

Ex-members denounce sect rehab program

By GEORGE-WAYNE SHELOR
Sun staff writer

The young man—by all appearances a teen-ager—crouched on the dark, narrow stairway as he scrubbed the sixth-floor landing in the former Fort Harrison Hotel, the "Flag Land Base" headquarters of the Church of Scientology.

"Are you in RPF?" queried a reporter.

"Sir?" he asked quietly, peering up from his work.

"Are you in RPF?"

"Yes sir, I am."

RPF is the Rehabilitation Project Force (RPF), which, depending on who is speaking, is either a businessman's approach to improving an employee's lagging job performance or a form of punishment for Scientologists who are banished to serve penance for their misdeeds and "bad thoughts."

Two others—adult men who, like the youth, were dressed in blue shorts and faded blue shirts—worked two floors below, also cleaning the stairs. They spoke not a word. Former Scientologists say that those in RPF "are not to speak unless spoken to."

Those who have spent time in the RPF at the Fort Harrison tell a harrowing tale of long hours at work—as much as 100 hours a week—and of months of humiliation and mental abuse at the hands of other Scientologists.

But their vivid recollections of hard work and abuse contradict current Church of Scientology statements that the RPF is "an entirely voluntary" program.

"It's totally up to the individual if he wants to do it or not," sect spokesman Richard Haworth said Monday.

Haworth, who said he has never been in RPF, characterized the program as "a chance for an individual to get himself back on track. It's a rehabilitation program like any other business has for employees who may not be operating up to their potential."

He said persons don't have to enter the RPF if they choose not to, and if they do, "they have 10 to 12 hour (work) days like everyone else (and) get no more or no less pay than anyone else." He said employees are paid \$30 a week plus room, board and uniforms.

But former high-ranking Scientologists, who themselves were in the RPF in Clearwater, scoffed at Haworth's statement that the program is "voluntary."

"It's absolutely involuntary," said Gerald Armstrong, the sect's former archivist who spent 17 months in the RPF in the former Fort Harrison Hotel after he swore at a higher-ranking Scientologist.

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"People who didn't wish to 'volunteer' were locked up," the 37-year-old former Scientologist said.

"To say the RPF is voluntary is like saying all the Jews signed up for the gas chambers."

"It was a horrible thing," recalled William Franks, the sect's former executive director international and chairman of the board, who has since defected.

"I was in the RPF three times," Franks recalled during a telephone interview Monday. "(And) it certainly wasn't voluntary—I can't believe they would tell you something like that."

Armstrong, who was exonerated in June of stealing thousands of Scientology-related documents he took when he fled the Clearwater-based sect nearly three years ago, said his days in the RPF "consisted of hard labor and then a brainwashing process and depravation—in terms of sleep deprivation, food deprivation and communication deprivation."

"I was also subjected to constant harranguing and abuse by others who told me I was a criminal and an SP (suppressive person)."

Armstrong said that when he was first assigned to the RPF, he lived in a bathroom in the laundry room of the Fort Harrison. He was later moved to an unventilated storage room on the 10th floor and then a storage room on the third floor.

"I worked at least 100 hours each week, and if I'll never forget it," he said.

Armstrong said he believes the purpose of the RPF "is to break the will of anybody who questions LRH (Hubbard) or the policies and orders" of the sect, adding that a person is allowed to leave RPF "when your will is sufficiently broken ... when you no longer pose a threat of questioning their doctrines and orders."

Laurel Sullivan, the Hubbard's former personal representative, said she spent eight months in RPF in the California desert for "thoughts" the sect's E-Meter indicated she was thinking, but was later proved incorrect.

(The E-Meter is a simple galvanometer which measures the skin's resistance to a small electrical current. Scientologists believe it can interpret a person's thought process.)

"(RPF) was *not* voluntary and it was very rough," Mrs. Sullivan recalled. "I had to work in 120-degree heat with a severe case of colitis and although I was sick, I had to work anyway. I was not allowed to talk to anybody, got no medical care and there were times where we worked 24 hours straight.

"I wanted to leave but then I was locked up and told I couldn't leave."

To the claims by former members that RPF is a form of punishment, Haworth said only "phooey!"

"No other employer that I know of goes to the lengths that the church does to aid their employees that otherwise would be unemployable by us," he said. "We don't like to lose employees."