time had come to move on to the next Empire.

Within no time I had rented an apartment in Cullman, an hour's drive north of where I had lived for months in Birmingham.

I ARRANGED FOR a telephone call service to take messages while

22 I was away from the apartment. I told my "boss," David Skelton — who had employed me for months as a cabinetmaker's helper in Homewood, a Birmingham suburb — that I was having to move away.

He was my friend. He wished me well, suspicious but not sure of what my relationship with the Klan was all about.

When I called Terry Tucker, the "E.C." for Wilkinson's den in Cullman, he was delighted to hear from me — a real, live defector from the KKK Knights of Don Black. He said he would put the question of my membership to his Klansmen at their next meeting.

THREE DAYS later he called me back to say everything had been approved and that I could be sworn in at the next meeting, which was two weeks away. It was another

great example of KKK "security" techniques.

I decided to push him to try to bring about a personal meeting of myself with Wilkinson. Torbert urged me to call the Wizard and gave me his phone number in Denham Springs, La. I made the call.

"You don't know me," I told the Imperial Wizard over the phone. "but I'm J.W. Thompson and I've been a member of David Duke's and Don Black's Klan. Now, I'm getting ready to come over to your group."

"I'M DOING THIS because I'm so upset that Duke tried to sell my membership. I've got to ask you, Mr. Wilkinson: If and when you decide to sell my membership to someone, will you notify me first?"

Wilkinson's response was immediate. "I don't sell anyone out," he

said. "And I don't buy anyone either. My record will show that."

I expressed satisfaction with his reply. I asked if he would be in Alabama soon so that we could talk personally. He would not be there for almost two months, he said. In fact, I never got to meet him face to face. Now I was ready to become a member of Wilkinson's group — while secretly retaining my membership in Black's organization.

SO, ON A SATURDAY night — this past Oct. 4 — I arrived at the same isolated farmhouse where a few weeks earlier Bill Wilkinson and David Duke had their confrontation. As I drove up, Gerald Briscoe, the den's Nighthawk, fumbled with the lock on the front door. But the key he had been given didn't work.

"How are we going to get in?"

Briscoe finally asked. I had no idea. Other Klan members arrived.

Finally one of them, Red Willingham, said he would go look for a key somewhere else. And while we were waiting for his return, we watched the children of Klan members ride a white horse from a nearby shed.

KLANSMAN Jim Logan — who later told me he had owned the farmhouse before selling it to a relative — drove up. He had a key.

Inside, it appeared that only the living room was in use. The front window was boarded up and old theater seats and church pews were lined up in front of a table. Behind the table a Klan flag and a Confederate battle flag hung on the wall.

Beside the table was a handmade cross that held 13 candles in little glass cups. The room was lighted by a single bulb hanging at the end of a cord from the ceiling.

I WAS INTRODUCED to another KKK "recruit," James Johnson, who was identified as a city fireman. He was also there to be inducted into Wilkinson's Invisible Empire.

Briscoe and Willingham. I noticed, had briefcases. Opening them, they took out their Klan robes and hoods. Briscoe had a revolver, which he laid on the table.

The weapons should not have surprised me. I never went to a meeting of Wilkinson's Klan group where rifles and pistols, and sometimes bayonets, were not displayed.

It is necessary, Wilkinson tells his members, that they arm themselves for what he predicts will be "a race war."

IN THE WAY IT is armed, Wilkinson's Klan is different from Black's. Black preaches that acts of violence result in Klan members going to jail, and usually only his security guards are armed.

On this night at the farmhouse, Nighthawk Briscoe was serving as Exalted Cyclops during the ceremony, in the absence of Terry Tucker, who was out of town.

Willingham was appointed the Klaliff — second in command — for the night. The regular Klaliff, Dudley Ham, was out of town with Tucker. Jim Logan served as Chaplain. All three were dressed in their Klan garb, the white robes.

MEANWHILE, AN older man whose name I never learned served as Nighthawk, or guard at the front door. Wearing a 38-caliber revolver in a shoulder holster, he stood in the doorway to make sure no unauthorized persons came in.

I had expected all the other Klan members — 18 were there that evening — to attend the ceremony. But most of them declined, remaining outside on the front porch and in the front yard. They obviously had seen such ceremonies dozens of times. It was routine for them, and something of a bore.

The Klan calls such a ceremony a "naturalization," meaning that the recruit is accepted from an "alien world" — a racially integrated world, of course — into "citizenship in an empire that believes in the purity of the white race for America."

IN MOST RESPECTS the ceremony for Wilkinson's group is exactly like that for Black's — a ceremony in which I had participated nearly a year before.

Yesterday † Today † Tomorrow † Forever



Knights of the Ku Klux Klan

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THE KLAN OATH

TOP SECRET

I (repeat your full name) — on this date (say date) — do before God and man — most solemnly swear — that I dedicate — my life — my fortune — and my sacred honor — to the Preservation — Protection — and Advancement of the White Race — and to that great order — the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

SECTION I † † † † SECRECY

I swear most honestly — that I will never divulge what transpires tonight. (today)
I swear that I will forever keep secret — the signs — words — papers — and rituals of the KKK
I sacredly vow — that I will forever keep secret — the name of any fellow Klansman.
I am willing to die before revealing such secrets.

SECTION II † † † † LOYALTY

I will faithfully obey — the regulations and laws of the Knights of the KKK.
I recognize that this order is the only true Klan in existence — and that I will never associate myself — with any other "so-called" Klan organization.
I swear my undying loyalty — to the elected Grand Wizard — David Duke.

SECTION III † † † † DUTY

I will respond promptly to the needs of the KKK — I will give as much of my time — and money as possible — to further its great aims.
I will fulfill all the duties of a Klansman — for at least five years.

SECTION IV † † † † PROLIFERATION

I will actively work to expand the ranks — of the KKK.
I will not recommend for membership — any person whose loyalty is doubtful.

SECTION V † † † † FRATERNITY

Every fellow Klansman will be as a brother to me — his welfare will come before my own.
I will never slander — defraud — deceive — or in any way wrong a fellow Klansman — or a Klansman's family — nor will I permit others — to do the same — if I can so prevent it.
I will go to the aid of any fellow Klansman who requests it — at his call I will answer — I will be truly Klannish — toward all Klansmen — in all things honorable and just.

SECTION VI † † † † HONOR

I will keep secret — any secret transmitted by any other Klansman.
I will not conspire with other Klansmen to commit an illegal act of violence.
I swear that I will oppose — the enemies of our race — nation — and this order — with my life — my fortune — and my honor — and that I will oppose a serious threat — to the survival and freedom of my people — with whatever means the situation demands — if necessary — I will even sacrifice my life — in defense of fellow Klansmen — and this great order — the Knights of the KKK.
I will never judge any Klan leaders — by any newspaper account — broadcast — rumor — or any other source — other than from the authority — of this order.
I will in fact — not tolerate — accusations — in my presence — against any level of Klan leadership — I recognize the duplicity of our enemies.

SECTION VII † † † † DEDICATION

I believe in the Constitution of the United States — and in the great race that created it.
I will work diligently — to secure the preservation — protection — and advancement of the White Race.
I believe in complete religious freedom — and in the free practice of the Christian faith — in public institutions — but also in the separation — of church and state.
I will diligently fight against — Communism — and Zionism.
I swear my loyalty — to this order forever — as the only true Klan — I shall obey its elected Grand Wizard — David Duke — and all other officers — as long as they continue with this order.
I swear I dedicate my life — from this moment forward — to fostering the welfare of the White Race — and furthering the work of America's greatest Movement — The KNIGHTS OF THE KU KLUX KLAN.

name J. W. Thompson signature J. W. Thompson
witness Don Black date 5-23-80

A Now-Shattered Secret Oath of Allegiance

This is the oath that Tennessean reporter Jerry Thompson — using the name J.W. Thompson — was administered when he was naturalized as a member of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.



—Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

Costumed Watchers During Presidential Address

TUSCUMBIA, Ala. — Stanley McCullom, Ku Klux Klan Titan for north Alabama, keeps an eye on the President Carter speak in Tuscumbia — while Tennessee reporter Jerry Thompson, wearing hat and sunglasses, keeps an eye on McCullom.

The wording in some parts of the ceremony is, however, different, and in place of the section on "honor," Wilkinson's group has substituted a section on "power." But the two ceremonies are essentially the same.

The secret ceremony that October night — which no longer will be secret after this publication — began this way:

Nighthawk — "Your Excellency, your faithful Nighthawk has important documents and information from the outside world."

Exalted Cyclops — "Faithful Nighthawk, you may now speak and impart to us the important information in your possession."

Nighthawk — "Your Excellency: Pursuant to my duty in seeking laudable adventure in the alien world, I found these men, J.W. Thompson and James Johnson. Having read the honest introduction to our Klan, and prompted by unselfish motive, they desire a nobler life. In consequence they have made the honorable decision to forsake the world of selfishness and racial alienation, and emigrate to the racial community known as the Invisible Empire, and become loyal citizens of the same."

The Exalted Cyclops then asked a series of 10 questions, generally the same ones I had answered when I became a member of Black's Knights of the KKK. I reported on that Klan naturalization

earlier in this series.

Did I believe in racial separation? Was I white? Gentile? An American citizen? Was I in favor of "a white man's government in this country?" Was I willing to dedicate my life "to protection, preservation and advancement of the white race?"

Johnson and I answered all the questions affirmatively, and the ceremony moved on to what would happen to us if we ever betrayed the Klan:

Exalted Cyclops — "If one of you should prove himself to be a traitor ..."

Klalliff — "You will be immediately banished in disgrace from the Invisible Empire without fear or favor. Your conscience would torment you and direful things will befall you."

Since I had been threatened with "direful things" in the other naturalization, it was much easier to take this evening.

Exalted Cyclops — "Do you understand this?" We said we did.

The Exalted Cyclops then read the section on secrecy. With right hands raised, we took the oath:

"I swear most honestly ... that I will never divulge what transpires tonight. That I will forever keep secret the signs, words, papers and rituals of the Ku Klux Klan. I sacredly vow that I will forever keep secret the name of any fellow

Klansman who so desires. I sacredly vow that I will never yield to bribe, threats, punishment, nor any enticement from anyone for the purpose of obtaining a secret of the Invisible Empire. I am willing to die before revealing such secrets."

IN THIS CEREMONY I raised my right hand. In the Knights, the oath was taken with the left hand elevated.

We had to promise that we would work to promote the Klan, that we would be brothers to fellow Klansmen, and that we would work "diligently in the campaign of any candidate for public office who has been officially endorsed by the Invisible Empire, Knights of the KKK."

Then we were "dedicated," with the Exalted Cyclops saying:

"Mortal man cannot assume a more binding oath: Character and courage alone will enable you to keep it. Always remember that to keep this oath means to you honor, happiness and life; but to violate it means disgrace, dishonor and death."

THEN WE GOT down on one knee while the Cyclops lifted a "chaice" — a glass of drinking water — and said:

"With this life-giving fluid, more precious than and far more significant than all the sacred oils of the ancients, I set you apart from the men of your daily associations, to the great and honorable task you

have allotted yourself as a citizen of the Invisible Empire."

The Cyclops then sprinkled water liberally over us while intoning:

"Sirs, beneath the uplifted fiery cross, which by its holy light looks down upon you, to bless you with its sacred traditions of the past, I dedicate you in body, in mind, in spirit and in life to the holy service of our race, our Klan, our homes ..."

NOW I HAD BEEN baptized twice into the Klan. The second time was just as silly as the first.

Actually the fiery cross — with the 13 candles — wasn't lit. When I had been initiated into Black's group, a single candle had been lit, but the only lighting in the Invisible Empire ceremony came from the bare light bulb.

The Chaplain — Jim Logan — then prayed for "our white race in your sublime image. Amen."

We all said "Amen."

AND SO WE WERE "welcomed" into the Empire and told again that "Klansman" was "the most honorable title among white men."

After the initiation Johnson and I were instructed in the ways of the Cullman Klavern, and we were taught the "secret handshake."

I had learned a KKK handshake when I joined Duke's group. That involved shaking hands in the normal way, except that your first two fingers are extended along the wrist of the other person.

In the Invisible Empire, however, it is different. There, you shake hands in the normal way, but instead of moving your hands up and down, you simply roll your wrists.

THE SECRET handshakes are a way of identifying yourself — perhaps when you're in public and don't want anyone else to know you are a Klansman — to a fellow Klan member.

Johnson and I then attended our first business meeting with the Cullman den. It was less than impressive.

For one thing the secretary of the den was out of town — in Ohio — and so there could be no reading of the minutes of the last meeting. The treasurer was not present, so no one could pay dues. Tucker, the Exalted Cyclops, was away, so other business matters could not be attended to.

BRISCOE TALKED for a while about the "Special Forces" — a paramilitary group of Klansmen in training at a camp nearby — which, according to Wilkinson, will be used as a "defensive force" when the race war starts.

"Those of you who know anything about the Special Forces, just forget what you know," said Briscoe. "And those of you who don't know anything — well, that's OK. Just don't even ask. The Special Forces are the hottest thing in the country right now."

He was referring to the publicity the group received after *The Tennessean's* correspondent, Bob Dunnavant, had disclosed that Klan members were in training at the secret hideaway, using live ammunition and dressing in camouflage clothing, just like in the Army.

BRISCOE THEN asked if anyone had anything else to talk about. Nobody did, and so we broke up for the night.

The next meeting, we were told, would be two weeks later.

Now I could say "AKIA" — "A Klansman I Am" — and it would be twice as true as before.