

# 'Just keep 'em locked up, that's all'

By William Recktenwald

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**FOOD WAS PILED everywhere.** That made life easy for the mice and roaches I'd seen around. The odor of rotted food filled the air. Dirty utensils were scattered about. The floor looked and felt as though it had been waxed with slime.

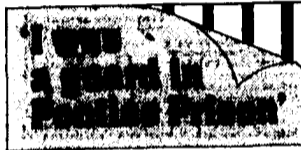
In my week as a guard at the Pontiac prison, I had become used to scenes like this one on the cell-house tiers. The inmates had been locked in their 9-by-5-foot cells for almost three months, ever since the July 22 riot in which three guards were killed. Frustrated by the "deadlock," the inmates had retaliated by hurling food and excrement from their cells, fouling their own environment.

But this time I wasn't on a tier. I was in a place to which only prison em-

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ment he describes as his toughest yet.

ployes had access—the kitchen, where the meals I served to inmates were prepared. It wasn't just the filth that shocked me. Waste cans around the kitchen were filled with cartons of bread, the loaves unopened. Full boxes of cookies were dumped in the trash.



**THE SIGHT** of the wasted cookies, in particular, made me sick. It had taken less than two hours on the job for me to learn that they were the most prized food in the prison. Cookies were so precious that inmates would beg, lie, threaten, do almost anything to get an extra handful. And here they were being

tossed out.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Throughout my week at Pontiac I had witnessed incredible waste of food, some of it simply because serving the inmates meals in their cells was so difficult. The prison is ancient, and most of the cell doors weren't constructed with openings through which a plate or tray could be passed. So we used paper plates and folded them to slip dinner through the bars.

It was extremely messy. The Jell-O would be thoroughly mixed in with the carrots and chop suey, and the sloppier foods would drip all over the place. Guards often wound up wearing parts of the dinner on their uniforms; a lot of them avoided the problem by not serving all the food prepared by the kitchen.

IN SEVERAL nights of serving din-

ner, I saw guards discard stewed tomatoes, greens, cole slaw, and tartar sauce. Food in quantities to serve an entire cell house, perhaps 300 men, was simply thrown out.

"What they throw out in this place in one week would feed the whole town of Pontiac for a month," one guard told me. "It's just a crime."

The guards also preferred not to serve the inmates any beverages, which were apt to be thrown back at them. In my first six nights at Pontiac, I saw no beverages served except to a handful of inmates who were on special diets and received milk. My last night on the job, we served the men unsweetened tea.

I overheard a couple of guards joking about a time when some inmates had been complaining to a group of visiting lawyers about never receiving anything to drink. According to the story, some

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Gov. Thompson says he is not surprised by disclosures of conditions at "deadlocked" Pontiac prison, and defends the hiring of reporter William Recktenwald without a check of his credentials. Page 10.

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guards heard the remarks and slipped off to mix up a big pitcher of tea.

"Just as this guy was bitching about getting nothing to drink, they walked up with this big pitcher and said, 'Hey, you want some tea?'" one guard related with glee.

IF THERE WAS a lot of food wasted, there was a lot more that deserved to be thrown out. Many of the meals I served turned my stomach just to look at them. One dinner was a watery beef

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# Pontiac prison: Filth and laxity

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stew with so many carrots and so little beef that it could have passed for carrot soup. Another time I served a vile-looking chop suey, which was poured over a hard lump of rice.

Then there was the evening we should have thrown out the cole slaw but served it. It smelled rancid, and I don't believe a single inmate ate it. They just dumped it in plastic trash bags or on the walkways, so the entire cell house smelled of it.

Food wasn't the only thing that didn't always get to the inmates as prescribed. The same happened with medication.

After work one night, a medic told me that 58 of the 61 drug containers sent to the North Cell House that evening had arrived empty. The quantity of drugs missing or stolen was so large that the warden had called the prison hospital to ask what happened.

DESPITE HIS inquiry, there hadn't been a shakedown of the staff in that cell house. The medic said he often heard reports that officers were trafficking in drugs inside the prison. The shakedowns of guards were so infrequent and so half-hearted that there was practically no risk, he said.

I was searched—if you can call it that—only once. A lieutenant asked me to empty my pockets and patted me down in a cursory way. My cigarettes never left my pocket; the pack could easily have been filled with pills, and the lieutenant would never have known. I suspect that a well-placed gun would have gone undetected as well. It was this kind of security that permitted me to bring a camera into the prison.

It wouldn't have been too difficult to obtain some drugs at Pontiac. As it hap-

pened, I wouldn't even have had to steal them when distributing medications to the inmates. On one of my shifts, I was assigned to the hospital.

AS SOON AS I walked in, the officer there handed me the keys to the hospital unit. In our orientation lecture, we had been told that no guard would hold such keys until he'd been on the job six months; I hadn't even been there for six days. And this proved to be no fluke—a few nights later, I was given the keys and left in charge of Pontiac's Protective Custody Unit (the quarters for inmates who have requested additional protection).

Everything was calm in the hospital. A few inmates were waiting to see the prison psychiatrist, and the medics were treating a guard who had a small puncture wound in his lower back where an inmate had struck him with a broken light bulb.

The two medics on duty were named Bill and Jerry, but inmates called them Gage and DeSoto, for the heroes of the TV show "Emergency."

"They don't give us problems," Jerry said. "They know we're here to help them."

OVER BEERS later, they confided that the inmates, especially the troublemakers, could only count on so much medical attention. The medics seemed a bit embarrassed as they explained the double standard.

"I know it's not very professional, but sometimes we just don't take as good care of these guys as we should," Jerry said.

What this meant, apparently, was that sometimes the medics would be called to treat a "real bad one" whom the guards worked over, perhaps with

MACE, tear gas, or well-placed whacks with a riot stick until the inmate was urinating blood.

Then, while the medics worked inside the cells the guards might tell them to hurry it up or they would have to leave the medics alone with this angry, crazed prisoner without a guard.

I got the message. It's an endless war in prison, and you have to choose sides. You're either with the guards or against them; there's no room for Florence Nightingales.

BUT EVEN WHEN they wanted to, the medics could do only so much.

We were talking one night about a guard who had dropped dead from a heart attack while working in the gatehouse. I told them that a likely candidate for an emergency call was a 25-year veteran tower guard I'd seen in the dining room. My father had suffered from emphysema for years, and this man appeared to have the same affliction.

"If you ever get a call for this guy's tower," I said, "be sure to bring the oxygen with you."

"We don't have any oxygen," Bill said. "If anybody needs oxygen, they're in bad trouble."

DURING MY NIGHT on hospital duty, we received a call that a "bad case" was being hauled down from the segregation unit, where he'd gone berserk. He was a raving madman, we were warned.

He arrived twenty minutes later. I couldn't believe this was the inmate we had been talking about. He was a short, scrawny youth wearing cutoffs and a T-shirt. His face wore a hangdog look, and he appeared to be whimpering as he walked quietly between two guards.

The medics had readied a shot of thorazine to knock him out, and Bill planned to "hit him with it just as he comes in the door." I had been instructed to lock the entry door from the outside to guarantee security.

After locking myself out, I watched through the bars as the inmate received the shot almost gratefully and meekly walked to a hospital cell.

With the "madman" safely disposed of, the other guards and the medics broke for dinner, leaving me as the only guard in the hospital. With the keys they'd handed me, I had access to the drug cabinets.

I SAT DOWN at a desk and began reading the daily report for the hospital ward. On Aug. 4, a shakedown of the inmates there had resulted in the confiscation of "a needle syringe, brass type knuckles, one iron pipe, 1 oz. supposed heroin, 1 gallon of homemade booze," according to the report.

On Aug. 21, the reporting officer had described the hospital ward as "a complete madhouse."

As I was reading the reports, I was startled to see a tall husky inmate walking casually down the hospital corridor. He seemed friendly and appeared to know more about the place than I did, so I did nothing.

Still, it made me uncomfortable. The institution was supposed to be on dead-lock, with all inmates in their cells 24 hours a day. Here was a guy rambling around the hospital at will.

FINALLY I became curious enough to walk to the hospital kitchen where he'd been heading. I found him cooking some bacon, and he gave me an amiable wave.

I later learned from the medics that he was one of a few especially trustworthy inmates who worked and lived in the hospital. The cells they lived in didn't have toilets, so they were left unlocked.

An inmate in one of the hospital "quiet cells," which were luxurious by Pontiac standards, called me over. He wanted to chat. He had been brought there three days before, when he slashed five large gashes across his arm. Previously, he'd done the same thing to his other arm, he said, explaining that it was all an attempt to get transferred out of Pontiac to Menard, the prison hospital for mental patients. He had only four months left on his sentence but feared that at Pontiac he'd have to spend them locked in a cell.

"It was worth it," he said, displaying his stitch-covered arm. "I got my transfer. You just don't know what it's like to be locked up in one of those cages."

HE MOTIONED toward the cell where the inmate who'd gone "berserk" in segregation was already asleep from the effects of the thorazine. "Just look what that guy did to get out," he said.

At that moment, I could feel nothing but pity. This was a place where men would rather be taken for lunatics than spend another minute in the cells.

When the medics returned, I asked them if some of the inmates' problems might not be caused by being confined 24 hours a day with another man in too small a space. Was some of it simply acute claustrophobia?

"It doesn't matter," one said. "Nobody cares what their real problems are. They just keep them locked up. That's all."

Wednesday: A look ahead—the new warden talks about the Pontiac prison's future.



Telephone Photo by Ernie Fox Jr.

By Pontiac standards, this cell in the segregation unit is luxurious. "It's a guaranteed single," said one official.