

Clipping in Space Below

Just Another Prisoner! An Interview With James Earl Ray

By WILLARD YARBROUGH
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PETROS, March 26 — Why does James Earl Ray avoid reporters? "Because," he told this reporter late yesterday, "my lawyer told me interviews could jeopardize my appeals to overturn my conviction, since something I might say could be misinterpreted or lifted out of context."

Then why did the convicted assassin of Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King in Memphis some three years ago grant me an exclusive interview for this newspaper? The first one, incidentally, since his apprehension in England as he attempted to board a plane to Spain in his flight from America. He permitted the interview, as some 20 newsmen and television cameramen on annual open house day at Brushy Mountain State Prison here gnashed their teeth outside, because I asked him. It was a simple thing.

PULLED COVER OVER HEAD

Earlier, during a special visit here by this writer and WBIR-TV newsmen Carl Warner, Ray lay on his cot behind his locked door in Cellblock B and pulled covers over his head. He feigned sleep, but even then I spoke to him and got silence in return.

This time, as others of the media interviewed his cellblock mates about the most celebrated inmate among the 360 here, I merely knelt at his cell, told the again-covered form who I was, that I would like to interview him now or later, and to check with others about my credentials.

Fifteen minutes later, Chaplain Herbert Carlock Jr., who pastors Oak Ridge's First Cumberland Presbyterian Church, sought me out in the prison yard, said Ray wanted to talk with me and nobody else. Rev. Carlock obtained a master key and we were in Ray's cell within a minute.

WORKS SIX HOURS EACH DAY

Here's what Ray had to say:
"I decided to trust you so that I could let

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people outside know that I wasn't crazy. Some people have thought so, since I always hide when the press come around.

"I do not cause trouble here. I work six hours a day, seven days a week. My job is serving food to my cellmates, which requires two hours at each meal, and to housekeep in our cellblock.

"Once a day I get outside the cellblock—our doors to individual cells are always open—and go to the gymnasium for exercise. I do this soon after arising around 5:30 a.m."

What does he do in-between?

"I write memos to my lawyer, Bernard Finsterwald, in Washington. He was down to see me about appeals of my conviction two weeks ago. I read Knoxville newspapers. I read magazines. I watch television."

ASLEEP BY 8 EVERY NIGHT

His 11-inch set is suspended above his cot, and lights and electricity are turned off at 11 p.m. weekdays, later on weekends. Ray couldn't care less.

"I'm in bed and asleep by 8 every night," he said. "I must sack in early because I'm up at 5:30 a.m. next day, and when I finish working and exercising I'm beat."

Warden Robert Moore and Ray's cellmates term him a "model prisoner." One longtimer in Cellblock B said cellmates don't ask Ray about the assassination that rocked the world. "We don't pry into his affairs, he doesn't talk about the slaying, and he doesn't pry into our personal affairs," said a Ray next-door neighbor.

On one cot in Ray's cell was a portable typewriter, furnished by lawyer Finsterwald. Ray is sparing with stamps and paper, since he earns only 35 cents daily for his six-hour work

chores. But he insists he wants for nothing, points out he doesn't smoke, and that he is "just another prisoner and am treated as one." He gets no special favors, expects none.

HAS GAINED SINCE TRANSFER

Now 42 and weighing around 175 pounds, he said he had gained 20 pounds since being transferred to Tennessee's maximum security prison here a year ago from the main penitentiary at Nashville.

Ray is supremely confident that his lawyer will win his case eventually, whether exoneration via a new trial or whatever, but he steadfastly declines to discuss his predicament on advice of counsel.

He is, nonetheless, somewhat nervous but quite calm when he explains he has no fear of bodily harm from fellow inmates—even the blacks whose onetime hero he stands convicted of slaying.

"Prisoners here, white or black, aren't concerned about such things," Ray said. "All of us are concerned about day-to-day existence and perhaps the day when we won't be locked up anymore."

URNS BACK ON NEWSMEN

By now prison guard Richard Davis, who had carried the message that Ray would talk with me, entered the cell and sat down. Behind him came the press. And Ray's only media interview was over.

He rose slowly and turned his back on them. TV cameraman Warner got one answer to one question: "I cannot talk with you because my lawyer said I could not discuss the case with the press."

State Corrections Commissioner Mark Luttrell suggested the jammed cellblock hallway be cleared, since Ray didn't want to be interviewed, and that's what happened. But earlier, Warner and a Nashville television crew let their cameras whirr as Ray lay under the covers: WBIR-TV will show its strip at 6 p. m. Saturday.



JAMES EARL RAY



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