

Attica Guard Says Economy Measures Hurt Security at Time of Rebellion

By MICHAEL T. KAUFMAN

A lieutenant at the Attica Correctional Facility told the McKay Commission yesterday that a suggestion for augmented security that was made the day before prisoners rioted was rejected for economy reasons.

The officer, Robert Curtis, said that he had become "extremely concerned" as he supervised the transfer of a white inmate from Five Company of a block to a segregation cell. He said that some of the 41 others on that gallery had shouted to him, "We're going to burn this place tomorrow!"

Lieutenant Curtissaid he reported his fears to Leon Vincent, assistant deputy superintendent, along with a recommendation that a late shift of swarmed over by other inmates

in for early duty on the next day, Sept. 9.

"Mr. Vincent told me, 'Who the hell is going to pay the overtime?'" Lieutenant Curtis said.

He then explained how the next morning he received word that Five Company was causing trouble in a central corridor on his way back from mess hall. That group of men had already forced the release of one inmate who had been ordered confined to his cell for having thrown a tin can at a guard the night before.

Lieutenant Curtis said he ran to the corridor in an attempt to reason with the inmates. "One of them hit me in the temple," he said. The lieutenant recalled that he was then swarmed over by other inmates

but was eventually rescued by two correction officers who dragged him to the temporary safety of a cellblock, where the three men locked themselves in a cell.

Start of a Rebellion

Earlier testimony before the panel explained how the rebellion had fanned out from that incident and had come to take in much of the prison area and more than half of Attica's 2,300 inmates.

Lieutenant Curtis said that he and the other two guards were eventually forced from their sanctuary by prisoners threatening to burn them out. But while he was in the cell just minutes after the initial eruption began, he heard an inmate shouting orders. "One squad over here. Two squad go

there," was what he said he heard.

This, he said, indicated to him that there was a degree of planning in the uprising since the word "squad" was not a part of everyday usage in the prison.

The lieutenant then explained the final minutes of his incarceration in the inmate-held yard. He was blindfolded and ordered to stand in the center of the open area as tear gas-laden helicopters passed above. "I heard the firing and I heard the inmate behind me say, 'I'm hit,'" he said. "I suddenly felt a terrific jolt in the back that drove me to my knees."

The lieutenant said that at first he thought the pain was from a blow but later learned he had been wounded twice by

shots from the assault force of state troopers.

A second former hostage, Frank Wald, who retired as a captain at Attica last month, echoed much of the lieutenant's testimony, explaining that he had maintained some hope right until the mornin of the assault. "But then I gave up and prepared to die," he testified. "I said a few prayers and waited." He was ultimately saved when a trooper snipers picked off the man assigned to him as his "executioner," he said.

Mr. Wald, who is 62 years old and was nicknamed Pappy by the inmates, closed with a plea for more money and more therapeutic programs for prisoners. Several inmates also appeared yesterday, giving their views of the final assault.

Francis Joseph Huen, a 35-year-old prisoner who had earlier told the commission of his reluctant involvement in the uprising, said he had been singled out in the yard for no apparent reason and forced to run a gullet to a segregation cell, where he was kept for four months.

Perry Ford, a black inmate, said he saw troopers fire on the inmates who were attempting to give up as the initial round of firing ended.

He said a trooper at one point held a shotgun to his head, cursing him as a trooper fired another trooper came along and jostled the gun, causing the shot to go wide. He said that a pellet did strike him in the shoulder.