

Tough Vigil



By Art Frisch

An armed San Quentin prison guard keeps close watch from B section catwalk

Behind Prison Bars

'I Was a Guard At San Quentin'

The Chronicle's Charles Howe served for a week as a guard at San Quentin — part of a three-month investigation of life inside California prisons by reporters Howe and Tim Findley.

Today Howe tells what it's like to be a rookie guard — or "fish bull" — behind prison walls.

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By Charles Howe

There is a sign hanging in the Receiving and Release room just inside San Quentin State Prison and this is what it says:

"Blessed are those who demand nothing for they shall not be disappointed."

It was one of the first things I saw during the week I worked at the prison as a correctional officer. Civilians call them prison guards.

The assignment came at the end of an intensive three-month study of the California Department of Corrections by myself and Tim Findley, another reporter.

"We've got nothing to hide," said Raymond K. Procnier, director of the State's sprawling prison system.

"I think you'll find out we aren't beating in-

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'I Was a Guard at Quentin'



Chronicle reporter Charles Howe in uniform of a San Quentin guard

Profile of State's Prison Guards

The average California correctional officer is 41 years old and has had some prior civilian work experience before putting on a green uniform.

The majority of officers are high school graduates and have some college state statistics say.

About 20 per cent of them are retired from the military, the bulk of them former master sergeants or chief petty officers. Seven of every ten correctional officers are white.

A correctional officer starts at \$651 per month; his maximum salary, after time in grade, will rise to \$791. As a prison officer he has a few prerequisites. Shineshes and haircuts are free, provided by inmates. He can get substantially reduced rates at the prison laundry and dry cleaning establishment.

However, he must supply his own uniform and equipment at a cost of about \$120. Subarms for gunmen (tower officers or rail guards) are furnished by the state.

As a member of the Department of Corrections, a correctional officer comes from a department that has the highest rate of heart attacks of any State department.

A long-range study of officers has indicated that situations of tension and stress within the institution make

the average correctional officer far more prone to coronary disease than his counterpart on the streets, the policeman.

Applicants must pass a civil service examination before they are appointed. After they are hired, officers receive a period of on-the-job training in the institution where they have elected to work.

This includes a week of orientation on the physical plant, plus working with a seasoned officer. Periodic in-service training that includes crowd control, the use of tear gas and elements of psychology is provided to each officer on a semi-annual basis.

Jakarta Expects David Kennedy

Jakarta, Indonesia

Roving U.S. Ambassador David M. Kennedy is expected in Jakarta by the middle of the month. Foreign Minister Adam Malik said yesterday.

Kennedy will have talks with Indonesian leaders on bilateral and international matters and sign an agreement on the rescheduling of Indonesia's debts to the United States. Malik said.

Reuters

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mates and that there are no notorious turpentine farms or torture cells. Go ahead, take your best shot."

Green Uniform

In January, with my identity as a Chronicle reporter known only to Warden Louis Nelson and a handful of top prison officials, I put on the forest green uniform which all the prison's officers wear.

"Man, things sure must be cold out on the streets for a man to come in here as a bull," said the black inmate barber who gave me my regulation haircut — a trimming shorter than the inmate's approved hair style.

"You going to tighten up the screws around here and be tough on us?" he asked, his razor gliding lightly over the back of my neck as I sat alone — in uniform — in the prison barber shop.

"Man, I'm putting in time in this joint just like you, so let's hold our mud," I said, using one of Procunier's favorite expressions.

The barber cackled. "You're going to do just fine around here, officer," he said.

The First Day

The first day was spent in an abbreviated indoctrination of the oldest prison in the State.

My cover story was that I had transferred to San Quentin from a prison in Southern California after spending about six months there. Prior to that, I said, I had spent 20 years in the Marine Corps, mainly working in briggs and stockades, retiring as a Master Gunnery Sergeant.

Warden Nelson, gave me the same talk he gives all "fish bulls," or new officers.

"A prison is a lawless jungle and one of your jobs is to protect some inmates from other inmates. Most people don't understand this," Nelson said.

"In the beginning you'll find this is dreary," monotonous work. We live with our failures, and we are not judged by our successes.

"Inmates are not going to love you; you're in the wrong field for that. But perhaps you'll be able to help one of them stay out of prison and when a thing like that happens you know your work has been worthwhile."

Watching Them

On that morning there were 3352 men behind the prison's concrete walls, and there were 285 of us, spread out over three shifts.

None of us who worked inside the prison carried a gun, a Billy, or even tear gas.

Instead, we were armed only with a little silver whistle, a notebook and a pencil. In the event of a fight, I was told, the officer blew his whistle.

This was the signal for the armed gunmen who walk high above on narrow catwalks and cover the yard or other places of activity.

It was said they could jack a live round of .30-30 ammunition into their carbines before the last note of the whistle died.

"You blow that little old whistle, boy," said the Georgia Cracker, one of my mentors. "And then you take off like a striped ass ape, for surely the stuff will commence to come down. And the cons know this, too, and if you blow that thing it will be like a sea of blue grain falling down to the ground, 'cause they don't want to get hit by a live round anymore than you do."

The Cracker was a retired Navy chief petty officer who had been working at San Quentin for ten years. Despite a notable lack of academic credentials — he told me his high school diploma was



Guard looks down on the industrial area of the San Quentin yard, where fear rules

bogus — he was one of the best penologists I was to meet.

On a tour of the catwalks more than 100 feet above the prison the Cracker said:

"This is a crappy old joint, see. It is likely to crumble apart, and it was built in bits and pieces ever since 1850. It is a bitch to watch and it has far too many men in it. It is the Skid Row of the prison system."

The Snuff

He dipped a quid of Copenhagen snuff beneath his lower lip, thought to spit, tested the wind and then decided against it.

"You won't have no trouble with the inmates if you treat each one like a man. At first out in that big old yard they will all look alike.

"But after a week or so you'll likely start remembering names and faces. You'll know which are dangerous and which are just mouthy. You'll find out which ones you can trust and which ones will snitch off on you to the Captain if you do them a kindness.

"A lot of people on the outside think we whip these inmates and stomp them something terrible. But you figure it out yourself. If you whip a man on Monday you may be out in that yard with him Tuesday.

San Quentin Incident

Inmate Stabbed--Won't Talk

A Death Row inmate at San Quentin prison was stabbed yesterday, but true to prison tradition, isn't talking about the incident.

Prison officials reported that about 1:25 p.m. guards saw Milton L. McShane walking around the exercise area as if he were injured.

They questioned him, and he showed them a puncture wound in his chest. McShane was taken to the prison hospital, where he was reported in good condition, but refused to say how he was stabbed.

Officers found a seven-inch bed spring, hued down to a sharp point and attached to a

"Now shanks (knives) ain't all that hard to come by in here and if you've been messing with a man he's gonna plant a shank right in you.

"Inmates could take over this joint in five minutes if conditions was as bad as they say on the outside. But they ain't; both of us — officers and the inmates — we go along with The System and aside from a handful of peckerhead troublemakers, we both do right fine."

We moved to a gun tower where a gnomish officer beamed, rubbed his hands and put aside his carbine long enough to pour us a cup of coffee.

The Cracker took his black. He drank it with the quid of Copenhagen held firmly in place.

"One time I brought a Los Angeles detective on a tour of this old joint," he reflected. "He got out in that big yard around noon, see, with maybe 2000 inmates milling around and only three officers to be seen. Naturally, he wasn't wearing his gun."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"The Cracker added a pinch of snuff to his quid. 'He like to wet his pants,' he chuckled.

"We near had to carry him out, he was so scared."

"Tomorrow," he said with a smile, "we'll see how you do down there."

Tomorrow: Which convict has the knife?

Moral Stand Against Lust

London

Anglican church members yesterday carried signs reading "Down with Lust" outside a theater showing the American films "Moo Breckenridge" and "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls."

Said the protest organizers the Rev. Edward Stride: "These films are terrible in harm."

Associated Press