

Catholic nun begins jail sentence for military protest: Hopped fence at former School of the Americas

News in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

Before going behind bars, Sister Lelia (“Lil”) Mattingly said she expected jail would be cold and dreary compared to life in a convent. But the nun sentenced in connection with a protest in Georgia said her imprisonment follows Jesus’ way—“to speak the truth to power and pay the consequences.”

Mattingly, 63, reported March 15 to the Danbury Federal Correctional Institution, a low-security prison in Danbury, Connecticut, that is home to 1,300 female inmates. She will serve a six-month sentence for trespassing on a U.S. Army base.

The nun is among 11 activists who have been sentenced to jail time for their part in a November 21 demonstration at Fort Benning, Georgia, that involved several thousand protesters. Mattingly was arrested during the annual protest against the base’s military school, which has trained more than 57,000 Latin American soldiers, some of whom were later charged with human rights violations in their native countries.

A Maryknoll sister, Mattingly lived in Bolivia from 1971 until 1997 where she provided basic health care. She knew all four U.S. churchwomen raped and killed by security forces in El Salvador in 1980; two of those killed were Maryknoll nuns.

Mattingly said she tried to plant a cross inscribed with the names of Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan on the grounds of the school where the churchwomen’s killers were trained.

“The only way I could do that is to cross over the line,” Mattingly said. “They’re just very beautiful people who were brave enough to be there where the danger was because the people were in danger, too. And it’s like really believing in something that’s important enough to die for, and that’s been inspiring for me. I wouldn’t be

able to die, but I could go to prison.”

In prison, Mattingly will sleep in a bunk bed, and her living situation will depend on whether she’s assigned to Danbury’s barracks-style prison camp or traditional cellblock housing.

Nicknamed “Club Fed,” the facility is the place media empress Martha Stewart requested but didn’t get. Inmates can take craft classes and use a baseball field and walking track. New York hotel queen Leona Helmsley served time there. Mattingly was allowed to bring her Bible when she reported to prison, but nothing else.

Brian DeRouwen, 27, another protester, who will serve 120 days at California’s Taft Correctional Institute starting March 15, first met Mattingly the night before the demonstration. “She knew exactly what she wanted to do,” said DeRouwen, a University of Dayton graduate student.

They were both at a meeting for those considering risking arrest by hopping the fence at the army facility, formerly called the School of the Americas. The school is now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Training manuals used at the School of the Americas until 1991 advocated torture, execution and blackmail, according to a March 1992 U.S. Defense Department report.

The school’s defenders have said its courses do not teach abuse and that current curriculum includes a human rights component. They say the school shouldn’t be held responsible for the actions of some of its graduates.

Mattingly’s sentence will be up in time for another fall protest against the school. Each year, protesters mark the anniversary of the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her teenage daughter in El Salvador in 1989 by Salvadoran army personnel. *-Religion News Service*