

Bloody tale of the Soledad

By Stephen Cook

Soledad Brother George Jackson, the martyr of California's prisoner revolution, went to his death two years ago shouting allusions to the Prison Writings of Ho Chi Minh.

"This is it, gentlemen. The Dragon has come," the convict leader announced as he produced a pistol in the face of startled guards at San Quentin Prison's adjustment center Aug. 21, 1971.

"The Black Dragon has arrived. He's here to free you," he shouted to the first inmates to emerge quietly from their cells.

Marin County author Min S. Yee reveals this and considerably more about that "bloodiest day in San Quentin's history" in his book, "The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison," which, ironically, is not on sale in Marin County.

At the front of the book, he quotes the late North Vietnamese leader: "People who come out of prison can build up a country. Misfortune is a test of people's fidelity. Those who protest at injustice are people of true merit. When the prison doors are opened, the real dragon will fly out."

The book is a chronicle of the deadly chain of events that grew out of the racial antagonism and human misery at Soledad prison at the start of this decade.

The violence began with the fatal shooting of three black inmates by a white guard in the adjustment center yard of Soledad Jan. 13, 1970. It ended a year and a

half later with the deaths of Jackson, two white inmates and three guards at the San Quentin adjustment center.

In the end, Yee counts 20 men dead.

It is because 11 of those deaths occurred in Marin — at the Courthouse and San Quentin Prison — that the book is not for sale there.

Yee has included a full chapter detailing the previously untold state version



MIN S. YEE

No sale in Marin

of what happened at San Quentin the day Jackson died.

Because six San Quentin inmates are about to go on trial in Marin Superior Court, charged with the murders of that bloody day, Harper and Row Publishers have written Marin book dealers: "We have decided not to offer it (the book) for sale in Marin County until after the trial has been concluded." The book came out this month."

dragons

Yee said in an interview the controversial chapter is based on "sworn investigative statements and personal interviews" and "all I'm saying is that this is what prison officials and guards say is what happened."

The author had covered the story from its beginning at Soledad as a reporter for Newsweek and the Washington Post and had served as an investigator for a legisla-

tive committee studying problems at Soledad.

The book states a belief that the San Quentin tragedy occurred because guards knew Jackson was caching arms with an eye toward a mass escape and "plotted to control and manipulate the scheme," possibly intending to kill Jackson.

Yet Yee's account details practically no defense evidence. He offered this partial explanation:

My prison sources closed first. Then the radical sources started drying up, partly because the more radical element is not interested in truth. To them, it's almost irrelevant. That might be workable from a legal point of view, but not from a historical or journalistic point of view."

Some of the most startling evidence revealed by Yee in the San Quentin chapter deals with whether radical attorney Stephen M. Bingham, missing since the day Jackson's death, passed a

gun to Jackson during their visit that day.

Jackson was anxiously expecting the visit, Yee reports, and complained loudly that "I got a visit and you guys aren't giving it to me."

At Jackson's insistence, the adjustment center guards called the visiting room to ask if Bingham had arrived. Inmate Hugo Pinell, one of those later charged with the day's murders, asked the same question twice when he came to the visiting room to meet his mother and two other women.

Prison officials maintain Jackson was thoroughly searched before he was finally allowed to visit with Bingham. When he returned to the adjustment center after the visit, they say Jackson produced the 8½ inch long run from beneath his Afro wig.

After the ensuing blood-bath, Yee reports, investigators searching the legal file Jackson carried to and from the adjustment center made a startling discovery.

On the back of one page of a letter, they noticed some erasure marks and some barely visible writing. A stereoscopic microscope in the state laboratory in Sacramento revealed the handwriting of George Jackson, and this message:

"Take the bullets out of the bag. Hurry and give me the piece in the bag. Keep the bullets."

Were these scribbled orders to Bingham in the visiting room? If so, Jackson

must have carried the two clips of bullets that he produced with the gun to and from the visiting room — through an alleged careful skin search.

Yee believes the gun was passed at an earlier time and that Jackson's refusal of the bullets exhibits his fear that someone would set him up for killing by passing him dud ammunition.

Furthermore, said Yee, Jackson had two guns, possibly three, that day. He relies on prior prison grapevine reports that there were about seven guns in San Quentin and that Jackson had one. He also relies on the report of one of the guards — officer W. L. Hampton who, Yee writes, said an inmate pointed a revolver in his face that day.

After the 30 minute rebellion was quelled, officers found only the 9 mm automatic Jackson carried to his death on the yard. Hampton was asked if he was certain he'd seen a revolver, not an

automatic. He said: "Yes. I'm certain it was a revolver."

Yee told The Examiner he originally listed Bingham as dead, the 21st victim in the

chain of killings. Before the book was printed, he said, something changed his mind. He won't say why but he now believes Bingham is alive, awaiting the outcome of the San Quentin Six trial.