

Quentin Center Spawns

By Robert Patterson

A year ago The Examiner took a long, deep look at the San Quentin "adjustment center," in which last week's six-victim blood-bath took place.

It concluded that this strange prison-within-a-prison—duplicated in almost every California correctional institution—was a made-to-order seed-bed for violence, mayhem and murder.

It became clear that these sanitary, air-conditioned, pastel-painted dungeons were perfect devices for transforming men into monsters on the well-accredited premise that men in concentration tend to rise to the conduct standards of the worst among them.

Even under the penal "common denominator theory of homogenized result," prison administrators readily admit that the hostility quotient of the many is disproportionately influenced by that of the few who really dig trouble.

Recent prison history in California strongly supports this credo.

Notorious Block 'B'

Soledad's notorious adjustment center (Block "B") has directly spawned three murders and indirectly three more, inasmuch as its graduates have been charged with spin-off attacks on guards or convicts.

Tracy (the Deuel Vocational Institution — for young offenders) has had its share of violence and murder, most of it developing from adjustment center alumni.

Folsom's dreaded AC (Five Building) has produced some of the most outstanding and talented rip-off artists in penal history. Less word of their accomplishments gets out. Five Building is a tight jug.

Vacaville's "psychiatric diagnostic unit" (another prison-within-a-prison) has recently tendered hospitality to a man who stabbed 22 persons, and to another who killed five attendants at the Atascadero State Hospital.

Practically all of the convicts accused or suspected of the multiplicity of murders that have occurred in San Quentin during the past year

Violence

were either graduates of or candidates for its AC.

All of last week's murders took place in the grim human zoo centered within the lower prison enclave, as remote from contact or influence with the rest of prison population as if it were on Baffin Land.

'Protection Cases'

The adjustment center is by no means merely the police station for the prison, housing those who are accused of stealing pies, whacking fellow inmates for laughs or minor retaliation, or cooking "pruno" under their bunks.

There are other facilities for such mundane offenders.

Nor is the adjustment center type facility merely for the housing of potential murderers. People too militantly involved in racist activities go here; people of many persuasions . . . black, brown, yellow and red-neck white.

Ironically enough, "protection cases" also wind up in the AC sometimes only a cell away from the man from whom they are being protected.

Other protection cases are there because of gambling hate. The guts and enterprise of the "baddest" types sets the criterion of conduct and even once moderate men tend to move up to a tone-level of passionate animosi-

8-29-71

SF EXAM

ty, to implement this animosity that heaped too high for them to continue safely in the Big Yard outside, or because someone thought they were pretty and susceptible, or because of even less valid reasons.

Not infrequently a baffled convict has been hauled off unceremoniously to the AC because his wife wrote the warden that he was "in danger."

Here — like dogs at the SPCA — they are gathered in sterile enclosures like boxes lying on their sides, barred at the front, food slid into them at 8, 12 and 4, their doors opened only once daily for an hour's exercise.

The exercise periods are arranged with sensitive selectivity; all of it determined by notations on the roster in the sergeant's office. This black must be kept from that white; that Chicano from both of them. And there could be no greater faux pas than permitting the protection cases to meet up on an anti-social basis with the men who are aching to kill them.

Throughout the day communication between convicts is strictly vocal and often ro-



"No one sees anyone else . . . boredom is acute"

—Examiner Photo

bust, from cell to cell, a capella. No one sees anyone else but everyone knows everyone else, his social standing in the convict cosmopolis, and his fallibilities and strengths, plus his box

score in the violence league. Boredom is acute and there are no tangible rewards for good conduct except negatively. Release is impossible and transfer unlikely.

Learning the skills of applied hatred supplants most other activities and even via the tenuous communication of the shouted or whispered grapevine enough advice and instruction is available.

There is no way to go but down, in terms of human attitude. Almost inevitably, the recalcitrant convict plays out his role and justifies his AC billing to the fullest.

This was the setting for the last week's murders; the seed-bed of savagery.

To blame the instant mutiny on any outside cause would be naive, whether it be motivation by others, by the revolutionary movement, or because of racialism, although all of these factors — and others — were contributory.

The cast of characters was strictly democratic and of multi-origin. Spontaneously and in a matter of seconds, 16 blacks, four whites, one Mexican-American and one Puerto Rican were out of their cells unquestioningly involved in blood-letting.

Their basic motivation and the unanimity of their action sprang from the pressures of the building in which they were immured. The adjustment center is the major heavy of Six-Murder Saturday at Quentin.

Guards Praised

"We know that this is not the panacea," Prison Director Ray K. Procunier yesterday told the Examiner, "and we are trying to do something about it.

"In fact, only a week before the killings at Quentin I and my wardens discussed this problem and dilemma. I have since requested each of them to suggest ways, based on their own personal experience and conditions in their

own institutions, for a better way to house and handle really dangerous and desperate men.

"It certainly isn't to turn the clock back, to start in whacking them around, reinvoking the lockstep, and shaving heads, the way I've been reading about in some of the media. That stuff is gone forever, or at least for as long as I'm in this job. Despite the violence of last and previous weeks, we've still got the best prison system in the world.

"And the best guards. I've been to three of their funerals this week and I'm almost broken-hearted at the loss of these fine men. They are the most often maligned public servants I know of and they face crud like last week's violence all the time.

"We are going to have to provide them with more protection.

"Among these protections will be a plan to redeploy our resources so that all convicts — at all levels of danger potential, or the lack of it — are dealt with continuously according to flexible standards of evaluation which will keep them in program that are acutely geared to their needs, and our needs for them.

"The adjustment center apparently isn't the answer to house the really bad man any more just as today's violent criminal isn't any lovable old Wallace Beery type. We're not proud of it any more than the average sheriff is proud of his county jail but it's all we've got until we can work out better packaging for the product; the mean and murderous prisoner.

"Thank God we don't have many of them."