

LIFE AUG 15, 69

Nightmare for the innocent in a California jail

*How a law-abiding citizen, who wandered into a mass arrest,
was held for 18 hours and threatened, humiliated and blackjacked*

When I moved my family to San Francisco last year to teach in the English department at San Francisco State College, I did so with misgivings. I knew that the educational atmosphere in California was far from tranquil—Governor Reagan was waging virtual war against student protesters, and the political polarization between the left and the right could only be described in terms of paranoia.

Through the year, my fears were confirmed as I witnessed student and faculty strikes, bombings, brawls, police assaults, mass arrests. But none of those events—brutal as they were—prepared me for the nightmare that followed my recent chance arrest this spring in Berkeley. Overnight that experience, which can be verified by many reliable witnesses, turned a father of five, veteran of the Korean war and law-abiding citizen into a bitter man.

On Thursday morning, May 22,

I left San Francisco State College with four other teachers to drive to Berkeley. We were beginning work on an environmental art project one of the teachers was directing. We planned to borrow a sailboat from a couple I knew in Berkeley and dump a small amount of nontoxic dye in the bay water at strategic points to observe the action of the currents.

We arrived in Berkeley about noon. After a pleasant lunch and a trip to buy supplies for the sail we walked toward Shattuck on Addison Street. There we were to meet my friend's wife, Nora.

The city of Berkeley was then in something like a state of siege because of the People's Park issue. On the streets, under the command of Alameda County Sheriff Frank Madigan, was a vast force of National Guard troops, county sheriffs, San Francisco Tactical Squad units. Madigan had authorized use of shotguns against demonstrators.

One man had already been killed, and many others wounded. Demonstrators, workers and onlookers trapped in a plaza on the University of California campus had been sprayed from a helicopter with a virulent form of tear gas currently being used in Vietnam. To protest, approximately 2,000 students had now begun a spontaneous march from the university campus through downtown Berkeley.

We could see a concentration of National Guard troops, policemen and citizens several blocks east of us. I described what Nora looked like to the others and we stopped at the southwest corner of Shattuck and Addison to scan the crowd for her. We decided not to go any farther because we saw soldiers, police and people both to the east and south of us. The National Guard troops nearest us were climbing into trucks and moving out. Small groups of

people on each corner of the intersection watched the troops; others walked casually on the sidewalks.

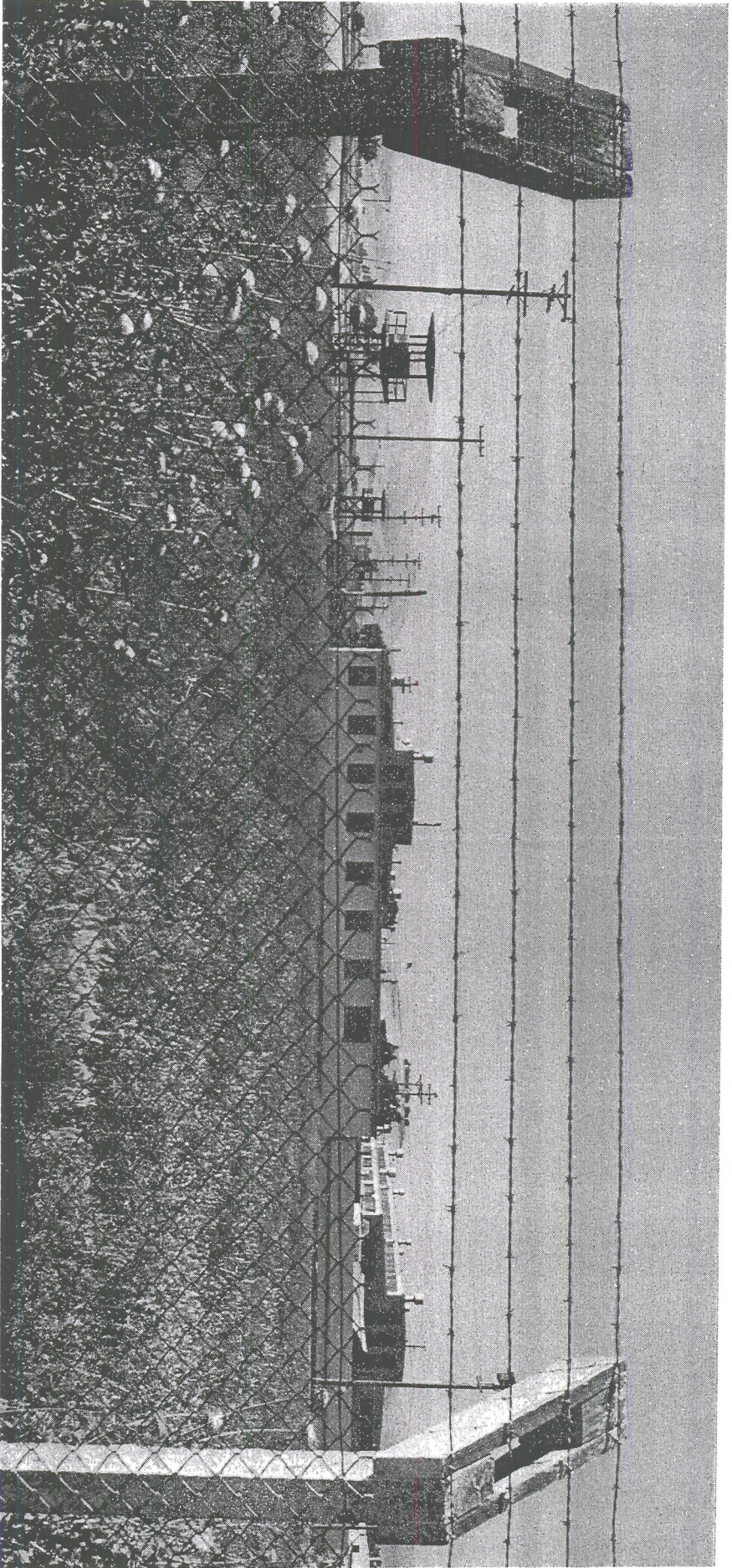
Berkeley policemen and Alameda County deputies began moving our way. An officer leading four or five others approached our group of 12 to 15 people and said, "Let's move out; clear the area!" Everyone on our corner obediently started walking away. Suddenly, a Berkeley policeman ran in front of us, spread his arms and shouted, "Stay where you are!" Behind us, two other policemen kept repeating, "Keep moving, clear out of here!" We said we were leaving, and at this point a Berkeley police sergeant approached and began pointing to various people in our group, saying, "Get that one, that one, that one."

An officer snapped handcuffs on me and joined me with the cuffs to a protesting youngster. I asked if we were under arrest and the officer said yes—we were charged

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by JESSE P. RITTER JR.

Bleak with its barbed wire and watchtowers, Santa Rita prison has the look—and for a night, had the feel—of a prisoner-of-war camp



with blocking traffic. We were not allowed to talk to the policemen after that. The sergeant who had us arrested taunted us, using obscenities and accusing us of being revolutionaries, rock-throwers and hippies. Those not fingered by the sergeant continued down the street and were not apprehended. While we were being herded into the paddy wagon, however, officers continued to arrest people at random—mostly young people, and particularly those with long hair, mustaches, sideburns. Three of the teachers with me were arrested; our fifth companion was not, and he immediately began calling friends and relatives to arrange our release.

Nineteen of us—17 men and two women—were packed into a paddy wagon. I was never able to identify myself or state my business; indeed, the policemen threatened anyone who talked at all. We sat in the wagon for about 20 minutes, then it backed up the street a block, where we were transferred to a large bus. We were all being taken to “Santa Rita,” a place I had never heard of.

During the 45-minute ride our feelings were reinforced that it had been an indiscriminate bust. Aboard were students with books and notepads who had been on their way to and from classes at the university. There was a U.S. mailman (with long hair), still carrying his bag of mail, and a resident psychiatrist who had stepped outside his hospital for a short walk during a 30-minute break. Others included several young divinity students and five medical observers—young men in white smocks with red crosses—who had accompanied the student march down Shattuck Avenue. The police blew it, I thought. They went too far this time. Most of us will be released when we get to wherever we’re going.

The bus stopped inside the Santa Rita Rehabilitation Center and

Prison Farm, an institution run by Alameda County. Prison guards who work under the jurisdiction of County Sheriff Madigan now took charge of us. We heard repeated orders through the frosted bus windows: “Unload single file and march. Anybody talks and he’ll get a club up the butt!” As we filed off the bus the sight that greeted us was from a World War II

movie—shabby wooden barracks, barbed-wire fences, rickety watch towers and rows of men lying face down in an asphalt-paved compound. We were marched into the compound and ordered to lie prone in rows. Those who looked around or stumbled or didn’t move fast enough were prodded and hit with clubs. Frequently, men were dragged out of the marching lines

and forced to kneel while being struck. The guards shouted and screamed, often giving conflicting commands and clubbing those unable to obey them. Our chief source of terror was not so much the beatings as the wild hysteria that had seized many of the guards. They walked up and down our rows of flattened men, striking upraised hands with clubs, striking us on the soles of our feet with clubs to make us lie in even rows. We were told we would be shot if we tried to escape. We were cursed continuously; we were called dope users, revolutionaries, filthy long-hairs. We would, they shouted, be taught such a lesson that we would never again cause trouble. All of us were identified as political troublemakers. No attempt was made to distinguish us by age, nature of charges or physical condition. Periodically we were ordered to turn our heads to the left or right. I experienced severe leg cramps and sharp twinges of pain from an arthritic elbow. From time to time we were forced to close up ranks by crawling across the asphalt, which was covered with sharp gravel. Those accused of speaking or looking around or moving slightly were dragged out and forced to kneel with their hands behind them in a separate group. Some remained kneeling for hours. There were some 300 men on the ground.

After a few of us asked to use the rest rooms (and were abused for it), guards began allowing small groups to go. At times, the guards said, “You’ll have to wait another half hour.” One kid near me identified himself as a diabetic in the rest room and was cruelly beaten.

This savage parody of prison discipline had an obvious psychology behind it. Humiliate the prisoners totally from the beginning so they will obey orders and accept punishment without resistance. Of

course, we weren't prisoners—we were simply being held for booking!

During the time I was lying in the compound, from approximately 4 until 8:30 p.m., new arrestees were brought in and forced to lie in rows. It was cold when the sun went down, and men around me were shivering. At 8 we were allowed to stand and exercise in place for a few minutes. We then lay back down on our faces. They had taken our names when we were first arrested, and about every 20 minutes a guard would call out some names in alphabetical order. At 8:30 my name was called along with seven others, and we were taken into an adjoining barracks for booking.

Here we experienced new refinements. We were forced to sit in single file on the floor, knees together, while a squat, dark-haired guard waving a blackjack shouted that if we didn't do exactly as he said he would beat us until we couldn't walk. He had us face the wall, spread our legs and place our hands high on the wall. We then turned and threw our jackets, belts and the contents of our pockets into a pile. During this procedure, the squat guard struck prisoners in the back, stomach, face and legs with his fist or the blackjack. He struck me four times with the blackjack during the booking process—either for not having my heels tightly together or for not clasping my hands in front of me. He assaulted one of us—a very young boy with long hair—by slugging him with his fist and then grabbing the boy's hair and slamming his face into the wall. Later, in the barracks, we saw that the boy's left eye had swollen badly and he could barely open his jaw.

After the booking and fingerprinting, we again had to sit on the floor with legs drawn up, heels together. We were then lined up and marched to Barracks B across the

street. The guard in charge treated us firmly but decently, telling us that while we were in the barracks we could get together and talk, plan our bail procedures and wait our turn to use the telephone. He repeated what other guards had told us in the compound—that the regular prisoners were outraged at us because we were troublemakers, because we were responsible for the regular inmates' missing movies and other privileges. The inmates would beat us terribly, and the guards couldn't prevent it. We would be turned over to "hardened criminals and sex perverts."

At about 11:30, four lawyers from the People's Park Defense Committee appeared in the barracks. They told us they were trying to arrange bail procedures for as many people as possible, but they lacked funds and organizations for rapid release. We filled out forms giving information about our families and personal legal arrangements. We later were told that many of these forms were destroyed by prison guards who claimed they were "messages." At no time during our detention did anyone in my barracks have an opportunity to make a telephone call to relatives or lawyers.

During the night we were taunted and threatened by different prison guards. We left in small groups all through the night to have photos taken—I went in a group at 2:45 a.m. Few of us slept.

At 4:30 a.m., the door crashed open and three guards moved among the bunks rousting out people with curses, threats and blows. We were going to eat, they said, and we would eat what we took or it would be "shoved in your faces." Under continual threats, we were marched to the mess hall. Breakfast was Corn Chex and milk (no sugar), half-cooked prunes, white bread and artificial marmalade. We sat packed at the tables, or-

Ten officers were later suspended

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dered not to move or talk. Five men were dragged from their seats and forced to kneel before an empty table for such things as "looking around," "talking" or "moving." They were not allowed to eat. One boy was forced to lean his head on a post while the guards beat on the post. His nose began bleeding. Guards would prod him, pull him off the post and strike him, or kick his feet back farther until he was leaning at a severe angle to the post, his head and neck bearing the full weight of his body. After about 15 minutes of quivering spasmodically, the boy collapsed to the floor. Two guards dragged him over to the empty table and made him kneel, still twitching, with the others. After we finished eating, we were forced to kneel on the floor in columns of two and wait for about 15 minutes before being marched back to the barracks.

At 6 a.m. a new guard, a small man with reddish-blond hair on his neck, came into the barracks, yelling, "I had a good night's sleep and I feel like KILLING!" He announced that he was now in total control of us and said he needed a "boss" in the barracks. He grabbed my bunkmate, Professor Gary Oberbillig, by the shirt and dragged him out to the center of the floor. "Get out here," he said. "You're big; you want to take me? Come on, let's go outside. Want to go outside?" He then instructed Oberbillig that he, Ober-

billig, was the "barracks boss" and was to "beat the — out of anybody who don't do right!"

At 7:30 a guard came in and read off a list of names. We lined up and marched outside into the street, where several other guards spent approximately 30 minutes giving us military marching commands, making those who did not execute the commands smartly do calisthenics. (Ironically, not one of them was able to give an accurate "about-face" command, and our ragged "about-face" maneuvers enraged them.) We marched at double-time, forced to yell "WE LOVE THE BLUE MEANIES!"

The guards were proud of this idea: I overheard one tell another, "Say, we've gotta do that Blue Meanies bit some more." We marched to what appeared to be the receiving center of the prison, where we were put in open-screen cells already occupied by new arrestees. It was here that we learned we would be released soon. While we waited in the cells, several men were dragged out and beaten in our presence and told that they were on the way to further beatings and a stay in the "quiet room."

My three companions and I were finally processed for release on bail by 8:30 a.m., Friday, May 23, nearly 18 hours after our arrest. All released prisoners had to catch rides out of the main gate, a distance of a half mile, with outgoing bail bondsmen.

The first thing I learned face-down on the Santa Rita asphalt

was that I could make it without begging or breaking. This felt good; it was enough strength to counter the fears engendered by the heavy blue-black guards' shoes slowly crunching by my eyes six inches away. *But to be put to these tests in America!*

At a press conference, Alameda County Sheriff Frank Madigan admitted there had been "irregularities" at Santa Rita on that Thursday. He put the responsibility on his guards. Many of the deputies assigned there, he said, are young Vietnam war veterans and "they have a feeling that these people should be treated like Vietcong."

On July 2 Madigan suspended 10 of his officers at Santa Rita for "violating civil service and/or departmental rules" in handling the mass arrests. The officers, all of whom were told they had the right to appeal (only four chose to do so), included the commander, his two immediate assistants and a sergeant. By July 9, charges against all the people who had been arrested—a total of 480—had been dropped by the court.

Still, several hundred young men and women came out of Santa Rita believing there is no middle ground anymore—nowhere to stand to reconcile the growing polarities of our political lives. I am haunted by the bitterness brought forth by such assaults on our humaneness and human rights. When in the history of man have prisons and guards ever rooted out the ideas in which men really believe?

National Guardsmen encircled demonstrators and passersby in Berkeley mass arrest

