

San Quentin Calm Believed To Hide Violence Potential

Post 8/21/72

By Philip Hager
Los Angeles Times

SAN QUENTIN PRISON, Calif.—Last Aug. 21, this prison was the scene of a bizarre escape attempt, a nightmare of stabbings and shootings that left six men dead—five of them piled in a cell in a pool of blood one official recalls as “literally an inch deep.”

Today, San Quentin appears almost tranquil and half-deserted, as an occasional denim-clad inmate moves slowly in the mid-day sun along two white lines painted down the center of an asphalt path.

In the past year, new security procedures have been established and the prison has been free of major incidents. But the peaceful atmosphere is misleading, prison authorities say. The memories of Aug. 21 are too clear in their minds and the potential violence remains too high.

“The wounds haven’t healed by any means,” says warden Louis S. Nelson. “The tinder is still here. All we’d need is a spark and San Quentin could explode again.”

And Stephen M. Bingham, the young Oakland lawyer alleged to have smuggled a gun to convict George Jackson, killed by a bullet from a guard’s rifle, is still missing.

The new security procedures are designed to protect prison personnel, but, as Warden Nelson himself observes: “They aren’t foolproof; if an inmate wants to attack, and is careful, he can render you immobile before you can act.”

The innovations include:

- A net increase in the number of uniformed officers per inmate and greater restrictions on inmate movements which Nelson said have resulted in a “more rigid” operation of the prison.

Prisoners are no longer allowed to congregate in large numbers in the yard, nor are they free to roam about the yard. They are also required to proceed about the prison in single

file along the two white lines painted on walkways.

- Visiting procedures now require inmates judged dangerous to be bound—with handcuffs and/or legs chains—as they are brought to and from the visiting room, as well as searched before and after. (Jackson was not handcuffed when he left a visiting room last August after seeing Bingham and, according to authorities, subsequently pulled an Afro wig.)

Attorney-prisoner visits now are monitored by guards who are armed with a gun on guards from beneath watch through plexiglass windows. The attorney-visiting rooms have been remodeled so that lawyers and prisoners are separated from ceiling to floor by panels of plexiglass, wood and heavy screen. Documents or other objects that are passed are placed in a lock-box, to be examined first by guards.

- Guards, who in the past were armed only with a whistle to summon help, now in some areas are equipped with small, radio-operated warning devices. When activated, the devices transmit a signal that sets off an alarm.

While no prison staff members have been killed since last September, when a laundry supervisor at California’s Folsom Prison was stabbed to death, 15 inmates have died at the hands of other inmates since January.

The number of attacks against staff members has increased sharply in California institutions in the last decade. Phillip Guthrie, chief of community correctional services, notes that there were nine such assaults in the year 1960—compared to 67 in 1971 and 28 thus far this year.

Resignations by guards—which increased markedly in the weeks following the Aug. 21 incident—have resumed their normal rate, according to Guthrie, and, with approval from the pay board, state

corrections officers will be receiving a 15 per cent pay increase approved by the California legislature and Gov. Ronald Reagan.

Nonetheless, there is still concern expressed by the officers with conditions at the prisons.

Ken Brown of the California Correctional Officers Assn. agrees that the new security procedures have benefited the officers, but says that other innovations—such as closed-circuit, television viewing of large inmate gatherings and improved communications systems—are still needed.

“A pay increase—even if it’s \$1,000 a day—isn’t any good to a man if he’s dead,” says Brown.

Meanwhile, administrators at San Quentin are going about the business of “phasing out” the prison, scheduled to close in July 1975—if suitable maximum-security facilities are available to replace it.

Today most of the five-tiered South Block—the largest cellblock in the world—has been closed down. The inmate population stands at 1,524, compared to about 2,800 a year ago. Several facilities in the industrial section, including the clothing factory, have been shut down and other operations, such as the furniture factory, have been cut back substantially.

Inmates once housed on Death Row, beneficiaries of the recent California Supreme Court decision abolishing capital punishment, are being reassigned throughout the state corrections system.

But, even in its ancient stage, San Quentin still receives the toughest cases in the system. Right now there are 160 inmates—described by officials here as “literally uncontrollable”—housed in the prison’s segregation units and adjustment center.