

Working the cells where three died

By William Recktenwald

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I WAS WALKING the same floors that three other guards had walked before they were stabbed and beaten to death less than three months earlier.

This was the Pontiac prison's North Cell House, and all around were eerie reminders of the July 22 riot. Only recently had plastic been put up to cover the broken windows. The four-tier cell house was lit by only a handful of bulbs; there should have been 10 times as many, but no one had replaced the smashed lights or repaired the wiring.

The North Cell House is only a backdrop for this story. It's a story about prison guards, one of whom may already be marked for violence by inmates at Pontiac.

It is also a story of contrasts. Most people are aware that the inmate population of a large prison is made up of every type of person and personality imaginable. Yet the prison guards are often portrayed with a sameness that

Reporter William Recktenwald, who took a job in the state prison at Pontiac to view conditions there, is no stranger to "inside" investigations. As chief investigator for the Better Government Association before joining The Tribune, he worked undercover in probes of the nursing-home industry, ambulance services, and vote fraud. This is the second article in a series from the assign-

ment he describes as his toughest yet.

could lead to the conclusion that they all perform the same way.

NOTHING COULD be further from the truth, I learned in two nights' work as a guard in Pontiac's most infamous cell house.

Despite its recent history, the North Cell House seemed a welcome change from working in the segregation unit. The most noticeable difference, when I reported for duty, was the absence of the constant hysteria that seemed to



characterize the segregation section. A number of inmates were watching television, using mirrors to share the few sets around. Some were reading. Others were studying chess boards and calling out their moves to men in nearby cells.

I was paired with a stocky, veteran guard nicknamed Cadillac, about 30, who was soon holding forth on how to survive at Pontiac.

"Remember, they'll kill you in a min-

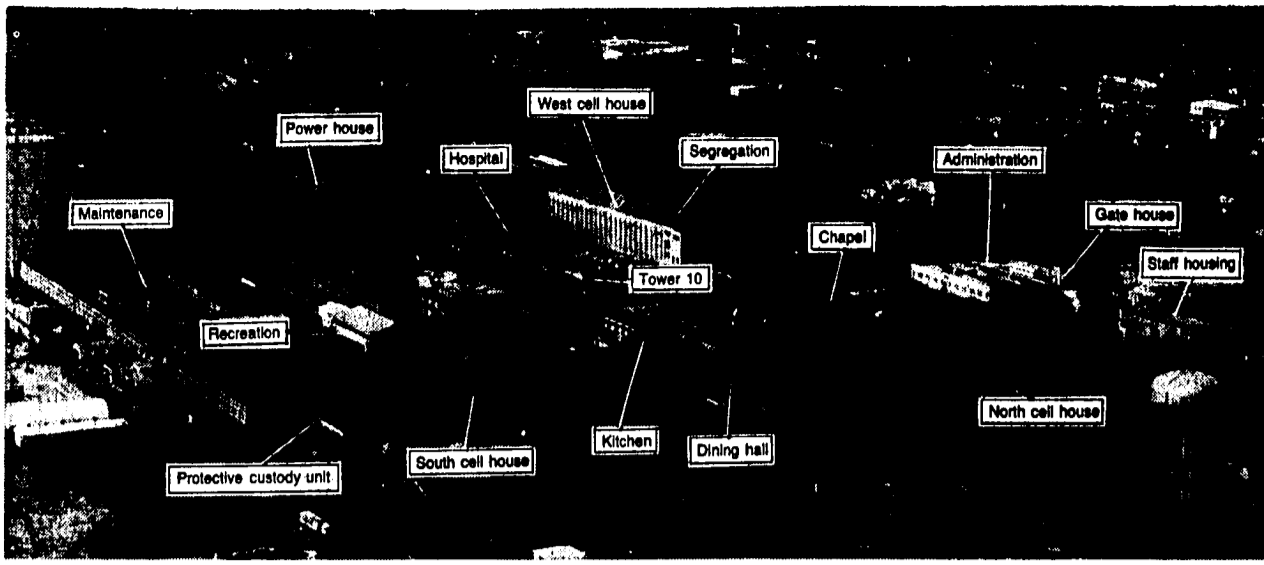
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Tribune Photo by Ernie Cox Jr.

Reporter Recktenwald: "The stories some of the guards cherished most were those of inmate abuse."

The Pontiac Correctional Center



Tribune photo by Ernie Cox Jr.; Tribune Graphic

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ute," he warned. "That's all they want. They'll kill anybody in a minute.

"So you treat 'em like dogs. Just like dogs. If you treat 'em like anything other than dogs, they're gonna take advantage of you."

CADILLAC AND I were assigned to serve dinner. Mealtime in prison is always special; in a prison under dead-lock, with men confined to their 9-by-5-foot cells 24 hours a day, it takes on even more significance. It's the only thing to break up the monotony of the day.

That night we were serving what the inmates considered the best meal on the prison menu—fried fish, potatoes, peas and carrots, and chocolate-chip cookies. With that on the food cart, we figured to have very little trouble.

But Cadillac seemed determined to start some as he wheeled the cart briskly up the gangways.

The cells in the North Cell House have no openings through which a dinner plate can be passed, so paper plates were

mine. At that moment, Cadillac represented the only real danger on the tier. He seemed dazed. His body began to tremble.

"Those dirty ———," Cadillac was mumbling. "Those dirty ———. I won't feed them anymore." All the while he was dishing out food at the remaining cells, overflowing the plates with half a dozen pieces of fish or more and piling on the cookies, to the delight of the inmates.

At this point I wanted only to finish the feeding and get away from this man. I had already decided I would refuse to work with him anymore.

As we left the last tier, Cadillac told me he was never going to feed those men again but was going to come back later and beat a few of them up. There's no evidence that he did, but he returned in full riot gear later in the evening to strut around the North Cell House.

WE REPORTED to the keeper, the chief guard of the house, and Cadillac told him there had been trouble. "You'd better write a report to cover your ass," said the keeper, a sergeant.

When Cadillac had left, I told the sergeant my view of what had happened on the gallery and said the inmates hadn't behaved so badly.

"They didn't eh?" he said without surprise. I got the impression that he knew Cadillac pretty well.

Over a few beers later that night, a young guard told me that Cadillac had a reputation as an officer who could walk into a perfectly calm situation and rile it up.

Some inmates told me much the same—Cadillac was trouble. "Some day we're going to get that Cadillac," one of them told me.

MY OTHER PARTNER in the North Cell House was named Grant. The night we served dinner together, we were dishing out a beef stew that had the consistency of a thin soup. There was so little meat and so many carrots that it had an orange coloring.

The stew was so watery it was hard to keep on a paper plate. Grant would carefully fold a plate in the middle, then turn up the edge to ensure that the stuff didn't drip on the inmates or in their cells when he passed it through the bars. At each cell, he'd chat amiably with the men, assuring them that the stew would taste better than it looked. I felt like adding, "It would have to."

As we were leaving one cell, an inmate yelled that I had forgotten the cookies for his cellmate. I gave them to him.

Grant stopped the cart and beckoned me to the cell.

"Do you see any 'cellie' [cellmate] in there?" he asked.

All I could see was one man with an ear-to-ear grin. Grant started laughing, and so did I. The inmate had conned me into giving him an extra cookie ration, but it felt good that I was enough of a "fish" to make that prisoner's entire day.

THAT NIGHT'S feeding went without a nasty incident. I knew there were other guards like Grant working at Pontiac and quietly doing a good job. I admired them. Under the worst conditions, working for modest pay, they were able to maintain a semblance of humanity.

One who stood out for his unique approach was a soft-spoken, balding guard named Carlile, who presided over Pontiac's Protective Custody Unit.

"I like to treat each man like a gentleman," he said. "Whenever I can, I do what I can for him, as much as I can."

But when an inmate didn't respond in kind, Carlile wasn't above taking care of the problems with what he considered good jailhouse justice. In a conversation with a rookie guard who had been the target of a cup of urine and cleanser, Carlile explained how he would have handled the incident.

CARLILE SAID he'd go home and fill a big jar with the most noxious creation possible. He told with relish how he'd shake it up every day and make sure it had fermented before bringing it to the prison.

"I'd bring the jar here one day and go up to that cell with the top off," he said. "Then I'd say, 'Come here for a minute. I have to talk to you.' And just as he got up to the bars, I'd throw it right in his face."

Carlile saw it as doing to others as they did to him. Too many other guards appeared to have a more indiscriminate response to any inmate trouble. I listened at dinner one night as officers from the segregation unit talked of some trouble they'd had that evening and how they'd used three cans of MACE and a canister of tear gas to knock one inmate out.

"Hit him square in the face with a stream of MACE," said one. "Then he went right down. You should have seen that place. For five cells on either side of this guy the people were almost knocked out."

I QUICKLY LEARNED that the stories some of the guards cherished and chortled over most were those of inmate abuse. I don't know if the stories were true or not, but some guards obviously enjoyed sitting around and talking about "how it used to be."

One story was of a guard who would roam around the West Cell House, where the cells have peepholes, and squirt MACE in "just to rile the men up." Another guard was legendary for dragging out a fire hose and blasting cells with water.

There were also stories of the tower guards. One, described as a crack shot, had reportedly said: "We ought to let 'em all loose in the yard. Anybody gets over that fence, I'll serve his time out."

I might have dismissed such tales if I hadn't worked with Cadillac. But he seemed capable of dirty tricks, and it disgusted me.

I HAD A different perspective, of course. I hadn't been working that Saturday in July when the guards were murdered. I hadn't had a daily dose of hot water and cleanser thrown in my eyes. If I had, perhaps it would be different.

But there was no doubt that I would rather be a Grant than a Cadillac. I started keeping busy by running errands

for the inmates. There was a never-ending demand for little favors like sharpening a pencil, providing a light for a cigaret, or helping someone write a letter. It wasn't much, but it was appreciated, and it made me begin to feel good about being there.

When I went out of my way to take some phonograph records from one cell to another, one of the inmates called me over several times during my shift to repeat his thanks.

AFTER WE had distributed state cigarets throughout the house one night, the keeper told me not to hand out matches. "——— them. They can wait till tomorrow," he said. That seemed a petty, pointless deprivation, and I decided to pass the matches out anyway.

As I moved along one of the North Cell House tiers, an inmate's voice kept rising over the din, shouting, "Hey, stupid."

I ignored him until I passed in front of his cell and he shouted loudly, "You with the glasses, stupid."

I stopped and asked, "What did you call me?"

"I called you stupid," he said without hesitation.

"What are you doing tonight at 11 o'clock?" I asked him.

HE SEEMED PUZZLED, then said, "I ain't doin' anything. I'm gonna be right here."

I let it sink in for a few seconds, then told him: "Well, while you're locked up here in the joint, I'm going out the front

In most cells, bars are so close together that food must be dished onto paper plates and the plates folded in half to pass to the inmates. There are no openings at the bottom of the doors to slide food through.

gate and have a couple of beers. And you're calling me stupid?"

He thought for a while and began to laugh. I asked him what he had wanted. He said he needed matches, and I gave him some.

"Thank you, officer," he said.

THESE ROUTINE duties were interrupted when the keeper asked me to assist in something distinctly not routine. The deadlock on one tier had malfunctioned. It's a lock system that stretches through half a tier, with bar locks that drop into a section of cells at the turn of a crank. The crank had become stuck in the open position. If the inmates became aware of it, they could probably break out of their cells.

The keeper told me to go on the walkway and act as though nothing special was happening, but my presence got a number of inmates asking what was up. I told them nothing and grabbed a broom in hopes of looking a bit less conspicuous.

A lock expert arrived, but he couldn't move the crank to the deadlock position. I kept sweeping. A few minutes later, on signal, five officers poured onto the tier and began slapping padlocks on the

cells. In less than half a minute, the cells were once again locked.

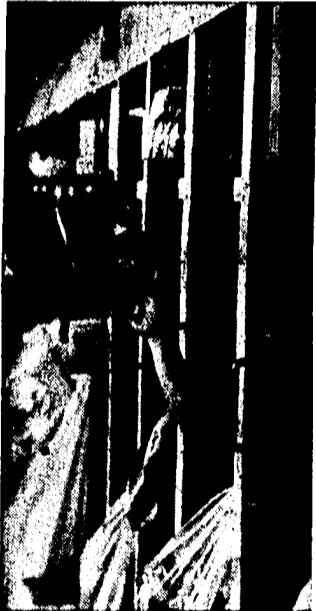
ANOTHER EXPERIENCE in the North Cell House was my first inmate count. Each night the guards count the prison's inmate population. When the count checks out, a whistle blows to let the town know that all is well at Pontiac prison. Inmates were fond of fouling up the count in any way possible.

Another rookie and I were assigned the North Cell House count, and we couldn't find the 74th prisoner on one tier. The entire prison was waiting for our count, and three other officers were eventually sent to help. The tier was hysterical with laughter as the five of us marched up and down, counting—and sounding very much like "Sesame Street"—until we all agreed on 74.

I was told by a guard that the entire 3-to-11 p.m. shift had been held over until 6:30 a.m. a few weeks earlier because the count didn't come out right.

"The whistle didn't ever blow that night," he said. "And a lot of people in town didn't sleep. Ever since the riot, they're real scared."

Tuesday: The filth and food waste at Pontiac.



Tribune Photo by Ernie Cox Jr.

To see inmates in neighboring cells or persons approaching in the hallways, plastic mirrors are held outside the bars. It's also the only way many inmates can watch television.

used. They had to be folded and slipped through the bars.

AT EACH CELL, Cadillac threw some food on a plate and folded it carelessly so that everything slid together and oozed out the ends. Then he'd ram it through the bars with maximum spillage, all the time keeping up a monolog of insults and curses aimed at the inmates.

If they asked for more food, he'd say, "——— you. This is all you're getting."

Pretty soon he had the inmates going. "What's the matter, Cadillac? You have too much wine last night, Cadillac? Look at that dirty shirt you're wearing, Cadillac. You drink too much last night, Cadillac?"

There was no affection in their taunts. The inmates were working him over.

FINALLY, on the fourth tier, a couple of inmates complained that Cadillac had dumped the cookies in with the fish on the food cart. This took on great importance because cookies are highly valued in the prison.

"Cadillac, what you doin' putting those cookies in the fish?" mocked one inmate. "Cadillac, that's just terrible."

Another snaked a hand out of his cell and took some cookies from the tray. Cadillac quickly picked up a serving spoon and began beating on the inmate's hand. The man's cellmate grabbed a broom and began poking the guard. While they battled, the first man raced to the sink to fill a container with water.

Several cookies had fallen on the floor, and Cadillac stomped them into crumbs. Then he scooped up a plate of peas and carrots and was about to throw the food into the cell when I pushed him away.

"Officer," I said. "Be cool. Let's keep going." It seemed absurd that in my first week on the job I was calming a veteran guard. But I kept remembering the only formal instruction I'd received the day I began work: "Whatever happens, don't lose your cool."

I WAS FURIOUS at Cadillac for losing control—and determined not to lose

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