

SLIGHTS, MIXUPS

Little Things Spawn Riot

By Robert J. Roth

ATTICA (N.Y.) — (CDN)
— An extra shower every week, better food, a new baseball diamond — the bloody rebellion at Attica grew from little grievances, small slights and bad misunderstandings that grated on the prisoners in their empty hours in the maximum security prison.

Day after day, the unanswered complaints and unheeded warnings grew in importance until all that was needed was a rumor that a prisoner had been beaten by a guard.

As much as anything else, impatience on the part of the inmates and delay on the part of the prison authorities brought on one of the bloodiest prison riots in our history.

The Attica correctional facility, a maximum security prison, from which even Willie (the Actor) Sutton could not escape, broke into the news on July 23, the day after Corrections Commissioner Russell Oswald opened the doors of all 22 New York prisons to the press.

Nothing to Hide

Oswald, who was appointed corrections commissioner Jan. 1, said the prisons had nothing to hide — if they did, he wanted to know about it.

Only a few weeks earlier, Oswald allowed prisoners to write confidential letters to him, to Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller, to the President of the United States, to state legislators and to their own attorneys.

In roving through the prison, I discovered that during the first week of July a petition — a manifesto, as it was called — had been sent by Attica inmates to Oswald.

Oswald said that he needed time to study and investigate. He said acting in haste could result in a harmful decision.

By that time he had been in possession of the petition for one month.

'Another Quentin'

Twenty days and the San Quentin riot passed before Oswald was asked again about the petition.

"Give me time, please," he said, "I don't want to act hastily. I don't want another San Quentin."

But time he didn't have. Inmates already had told me that they "are tired of begging, tired of asking — we're about ready to start acting."

They said they were planning a sit-in or a food strike, stressing that violence was not in the plan, that it would not be tolerated.

Inmates also had told Bedros Odian, New York state assistant attorney general, that "a peaceful work stoppage" was being planned.

On Aug. 21, less than three weeks before the riot, Odian told State Attorney General Louis J. Lefkowitz that the prison was a powder keg.

"Presently many prisoners are running out of hand and the warden (Vincent R. Mancusi) doesn't know what to do," Odian said. "I truly fear there is a kind of rumble

Two months before the Attica rioting began, New York's prisons announced a new policy under which reporters could tour prisons and interview inmates. Richard J. Roth of the Buffalo Courier-Express was the only reporter who went to Attica and wrote about what he found. When the riot started last week inmates asked that Roth be a member of the committee negotiating with them. He agreed and thus was in the prison before and during the riot.

within the prison walls of Attica."

A week later, State Sen. Samuel L. Greenberg (D-Brooklyn), who had been visiting prisons, said, "Unless the archaic conditions in the state's prisons are corrected, the riot that took place last November at the Auburn correctional facility will seem like a prelude to a nightmare."

Nightmares

Oswald heard the rumbles and scheduled an inspection of Attica. He and a team of correctional specialists were in Attica only one week before the riot began.

At the end of a three-day inspection, Sept. 3, Oswald spoke via tape recording to the inmates;

Again he asked for time.

Oswald realized that the prison system needed updating — that is why he was appointed Jan. 1 to succeed Paul D. McGinnis, who had served as commissioner for 12 years.

That is why Oswald recruited Walter Dunbar, former head of corrections in California, to serve as executive deputy commissioner.

Planning Stage

Six days before the inmates rebelled, Oswald had told them, partly in response to their petition (the only prisoners' petition Oswald had received since he allowed such things to be mailed to him) that many changes were in the advanced planning stages.

Oswald spoke of a federal grant that would afford the department the opportunity, beginning in December, to establish a training program for all prison guards and officials, something that is not now being done and something that the inmates demanded.

The winner of a master's degree in psychiatric social work from Loyola University, Chicago and a law degree from Marquette, Oswald also told the prisoners he was planning to install a complete law library in Attica — in the near future.

He also said that plans for a pre-parole furlough system and for post-parole halfway houses were all but complete.

He also said that evening educational classes and services would soon be expanded to include more men.

But, everything was in the future, if only a few weeks or a few months away.

If, in fact, the programs were about to be launched,

Oswald imagined that a short waiting period should be of no consequence to the inmates serving long terms at Attica.

All in Future

Short-termers were more concerned about getting out than in improving the prison they would soon be leaving.

But, the 2223 inmates were not willing to wait.

It had been 64 days since they mailed the manifesto to Oswald.

The manifesto, which was much like the list of 15 "practical proposals" the inmates demanded on the first day of the riot, "didn't ask for anything that any human being shouldn't be entitled to," had said inmate Wayne Trimmer, in an exclusive interview.

Requests

In late July, Trimmer said the original petition asked that inmates "get more than one shower a week, that our food be covered to keep the flies off, that the bugs be washed off our lettuce and that they improve the medical treatment."

"But," said Trimmer, "those are just the little things, the everyday things. The big thing is the attitude of the prison officials."

Trimmer contended that "prisoners have absolutely no rights and we get no respect because and only because, we happen to be in a prison."

"They treat us like we're no longer human beings. It's no wonder so many guys just give up — they're bitter and broken and most of them don't seem to care anymore."

Saying that inmates are demoralized by guards who shout and bang on bars with nightsticks, Trimmer touched on most of the same subjects that the inmates in command of Cellblock D courtyard were demanding.

Besides attitude and the physical things Trimmer said the inmates were grumbling about, other demands were that there be more than one basketball court and one

basketball for every 500 men; that less pork be served at mealtime, in deference to the Black Muslims; that the minimum wage law be applied to the prisoners who now earn between 25 cents and \$1 a day for their work in the prison's metal manufacturing shop; that Black Muslims be allowed to practice their religion; that inmates be allowed to communicate with persons of their own choosing and that a delegation of inmates be organized to speak with prison administrators every three months about grievances.

Before the riot broke out, Oswald said he agreed with and would implement these proposals — in time.

After the insurrection, Oswald told the citizens' mediating committee that he would attempt to implement the proposals immediately — within no later than 60 days.

The spark that touched off the explosion came Wednesday night, Sept. 8.

A young prison guard was sent to get an inmate who allegedly had punched a guard during the afternoon.

The inmate was to appear before a kangaroo court and subsequently to be remanded to solitary confinement — "The Box," as the prisoners call it.

"Doing My Job"

The guard told me that when he opened the cell in which the accused inmate was confined, the inmate grabbed a metal stool and threatened to strike if anyone attempted to send him to "The Box."

"I was only doing my job," said the guard, who asked to remain anonymous, "so when he refused to come out, I tackled him, that's all. I swear to you I didn't rough him up."

However a brutality rumor spread through the prison that night.

The following morning the inmates attempted to boycott breakfast and when guards attempted to force them into the dining hall the trouble began.