

They Led Me Into a Hall, Saying, 'Don't Hurt Him'

William L. Claiborne is a Washington Post staff writer assigned to cover corrections in the District of Columbia. When inmates took hostages at D.C. jail early yesterday, they asked that two people come inside: the head of the corrections department and Claiborne. This is Claiborne's first-person account of his nine-hour experience as a go-between.

The telephone rang loudly in my home at 4:15 a.m. and the message from Kenneth L. Hardy, corrections director, was frightening. The inmates at D.C. jail had a gun and were holding guards hostage.

Hardy himself called a moment later. His voice was heavy.

"Mr. Claiborne, they have taken Cellblock 1 and they are holding nine of my men as hostages. They want to talk to you. Can you come down here?"

I said it would take 10 or 15 minutes to drive there and I would come. He said: "Mr. Claiborne, we only have 10 minutes. I'll send someone."

I hurriedly dressed and told my wife and daughter where I was going. A police scout car arrived at my home in 10 minutes and took me, at high speed, with lights and sirens going, to the D.C. jail. We almost got lost once, and

ended up going the wrong way around Robert F. Kennedy Stadium.

I walked into a darkened office. Hardy and two other top corrections officials were sitting there, drinking coffee and talking. Hardy handed me a piece of yellow legal paper with a message from the inmates: "We want to negotiate with Hardy and Claiborne."

Hardy said an unknown number of inmates had seized nine hostages at approximately 2 a.m. He asked whether I wanted to go in and talk with them. "OK," I said. We walked to a steel door off the visitors' rotunda that rises to the full four-story height of the jail. We then entered a small alcove and the steel door shut behind us. There we faced another steel door with a small peephole, through which we could see a number of inmates. One held a snubnosed revolver to a guard's head. The glass in the peephole had been broken and we could see their faces clearly.

One of the inmates said through the peephole, "Mr. Claiborne, we want you to understand one thing very clearly. This is not a riot, it's a revolution, you understand?" I said I understood. But I'm not sure I did. My impression was that he meant by a revolution some-

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thing more serious—a fight to death, perhaps.

Hardy and I talked with the inmates in an effort to get them to come into the alcove or send several representatives into the rotunda to negotiate.

"We're not coming out this door; you're coming in," was the response.

The inmates could see a large number of metropolitan policemen in the rotunda, some with shotguns and one with a pepper fog (type of tear gas) machine.

Hardy ordered the police to leave, then turned to me and said, "Do you want to go in?"

"I'll go in," I said.

The inner steel door was heavily barricaded with tables, chairs, fire extinguishers and other equipment and the inmates removed enough of the barricade to allow the door to be opened about a foot. One of the inmates pointed at me and said, "All right, you first."

I squeezed through the door and climbed up on top of the barricade. An inmate grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me in while several encouraged me, saying, "You can make it, man, come on, you can make it."

They led me up into a dimly lighted hallway. Several inmates were shouting at other inmates, saying, "Don't hurt him, man, don't hurt him. If you hurt anybody, don't hurt him. We need him." There were about 30 inmates in the corridor.

Several faced me up against a wall, frisked me, and led me down a dark corridor about 50 feet.

Hardy had more trouble getting through the door because he's larger than I am and while they struggled to help him into the cellblock and over the barricade, one inmate told me to take out paper and pencil. He gave me a lecture on revolution.

I noticed that my notebook was one I had hurriedly snatched from a desk at home, and that my 7-year-old daughter had blackprinted "W.L.C.," my initials, address and telephone number.

I thought an inmate standing at my side noticed the writing on the cover of the notebook, but I also thought that he didn't understand the meaning it had to me at that moment. I was scared.

He said, "This is a revolutionary act, man, this is an act of rebellion against the system. This is an act for respect, and for us to be treated as men and not as animals in animal-like cages."

It seemed to take five minutes to squeeze Hardy through the door. During that time the inmate continued to talk. "We remember what happened to George Jackson. We remember what happened to Jonathan Jackson, his brother. We remember Mark Clark and Fred Hampton. We remember what happened at Attica after the negotiations."

The inmate doing most of the talking at that moment was extremely agitated and said the 1970 D.C. court reorganization was an "act of genocide." He said the inmates believed they had only one alternative: "That we will die or we will have our freedom because

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

While the inmates were still helping Hardy through the door one of them slammed a newspaper editorial on a table and began hitting it with his fists. The editorial dealt with reforms instituted at the Lorton reformatory that were negotiated by inmates and Hardy and other corrections officials.

Why didn't Hardy think of us when he negotiated with Lorton? This is still his plantation," the inmate, a tall man in his middle twenties demanded. He kept slamming his fist on the table.

Inmates shouted several references to Attica, one saying, "We feel totally that fear has gripped us because of Attica."

Another said, "We only have one alternative. To die here or on the sidewalk out front."

"This is it, it's all over," he said.

At that point they brought Hardy down the corridor and seated him at a table alongside Lt. Charles Wren.

Wren, a guard, had apparently been beaten. There was blood on his nose and head. Seated opposite him were two inmates, while still another stood by the table, alternately waving a gun at Hardy and me, or pointing it at Lt. Wren.

Once, the inmate holding the gun placed it on the table next to Hardy, but another prisoner quickly picked it up and again held it to Wren's head.

Over and over again the inmates emphasized that this was a revolution. The inmate doing most of the talking said, "I done accepted death, they're going to kill me when they open the doors."

Hardy tried repeatedly to begin negotiations on conditions at the jail. But the inmates—for the first time—said they were not interested in negotiating. They had only one demand: freedom. It was a one-way conversation. They were talking at us, and they didn't seem to expect any response.

Almost as an aside, several inmates did complain then of brutality, poor sanitary conditions in the dining hall, poor food and other things. But it was only to lead up to their single demand. "We want the area cleared," one said,

"We want to go out four at a time."

One said to me, "You tell them that we're coming out six at a time."

Hardy and I had entered the cellblock about 5:10 a.m. About 5:45 a.m., they said, "OK, you go out there and tell them what we want. We're keeping Hardy."

Hardy sat at the table with his arms folded, staring straight ahead. I hadn't expected this, I doubt that he had. One inmate took me by the arm and started leading me down the hall.

I turned back once to look at Hardy. Leaving him there, I felt then and now, was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. He was still looking straight ahead as I squeezed through the door.

Hardy's decision to go into Cellblock 1 had been made quickly, with a snub-nose revolver peering through the peephole at both of us. There was no discussion over terms, such as whether

he would be released or how long he would talk with the inmates.

There wasn't much time for him to think about being held a hostage himself. He simply asked me if I was willing to go into the cellblock with him and I said I was. But I knew the inmates had a specific use for me, and that was to convey to the authorities their demand for freedom and the terms under which they would leave the jail. And they needed me to tell their side of the story to the public.

Hardy could have had no such understanding. But we hadn't discussed the prospect of his being kept hostage.

Throughout my 35 minutes inside the cellblock the prisoners desperately tried to convince me of their single-mindedness of purpose—not to negotiate for better conditions inside the jail, but simply to negotiate the method in which they were to leave the jail.

But the announcement that they planned to keep Hardy as a hostage took both Hardy and me by surprise. It was made almost casually, and I couldn't tell whether they had planned it in advance.

The next seven hours I acted as a go-between for the inmates and the jail administration. Our talks were conducted through a window overlooking a courtyard and facing 19th Street SE.

Shortly after I left the cellblock the inmates yelled out the window that they wanted the police to come to the window.

Insp. Theodore Zanders, who was in charge until Police chief Jerry V. Wilson arrived, told me, "I think the corrections people ought to talk to them, not us."

Zanders said through a bullhorn that he could hear the inmates from behind a fence 30 yards away and that he wasn't going to the window. Hardy then appeared at the window and said, "I'm asking you to come up to the window. I'm ordering you to come up to the window."

The police refused.

About 6:20 a.m., Hardy telephoned to the rotunda from the cellblock and pleaded with the police to remove their cars from 19th Street.

Zanders told me he was reluctant to move the cars because he didn't know what the inmates' next demand would be. But he moved some.

The next hour Hardy came to the window repeatedly, pleading that police remove the cars and turn out the lights that were shining on the cellblock windows. His voice quavering, he said, "Turn those damn lights out. This is Hardy. Turn those lights off. Now move that thing out of the way." He said, referring to a police truck parked on 19th Street.

No one moved the trucks immediately and Hardy continued to plead through the window, begging the police to leave the area.

At one point he shouted, "Go home. Go on, get that damn truck out. Come on, clear the area. Move it. Get away from this jail. Come on, move that detail out of there. I've got a gun against my head, please move it," he pleaded.

At 7 a.m. the prisoners began yelling

out the windows that they wanted to see me again. When I got to the window one of them shouted, "We got Mr. Hardy and nine guards. We want this whole area cleared. Don't plan any mother tricks on us." They also told me to tell prison authorities they wanted Mayor Walter E. Washington there in 15 minutes.

At 7:15, inside the rotunda a Capt. Robinson received a telephone call from inside the cellblock. It was Hardy pleading for someone to bring the mayor. About that time, Chief Wilson arrived.

At 7:30 a.m. Charles M. Rodgers, deputy corrections director, talked with the mayor on the telephone. Marlon Barry, D.C. School Board president, also acting as a go-between, talked to the mayor and then said, "The mayor wants them to work through Rodgers and them."

At 8:15 a.m. Barry and I went to the window again briefly, and the inmates demanded that we bring the mayor there. They also wanted a doctor inside the cellblock to treat an inmate who had cut his arm and demanded that the police be removed from the area immediately.

As soon as we returned to the rotunda, Chief Wilson said, "OK, they're moving."

"The trouble is," Wilson told me, "they got a gun. I don't want the

mayor shot. If you or I get shot, that's OK, but it wouldn't do to get the mayor shot."

The first time I went to the window, an inmate pointed the gun at me. But as I returned for subsequent visits the gun did not appear.

I went to the window several more times and finally at 8:30 a.m. the inmates shouted to me their single demand—freedom.

"We don't want nothin' but the walk. What do you think we want for food? Bull... We want the walk man."

"We're dead now, we're better off out there than in here. We don't want us out of here. Go tell them that. There's nothing you can do but let us out of here. What is better than freedom, man, you tell me. What's better than freedom?" the inmates told Barry and myself.

One inmate said, "This is a death play or a freedom play. Tell them to kill us."

Another shouted, "We ain't no walk man. We don't mind dying for the cause."

And another: "When this is all over and the other brothers come along, make it better for them. . . . That's what we are asking for is to die out on the sidewalk. They can kill us right there."

Over and over again the inmates complained from the window about the negotiations at Lorton two weeks ago, saying at one point, "Mr. Hardy negotiated for the brothers at Lorton, how about us? You read in the paper about niggers escaping, but you don't know why. We have come to the conclusion that we're going to die."

At noon the inmates again came to the window and shouted for me to come talk to them. One of them said that Hardy was about to make a statement from the window to the effect that there would be no reprisals or action taken against the inmates in the block.

Hardy came to the window and pleaded for police to leave the area. He said, "I don't want any bloodshed. We got people here with lots of problems. They have treated me decently," he said. "I don't want any CDU (the police civil disturbance unit) in here. I don't want that kind of action. I don't want bloodshed."

He was drawn and appeared nervous but not injured. An inmate held what I thought was a knife close to his head and shouted, "His head is coming off, you better believe that."

Other inmates pulled Hardy away from the window and one of them threw out a white shirt saying that it belonged to the injured guard, Lt. Wren. The front was covered with blood-stains. The inmates then shouted out the window, "Get them out of the rotunda," referring to the police. "You better get those ——— out of the rotunda now."

There were only a few policemen in the rotunda and they left.

As early as noon, the inmates were asking me if I was "playing tricks" on them. They demanded to know why I hadn't brought the mayor to the window.

Later in the afternoon, it became obvious that my effectiveness as a go-between was lessening. They didn't seem to need me anymore, particularly after the arrival of Julian Topper—who negotiated at Attica prison—and Rep. Shirley Chisholm.