

D.C. Prisoners

By Haynes Johnson
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Armed prisoners, vowing freedom or death, seized 10 hostages before dawn yesterday and transformed the ancient D.C. jail into a tense conflict between convicts and Washington officialdom.

By nightfall, after hours of ultimatums, maneuvering and negotiations, the prisoners still held their hostages—Kenneth Hardy, Washington's department of corrections director, and 10 prison guards. But as the day wore on, they had changed their demands and attempted to take their hostages to the police and prison officials.

Hopes were raised for a solution to the long impasse when a bus carrying Hardy, six convicts, Del. Walter E. Fauntroy (D.D.C.) and several others left the jail late in the afternoon for U.S. District Court.

In the words of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm (D-N.Y.), who took an active part in the negotiations, the convicts were going to court because, "They want to go before a judge and actually tell him what goes on in prison."

She added: "I expect some amelioration if the conditions are heard out."

She also said the convicts told her

"they won't harm the hostages. They are not interested in hurting anyone. Once their grievances are aired, the hostages probably will be released."

Once at the court, one of the prisoners called out: "You want to search us? Search us in the courtroom." He then stripped to the skin. The other prisoners followed suit.

The plan at that time was to release the prisoners and Hardy back to the jail. Then another 20 prisoners would take the same bus ride to the court and present their demands.

For the prisoners, the court action coming as it did late in the day was a significant change in tactics. They had

Hold 10 Hostages

begun the long ordeal at the jail by issuing an ultimatum with only two alternatives—freedom or death. They threatened repeatedly to kill Hardy if their demands were not met.

As the day progressed and the prisoner demands escalated, the nature of the negotiators also changed. From first, dealing exclusively with Hardy and police officials, the prisoners were later talking with such people as Mrs. Chisholm; Marion Barry, D.C. school board president; Fauntroy, Julian Bond, and Charles Duncan, aides of Mayor Walter E. Washington; and Julian Tepper

who helped negotiate the Attica prison riot.

Mayor Washington was in constant touch with the situation from his command post downtown. Although the prisoners had demanded to see him, Police Chief Jerry V. Wilson said he did not want the mayor exposed to possible violence.

The prisoners—all young men, and all blacks—seized control of Cellblock 1 in the jail sometime between 1 and 2 a.m. yesterday. One-half of their cellblock is reserved exclusively for prisoners who have been placed on what prison authorities call "deadlock"—either for violation of prison regulations

or because they are considered dangerous or disruptive to other inmates.

Once in control of the cellblock, where they then held nine prison guards, the convicts demanded to see Hardy and William L. Claiborne, a Washington Post reporter who has written extensively about jail conditions.

Hardy and Claiborne came to the jail, talked to the prisoners, and then Claiborne was released to act as go-between. Hardy remained a hostage.

Other hostages were Lt. Charles Wren, Isaac Webb, Wilbert Roberts, John Crause, Bernard Holmes, James Saunders, David Michelow, and Crawford Lowery.

Police said all but Wren appeared to have been uninjured. Wren was struck in the nose and head.

The tone of the remarks earlier in the day was consistently angry and emotional. The prisoners said repeatedly they were prepared to die. It was freedom or nothing. They stressed that their act was one of revolution, it was not a riot.

In their words, they touched on a whole litany of problems, not only in the D.C. jail but in other prisons across America. They referred to the bloody Attica uprising of September, 1971, of the deaths of the Jackson brothers, George and Jonathon, at Soledad prison in California, of wrongs in the courts and in American society.

Their action was a new reminder that the prison problem has flared into acts of violence and disturbances throughout the nation in the past few years. These conditions in turn have led prison guards—including these at

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THE WASHINGTON POST

JAIL FROM A1

and the prisoners shouted back their original demands—freedom.

Hardy was pulled back out of sight. One of the convicts shouted: "We're going to cut his head off if we don't get what we want. His head is coming off."

It was a day of contrasts, of autumn beauty and prison terror, of death threats and attempts at peaceful negotiations. Before the day had ended, virtually everyone in Washington from public officials to private citizens had been caught up in the minute-by-minute drama unfolding at the old D.C. jail.

The jail itself personified the contrasts. It is a massive and ugly building constructed of dull red bricks and sandstone a century ago. Surrounding it are two chain-link fences topped with strands of barbed wire. It is sandwiched in between the D.C. General Hospital and the D.C. Armory, not far from the stadium where the Redskins play to cheering capacity crowds.

But the jail is a place apart from the normal life of Washington. Until yesterday, it was removed from the general public consciousness.

Yet while the tense hours were passing at the jail, they were reminders of the daily life of Washington.

One of the things that has been going on in Washington is the constructing of the monumental statue of the east steps of the Capitol that will serve as the inaugural stamp for the next President of the United States.

On Pennsylvania Avenue, halfway between the Capitol and the White House, the new Federal Bureau of Investigation, the new FBI, is a symbol of modernity and order, just as the ancient jail represents another kind of symbol that serves as a basic pillar of the system.

But it was the prison situation, not the monumental statue, that attracted attention yesterday.

Earlier in the day, the crowds that lined the streets around the jail had been good natured with only an occasional undertone of ill will. As police contingents marched two abreast in a long column, others on duty, people, the ropes, the crowd broke into a chant and a few jeers. "That man in the white shirt is team no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10."

By 10:30 a.m., the mood changed. As night approached, a reservation of some 100 many of them, the crowd began throwing against police lines some bottles and other objects. A crowd of three young men were arrested.

The life-and-death drama at the massive, century-old jail came after a number of recent incidents that once again thrust the prison problem onto center stage in the nation's capital.

Just nine days ago, eight prisoners, including three of the most widely known criminals in Washington, escaped through an attic skylight and then fled after sliding five stories down a fire hose and climbing two chain-link fences topped with barbed wire. Among those who escaped was one prisoner convicted of murder and three others indicted on murder charges.

It was the largest breakout in the history of the jail.

In the aftermath of the escape, three guards were relieved of duty and a U.S. grand jury and special team of federal and District investigators began a priority investigation. Those prisoners are still at large.

The jail break followed an emotional and bitter five-day strike last month by the 1,000 inmates of the Lorton reformatory, Washington's correctional facility located in suburban Fairfax County.

Lorton prisoners ended their strike only three days before the D.C. jail escape. They won concessions on about two dozen grievances and then gave top corrections officials a standing ovation.

The concessions focused principally on such things as improved food service, more medical care, reforms in mailing procedure, notification and representation in disciplinary action cases.

Earlier this year the conditions of the D.C. jail were the subject of an emotional and controversial report by the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU report charged that the jail is a "bathhouse of man's inhumanity to man." It also spoke of brutality by guards, inhuman living conditions, lack of proper medical care, over-crowding, idleness and infestation by rats and roaches.

But none of these events contained all the elements of yesterday's open rebellion at the jail.

What the prisoners repeatedly called their revolution began between 1 and 2 o'clock in the morning when the five corrections officers were seized in Cell block 1. How the prisoners seized control, and how they obtained at least one gun they have employed throughout the long ordeal, is not clear. Only the inmates and the hostages know that.

The first indication of trouble came about 3 a.m. when prisoners passed a note through a peephole in a steel door leading to their cellblock. The peephole, measuring about four inches by

...and FBI records...
...was a tape of about...
...Claiborne was contacted at his...
...in Northwest Washington...
...at 4:30 a.m. a police squad car...
...picked up the reporter and sped him...
...to the jail where he met Hardy.

Hardy showed him the note. "Are you willing to talk with them?" he asked Claiborne. The reporter said yes. They walked through a large rotunda that serves as a visiting room and approached the steel door to Cellblock I. Peering through the peephole, they saw a group of faces surrounding Lt. Wren. The prisoners were holding a four-inch revolver, either of .32 or .38 caliber, on Wren. From time to time, as they talked, they pointed the pistol at both Hardy and Claiborne.

Hardy asked the prisoners to come into the rotunda and discuss the situation. They refused. "You're coming in, we're not coming out," one of them shouted.

Then the prisoners demanded that policemen clustered in the background be removed. They left. Again, Hardy and Claiborne conferred briefly. They agreed to enter the cellblock and talk to the prisoners.

After the prisoners removed part of the barricades, composed of tables, chairs, desks and fire extinguishers, an opening about a foot wide was cleared.

Claiborne entered first. He climbed over what was left of the barricade and was then pulled forward through the narrow opening of the door by a group of prisoners.

He was immediately thrust against a wall and frisked for weapons. Then he was led by about 20 or 30 prisoners down a long, dim corridor past a series of cells toward a table at the end. The atmosphere inside the cellblock was oppressive: the single bulbs covered by wire mesh at intervals in the ceiling gave off little light. In the early hours before dawn, the cellblock was cold and dank. A strong smell of urine permeated the entire cellblock, which consists of five tiers of cells, each tier with 17 cells and each cell housing two men.

For several minutes Claiborne was alone with the most vocal of the prisoners. One of the most vociferous gave him a long, emotional lecture on the situation and the stakes involved.

"This is a revolutionary act," he was told. "This is an act of rebellion against the system. This is an act for respect and for us to be treated like men, not like animals in a cage. This is a positive action."

Another prisoner interrupted to refer to other prison incidents elsewhere.

"We remember what happened to George Jackson. We remember what happened to Jonathan Jackson, his brother and his mother."

...spoke about the tragedy of...
...prison a year ago in New York...
...more than 40 prisoners and...
...were killed. "We remember what...
...happened at Attica after the negotia-

tions," one prisoner said.

The shooting there followed all lines of procedure he was instructed to follow.

"We want the mayor, we want Chief Jerry V. Wilson, we want Attorney General."

Lorton was also referred to repeatedly—and also, by implication, he was the jail break of only a few days ago. "You read in the papers about the big one escaping," one convict said, "but I don't know why."

While this tense dialogue was taking place, Hardy was being taken into the cellblock. He is a larger man than Claiborne. It took the prisoners more time to pull him in.

Before Hardy arrived, the prisoners again mentioned Lorton. One of them had a editorial from The Washington Post News referring to the Lorton negotiations and settlement. He threw the editorial on the table and pointed to it with his fist, shouted: "Why don't Hardy think of us when he negotiates with Lorton? This is still a negotiation."

When Hardy finally was escorted down the same long corridor, he was nose bloody, his head cut, sat on the table. Again, the revolver was waved back and forth at the men.

The convicts addressed themselves to Hardy. "We will accept only one alternative," one man said. "That we will die here or we will have our freedom,

because death is being given out every day in the courts."

Another voice cut through the din: "We're tired, man. We're tired of fighting. We only have one alternative—to die here on the sidewalk."

Continually, they struck the same theme: this was not a riot. This was a revolution.

They also expressed another common thought: they were prepared to die, they were entirely fatalistic.

"I have accepted death," one prisoner said. "They're going to kill me when they open that door."

Then they issued their first demands:

- Remove all police from the jail.
- Permit the prisoners to leave four at a time.

(One convict disagreed. "You tell them that we're coming out six at a time," he said.)

It was 5:45 a.m. Claiborne left the cell block after what was probably the longest 35 minutes of his life. It was still dark outside. Hardy and the other hostages remained in the cellblock.

As dawn broke, crowds of curious citizens, attracted as always by morbid fascination over a real life-and-death story, began to gather slowly on the streets around the jail. Police had cordoned off the intersections to keep them back. The blocks surrounding the jail had been transformed into an armed camp of police cruisers and men carrying rifles, tear-gas canisters, pistols and nightsticks.

The situation settled into a stalemate. Officials came and went. There were more conferences between the prisoners and the officials, more conversations between Claiborne standing outside the cellblock windows (the convicts inside, more uncertainty about what, if anything, to do).

Delegations of prisoners from Lorton and relatives of the hostages were brought to the jail. From time to time, the prisoners would appear at the cellblock windows to shout down at those gathered below.

Occasionally, they brought Hardy with them, still covered by the pistol. Once, he was seen with what appeared to be a crudely fashioned knife held close to him.

One of the more dramatic moments came about noon when Hardy was again brought to the window. The prison official called out: "I don't want bloodshed. There are people here with a lot of problems. They have treated me decently. I don't want any CDU (police civil disturbance unit) action. I don't want that kind of action. I don't want bloodshed. This is not a criminal action. This is a revolution. This is real."

Hardy was then yanked back from the window. One of the prisoners shouted, "We're going to cut his head off if we don't get what we want. His head is coming off. You'd better believe that."

Shortly after that, a blood spattered

white shirt, said by officials to belong to Lt. Wren, was dropped out of a cellblock window. It fluttered slowly to the ground.

As the noon hour passed, there was another shout from inside the cellblock. "We've got a fire inside," someone yelled.

Smoke curled up first from the top tier of windows and then from the roof itself, disappearing into the cloudless skies.

Not long after that, negotiations began more intensively between the host of public officials and private citizens involved. All the activity only lent more of an air of confusion to the scene. Two comments summed up the feelings of optimism and pessimism.

From Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm (D-N.Y.), speaking at 8:40 p.m.:

"Within the next half-hour we are hoping all of us can see a break."

From Ron Goldfarb, head of the D.C. Citizens Committee for Criminal Justice at about the same time:

"This situation is very critical."

Contribution to today's articles on the D.C. jail incident were: Dennis E. Baker, William J. Claiborne, B. D. Golden, Martha Hamilton, John Katz, Claudio Levy, Grayson Mitchell, Peter Orvas, Margaret Pala, Raul Ramirez, Ken Ringler, Kirk Scharfenberg, J. Y. Smith, Ron Taylor, Paul W. Valentini, Ed Walsh, and Toby J. A. Wolff.

...taller; talks to Rep. Shirley Chisholm with juvenile prisoners who were brought to the

By KENNETH DAVID—The Washington Post



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...of...