

Attica Guards Tell

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Attica State Correctional Facility officers have been tightlipped about what caused the September 9 riot. Their silence, not understood by some, stems from many factors.

One is that they have been ordered, in the face of a legislative investigation, to remain mute.

Another is that correctional officers never have been big talkers because there is a chance somebody might hear you who would like to kill you — and maybe your family, too.

A third factor is that these men are weary. Few have had a day off since the turmoil began. They have been going with just a few hours sleep each night.

And finally, it is difficult to find words to tell strangers about something so personal.

ANONYMOUS

But, in the aftermath of a tragic time in which many accusations have been made against them, a few consented to private interviews with the Los Angeles Times — and only after assurances they would remain anonymous.

With bitter intensity, they declared that their side of the Attica story should already have been told.

The officers maintained that serious trouble has been heading for Attica for eight years — that they saw it coming, but, by federal court order, were forbidden to do anything about it.

Their Story

COMING

“There is no question about it — no question that it was coming, no question that it was planned.

“In 1962 we became aware of this militant group, the Black Muslims, inside Attica. At that time they were setting up an organization and it was then that we went in and broke them up and segregated them from each other and refused to permit them to have any type of gathering.

“We have put listening devices in the cells and we heard their plans — to conquer the world, destroy the whites.

“Well, they went to federal court and we had a full-fledged hearing.

BOXES

“We presented boxes and boxes full of confiscated material that set up the plan for their organization within the institution for Black Muslims, that they would govern the institution, govern the cell blocks.

“We presented evidence of their plans to run white prisoners out of their cell blocks, evidence that they would demand of the institution that they be separated from the whites, that they

would have their own services, their own food.

“And what did the judge do? He ruled that this was a religion. That you can't restrict them in their religious beliefs. And that we had to change the rules to permit Black Muslim ministers in and to permit them to have services within the institution.

REHEARSALS

“Well, their services were simply nothing other than organizational rehearsals for Black power, this was the total scheme that came in the guise of a religion.

“Well, we segregated them anyway. Simply because they were militant Blacks who would not conform to the rules and regulations of the institution. They attempted to destroy every single project the Department of Corrections instituted.

“They incriminated hundreds of ignorant, illiterate Negroes, telling them they would have nothing but a white mind inside a black body and that this is not permitted under the teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

“So we had illiterate Negroes we tried to get enrolled in the school programs so they could at least read and write. But the Black Muslims

forbade the illiterates to do it.

SEGREGATED

"It was a constant hassle. So when we found a man distributing literature or intimidating inmates and other inmates, we segregated him.

"Then the topper came. Constance Baker Motley, a colored Negro judge of the Second District of New York, issued an edict against the warden of Green Haven Prison and fined him and the State of New York for imposing on Brother Martin, this militant individual, and placing him in segregation (solitary confinement) in violation of his civil rights.

"Poor Brother Martin, one of the most vicious, one of the most evil people — he instigated the riots at Buffalo, taught those people how to build Molotov cocktails, he was engaged in the narcotics trade and he was indicted for murder of a prostitute.

CONCENTRATED

"He was one of the most vicious people the penal system has ever encountered and also one of the most clever enemies of the penal

system and we get fined for segregating him!"

The officers maintained that when this happened, it became apparent to them that the matter was out of their hands.

"We had no choice. And the black radicals then had the opportunity to organize because they had a court edict saying you can't segregate them.

"So they were all together in the block at Attica — all of them, Muslims and Panthers. They were concentrated. They held their meetings on the lawn. They elected officers. They did the whole bit.

"And so this (the riot) happened at Attica. And we couldn't stop it. We knew that this was a possibility and there we stood with the federal courts tying our hands.

JOINT

"It finally got to the point where a lot of the men said, 'To hell with it. I'm through trying to make this place run sensibly. From now on I'm just putting in my eight hours and if they tear the

whole joint down, so be it.'

"Now you might say that was a bad attitude — but God damn it, you couldn't blame them for feeling that way"

Asked about the relationship between Black Muslims and Black Panthers, they replied:

"The only difference between the Muslims and the Panthers is ideological — they both are after the same end. And in this riot here, they were together .

"The only place they were not together was during the riot when some of the inmates said, to hell with it, let's kill these bastards (referring to the hostages).

"Well, the Muslims were so well organized that after

they assembled the hostages, they put a ring of Muslims around them, armed with knives and spears.

"When some of the inmates said 'Let's kill them,' immediately the order went out: double the guard. They did. They knew they had to protect the hostages to get their demands — and they did so most efficiently."

QUENTIN

Of the effect on Attica of the incident at California's San Quentin Prison last month in which three guards and three prisoners were slain, the guards interviewed said: "Two days after this thing at Quentin, they had a fast at Attica and in D mess there were only 11 inmates out of 768 who actually ate. And at a mess 90 per cent fasted. That was an all-day fast. In honor of the revolution and (George) Jackson (the "Soledad Brother" who was slain in the San Quentin incident).

"But you have to realize one thing. The solidarity is not that great among the blacks. Most of these men were intimidated. A small but damned powerful group said that if you eat any food, you're dead. And they meant it. And they proved it. They're still diggin' up inmates' bodies in the yard up there."

Asked if they thought, as had the guards at San Quentin, that the Attica incident was the result of outside planning, they replied:

"They had no help from the outside in organizing this thing. I don't think. They didn't need any. When the guards have to permit a thing like this (the court order regarding the Muslim religion) to go on, they don't need help from the outside."

REV

"They psychologically reinforce themselves from the inside. They get to the point where they believe they are in control. They rev themselves up. It's just like some of the religious services where they get the spirit and roll on the ground."

"These militants are entranced with their own power at this point. And that's why, unless hard steps are taken now, the same Goddamn thing is going to happen at prisons all over America."

"The thing is, when they

get to believing all this crap about themselves and start making demands — well, once these crazy demands start pouring out of them. then it's just a matter of time before they actually riot to get them."

CORRIDORS

"Hell, one of the demands was that we tear out the corridors and make this all one complete yard so that the institution could no longer segregate even the black militants into separate situations such as B block and they could infiltrate other blocks. They wanted to practice their brotherly love on all the other institutions."

Why didn't San Quentin become as bloody as Attica? The Attica officers believe that at San Quentin there was not enough time. The California officers went right in and knocked down the insurrection before there was a chance for the inmates to think.

One guard said: "Yeah, I think the Quentin thing did happen prematurely. I often wondered how a man could hide a gun in his hair (referring to George Jackson) until I was going to Nebraska recently and I saw several colored guys get on the plane — Christ, they could have hidden a howitzer in their hair."

CRITICAL

The interviewed officers were all intensely critical of the handling of the trouble at Attica from start to finish. They agreed with the thoughts expressed by the warden of another New York state prison:

"When that whistle blew there were at least 100 to 150 correctional officers. There were at least a hundred weapons. I would have armed those officers and I would have said, 'Fellows let's go back and get them.' And we would have gotten them — within a matter of a couple of hours. Then I would have called the state police for reinforcements."

"A show of force at that point — they only had 11 hostages — would have done it. They were too disorganized, one group setting fire to one area, another setting fire to the school and so forth."

EYE

"Look, you had those AR-15s and you could have

gone up through a block and gone up on that roof and covered the whole institution. And those AR-15s will shoot a man's eye out at 75 yards and it's no more than 150 yards across the whole compound."

"But that's not what Russell Oswald (New York's prison commissioner) decided. He decided to negotiate. God damn it, you don't negotiate with black militants!"

"But Russell must not have known that. Russell's experience has been that of a rather vocal individual, having no experience at all in the field of penology except the experience he vocalizes. And his theories have been very well pointed out by the incident here, in that he brought in Bobby Seale and William Kunstler to talk with the rioters."

"Of all the people to bring in — people who could only serve to encourage the situation and who would leave immediately afterwards to revile him and to continue to build up resistance on the part of militants through the operations of institutions and through the administration."

BADGES

There are varied opinions among the correctional officers interviewed at Attica about the future. Some have decided the matter personally by turning in their badges.

Others who stayed, and this includes ranking officers with up to 22 years service here, maintain that the Attica riot will set penology back 20 years.

"Prisoners are not normal people and we are trained to try and do something for these people. How can we return these people to society as contributors rather than preying on society?"

OUTCRY

"This is the foremost thing in the mind of every dedicated correctional officer."

"And I don't think that

these officers at Attica will be too discouraged by what happened. I don't think they will overreact toward the inmates despite the fact that they lost eight brother officers.

"What's going to set penology back 20 years will be the public outcry. The people of New York are going to demand punitive action. Members of the legislature are going to consider on the basis of votes some of these demands."

There are other sides of the Attica story to tell. Many sides. The men whose words are quoted here were all veteran officers with more than two decades of service. Attempts to get younger officers to talk in such a manner have proved fruitless.