

How Violence Has Changed

By Jim Findley

Two parallel stripes of fresh white paint form the new narrow corridor down which inmates must walk single file between San Quentin prison's education building and the big upper yard.

The inmates move in a line, always in the center of the alleyway, never in any spots that can't be seen from the gun rail. George Jackson could have turned to his right that August Saturday instead of running straight ahead and there would not have been a clear shot at him.

"I just saw him fall, I didn't know then it was George. We all just stood there behind the fence in the yard and looked, it seemed like a long time before they locked us up," said Raymond Wright, 32, once a cell mate of Jackson's, at Soledad Prison, now an inmate in San Quentin's West Block honor wing.

Yesterday was the first time a reporter has been allowed into San Quentin to talk with inmates since the August 21 incident in which three guards and three inmates were killed.

There seemed no dramatic difference — except the new, closely watched lines of men in blue denim and the lingering residue of tension, itself no stranger to San Quentin.

Most significantly, there is less movement throughout the institution. Passes for inmates to move from one area to another are more strictly watched, and there are almost no large clumps of men gathered together. Things move in orderly, controlled lines.

Perhaps the two most dramatic and bizarre incidents in recent American penal history — the August 21 killings and the convict uprising at Attica, N.Y. have rattled the bars of American prisons like nothing ever before

them and nowhere is the issue still reverberating as it is in places like San Quentin.

"Nobody likes to see people dead," said a young black inmate, "but both incidents, they were necessary, you know? We heard the same rhetoric about reform for 20 years and nothing changed.

"Now . . . it was necessary, like Watts was necessary."

Lieutenant Mike Luxford braced a little at the suggestion that "taking any life could ever be necessary."

But he said he was going out on a limb when he added that, "sadly, it sometimes takes a tragedy to get changes."

Lieutenant Luxford and other correctional officers have part of the changes they want — tighter control on inmate movement, the promise of more officers, the implied sympathies of the mysterious "silent majority."

The inmates have something else — "an identity, maybe," said one inmate, "like you know everybody's finally paying attention to what's going on in here."

Another soft-spoken honor inmate put in a blunt evaluation:

"They're never going to be able to handle convicts like they did before—never."

Some inmates complained that they have taken more "harassment" since the August 21 incident — "you walk down those new lines and it's just an invitation for one of 'em (the officers) to shout at you. 'Keep in line' or 'straighten up' or stuff like that."

But the inmates also concede there is a subtle change in their own attitudes.

"I'll tell you, I've never seen so many guys openly taunt those bulls on the gun rail. You know, tell him to

Quentin

shove it and like that," an inmate said.

"It's knowing that people on the outside are really interested," said Sonny Perkins, 38, a black West Block inmate. "It sort of puts guys together in here. Even white guys now will tell you to watch out for a certain guard because he's a racist.

"You see guys who are really prepared to just defy 'em because they know people on the outside are paying attention."

"We haven't had as many people in here before who would just say 'Screw it, if they kill us, they kill us,' another inmate said.

There is a sense among both inmates and staff that changes are coming more rapidly than before — but there is debate and even apprehension about what those changes may bring.

Even West Block honor inmates were locked in their cells for two full weeks after the incident. Inmates in the more troublesome East and South blocks were locked up for up to a month. Even though most of the 2439-man inmate population is now returning to normal routine, the grim "B Section" segregation unit is filled with 170 men under constant lockup, and the strict adjustment center is similarly full.

"You watch it now," said black inmate Raymond Wright. "You give a fist salute to another dude and they'll put you in the hole."

Certain activities in the prison, particularly those associated with "questionable" outside groups, are no longer allowed — at least temporarily. Mail and outside publica-

tions are screened more carefully.

"If somebody could lay their thumb on a simple solution, I'd listen," said Lieutenant Luxford. "I haven't heard it yet."

Rumor has it among the inmates that the critical situation is what one inmate called "a power struggle between custody and the administration."

Although they deny there is any sort of "power struggle," San Quentin officials concede there are sharp differences of opinion between

the uniformed men out on the yard or on the gun rails and the civilian-garbed administrators who meet the public and talk about "treatment and rehabilitation."

The inmates sense that conflict and worry about it more than anything else.

"Like, the side that wins

that one is the side that's going to run this joint," said one inmate.

For the future, the prospects still remain those of trouble.

"Maybe the mood has changed on both sides," said one inmate, "but the situation hasn't. You put a dog in

a cage and keep poking at him and poking at him and pretty soon, he's gonna bite somebody."

"Right now, I'd say every one in here is aware of all the talk and proposals outside," said Lieutenant Luxford. "It's a matter of just waiting — waiting to see

what's going to happen."

"You get it together in here, OK," said Inmate Wright, "but myself, I'm still always asking myself will I be able to get back out there? After what's happened, I don't know. Nothing would surprise me anymore."