



The 'Florida Hilton' for white-collar criminals

By Robert Shaw
Knight Newspapers Writer

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE — Four miles into this sprawling outpost of jet planes and slash pines, take a right onto Inverness Road, follow it six-tenths of a mile and you'll run into an open aluminum cattle gate with a government - blue sign:

"Federal Prison Camp," it reads. "No Through Traffic."

Without that sign, it's possible motorists might drive right by — or into — Florida's most famous federal correctional institution, a prison without walls, fences, armed guards or even regulation requiring prisoners to remain on the grounds.

It is the Eglin Federal Prison Camp. In government parlance, it is a "minimum security" institution. More commonly — and much to its superintendent's distress — it's known as the Florida Hilton. Whatever, the slammer it's not — no Attica or Soledad.

"I came here after a career in maximum - and medium - security prisons," said Superintendent James A. Rhodes, a 20 year veteran prison official.

"In the mornings, I'd watch 250 men getting into buses to go to work, supervised by civilians. Then at night, 69 more would get into a bus to go off to the junior college.

"It almost run me nuts. What was to keep them here?"

The answer is almost nothing. Located just north of Fort Walton Beach, about 50 miles from Pensacola along the Panhandle's "miracle strip," Eglin is what prisoners — and many civilian reformers — think a prison ought to be.

There are color televisions in the barracks, tennis courts eyed enviously by Air Force personnel who live in a trailer camp just 200 yards away and — according to a

government survey last year — the best food in the entire 43 - prison federal system.

Home primarily to "white collar" criminals serving sentences of three years or less, Eglin is barred by an agreement with the Air Force from receiving murderers, rapists or convicts convicted of other violent crimes.

The largest portion of its 481 - inmate population, about 27 percent, are narcotics offenders. Another 10 percent are in for car theft. Nearly as many are convicted moonshiners.

The remainder are the prisoners that have put Eglin on the map — politicians, doctors, lawyers and, most recently, Watergate burglars. Four of the seven caught breaking into Democratic national headquarters — Bernard Barker, Frank Sturgis, Eugenio Martinez and Virtilio Gonzales — were released after serving two months.

E. Howard Hunt has spent time at Eglin. So has Miami financier Louis Wolfson.

By and large, says Rhodes, "these people make excellent inmates. They're no problem. Most prefer to do their time, remain in the background, do what they're told and make as few waves as possible."

A prisoner's day begins at about 6 a.m. in one of the camp's four 150 - foot long barracks. After making the narrow, military - style bed which is set three feet away from his neighbor's, he can go to breakfast — or not. At about 6:45 most pile into dark blue buses to take them to their work detail.

The Eglin inmates perform 30 - 40,000 man - hours of labor a month for the Air Force, which in return provides the camp facilities. For the most part, they cut lawns, trim hedges or work in the motor pool.

On weekends, visitors can

be entertained at one of 22 cement tables shaded by red, blue and yellow umbrellas in a fenced - in area at the front of the compound. Those with less than eight months to go can get two 14 - hour furloughs with their families. Wearing civilian clothes, they are released to go where they want — to the beach, a motel or simply a drive in the country.

Bible classes, an alcoholics anonymous chapter and a toastmasters club also flourish.

Inmates wanting an education can get that as well, and 55 per cent of the camp's population is enrolled in either in - camp programs or vocational

courses at nearby Okaloos - Walton Junior College.

Rounding off the list of amenities is the commissary, which offers everything from \$1.10 cans of peanuts and cans of Afro - Sheen to cigarettes at \$2.50 a carton. Inmates with no money can qualify for meritorious service awards that pay \$5 to \$25 a month.

Still, the illusion of freedom and normalcy at Eglin vanishes quickly for anyone

who stays there long. There is one payphone, monitored, in the camp, and inmates line up every night to place collect calls.