

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #13

Around 9 p.m. PST on February 4, 1974, there was a knock on the door of apartment #4 at 2603 Benvenue Street in Berkeley, California. In burst a group of men and women with their guns drawn. They grabbed a surprised 19 year-old college student named Patty Hearst. They beat up her fiancé, Stephen Weed, and left him unconscious. Then they threw her in the trunk of their car and drove off into the night. Thus began one of the strangest cases in FBI history.

Soon, a ransom note arrived. Hearst, it was discovered, had been kidnapped by a group of armed radicals, who billed themselves as the Symbionese Liberation Army, or SLA. Their leaders was a hardened criminal named Donald DeFreeze, who had formed the group in 1973 after he had escaped from prison.

Prior to the kidnapping of Hearst, an SLA bomb-making factory had been discovered by the police. On November 6, 1973, the SLA had shot and killed Marcus Foster, the supervisor of schools in Oakland, California, and had seriously wounded one other Oakland school official with cyanide-tipped bullets.

Now the SLA wanted nothing less than to incite a guerrilla war against the U.S. government and to destroy what they called the “capitalist state.” Their ranks included women and men, blacks and whites, as well as anarchists and extremists from various walks of life. They constituted a band of domestic terrorists – and dangerous ones at that.

Why had they snatched Patty Hearst? Primarily, the SLA wanted to get the attention of the nation. She was from a wealthy, powerful family. Her grandfather was the newspaper magnate, William Randolph Hearst. The plan of the SLA worked out very well. The kidnapping stunned the country and made front-page national news.

But the SLA had more plans for Patty Hearst. Soon after her disappearance, the SLA began releasing audiotapes demanding that her family distribute \$70 million in food donations to every poor person from Santa Rosa, California, to Los Angeles in exchange for her release. The Hearst family agreed to give \$2 million to the poor in Oakland to secure her freedom. The Black Muslims, the former organization of Malcolm X, were chosen to manage the food distribution, which turned into a riot, when more than 10,000 people showed up and fought for the food. Afterwards, the SLA demanded an additional \$6 million giveaway. This time the Hearst family refused, and Patty was not released.

At the same time, SLA members apparently began abusing and brainwashing their captive. They hoped to turn this young heiress from the highest reaches of society into a poster child for their coming revolution.

That, too, seemed to work. The Hearst story took a strange and unexpected turn two months after the abduction. On April 3, 1974 the SLA released a tape with Hearst saying

that she had voluntarily joined their fight to free the oppressed and had even taken a new name – “Tania.” This was inspired by the pseudonym of Che Guevara’s female comrade. As a result, Patty Hearst is frequently referred to as a victim of Stockholm Syndrome.

On April 15, when the SLA robbed the Hibernia Bank in San Francisco, the surveillance cameras clearly showed that Patty Hearst was one of the machine gun toting robbers, barking orders to bystanders and providing cover to her confederates.

Meanwhile, the FBI had launched one of the most massive, agent-intensive searches in its history to find Hearst and stop the SLA. Following thousands of leads, the FBI still struggled in its investigation because the SLA frightened potential informants into silence, used effective operational security, and relied on an organized network of “safe houses.” A break finally came in Los Angeles. On May 16 two SLA members tried to steal an ammunition belt from a local store and were nearly caught. The getaway van was discovered, which led authorities to a SLA “safe house.” The next day 400 Los Angeles police and FBI agents surrounded the house. A tremendous gun battle ensued. Police threw tear gas canisters into the house and then shot at them, sparking a fire. The building went up in flames. Six members of the SLA died in the blaze, including DeFreeze.

However, Hearst was not inside the house. She and several others had escaped and began traveling around the country to avoid capture. FBI agents finally captured her in San Francisco on September 18, 1975. She was charged with bank robbery and other crimes. Her trial was as sensational as the chase. Despite her claim that she had been coerced, through repeated rape, isolation, and brainwashing, into joining the SLA, prosecutors believed that she actually orchestrated her own kidnapping because of her prior involvement with one of the SLA members. Despite any real proof of this theory, the jury found her guilty, and she was sentenced to seven years in prison.

Patty Hearst served almost two years in jail before President Jimmy Carter commuted her sentence. She was pardoned by President Bill Clinton in January, 2001. After her release from prison she married her former bodyguard, Bernard Shaw, with whom she had two children.

The FBI caught up with the rest of the SLA. The last two members were arrested in 1999 and 2002. At that point, the bizarre case involving Patty Hearst was finally closed.