

The Bitterness That Led To the Quentin Killings

By Tim Findley

Within hours after Saturday's escape attempt at San Quentin Prison, three of the state's toughest prisons were locked up under the tightest security possible.

San Quentin was locked up first — none of the 2700 inmates moved out of their cells. The order was out from Department of Corrections

officials to all 13 of the state's prisons to take precautions. Deuel Vocational Institute immediately locked up its 1400 prisoners.

At Soledad, officials said some black inmates wept when they heard that George Jackson was dead. They wept and they went into their cells.

Director of Corrections

Raymond Procnier, just back from a meeting of corrections officials in Florida, arrived at San Quentin early in the evening, three hours after the attempt. San Quentin Warden Louis Nelson turned back from his vacation in Bend, Ore.

Even today, Soledad and Deuel remain locked up as

tight as San Quentin. There is an extra wariness among the officers at Folsom, San Luis Obispo, Vacaville and Tehachapi.

The tension and bitterness is still rippling down through the entire prison system.

"You can be certain the

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unlock will be done with great caution," said a spokesman for Procnier. There were early hints of an entirely new reclassification of inmates — toughening custody on many men, taking away some liberties, re-evaluating procedures. Doing it all slowly, carefully.

BITTERNESS

San Quentin Associate Warden Jim Park, still lashing his words with barely controlled bitterness, said it must be done, "so officers can come to work in the morning without their wives crying."

Already the talk is of a major investigation, demanded by the reformers who blame the prison system and hinted at by others who think reform and liberal policies have gone too far.

The escape was unlike any other attempted, not only because it was more bloody, but because there has been a single gore-stained thread running through all the heavy pressure building nearly the last two years.

It began in earnest in January, 1970, when Soledad tried to relieve racial hatred in its grim adjustment center by opening a new exercise yard. On the first day, three black men were shot dead by a correctional officer trying

to break up what he thought was a racial brawl.

Within two months a correctional officer at Soledad was beaten to death. Notes found on a blackboard and elsewhere in the prison said "one down, two to go." Within a year after that, two more officers at Soledad were killed.

CENTER

George Jackson and the other two "Soledad Brothers," Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette, were moved to San Quentin's adjustment center to await trial in San Francisco on charges of beating to death the first correctional officer victim at Soledad.

In August, 1970, an abortive attempt was made to free three inmates on trial at the Marin county courthouse. Four people were killed — a judge, two black inmates, and 17-year-old Jonathan Jackson, who it was speculated had planned the kidnap-escape in an effort to free his brother, George.

Those were the events that made headlines. Between them, however, was a building period of controversy about prisons. Inmates, authorities complained, were for the first time using radical politics as the justification for their crimes, both past and recent.

The demands on the out-



GEORGE JACKSON
'This is it'

side for prison reform seemed almost cyclic — a periodic awareness of the brutality of confinement.

INMATES

Inside, however, there was something new. Inmates were showing signs of organized radical groups not just within single prisons, but reaching from prison to prison around the nation's largest scattered system of penal institutions.

The Department of Corrections, the Chronicle learned, has for months been investigating the clandestine "Convict Union" within the walls. Messages from one prison to

another has been intercepted which indicated that the secret organization had some control over the violence in prisons.

Whether because of his own growing "celebrity" reputation on the outside, or because of tips from inside the walls, authorities intimated that Jackson was a key figure, perhaps the leader of the secret "Convict Union."

It seemed unlikely that the intense and articulate 29-year-old who had served an unusually long ten years for second degree robbery could participate in, much less run, a secret organization from behind the tense barriers of security he had been placed in as a "Soledad Brother" and accused killer of a correctional officer.

Wherever he went, he was skin-searched constantly — ordered to take his clothes off, bend over and spread his legs apart, rub briskly through his hair, open his mouth. Jackson and other inmates considered potentially dangerous went through that procedure sometimes several times a day.

For Jackson, the searches were most often for his frequent trips to and from the visiting room to talk with a constant stream of attorneys, investigators, reporters, family and widening circle of political friends.

Jackson and the Soledad Brothers had already become national "cause" figures in radical movements by the time Jackson's critically-acclaimed book "Soledad Brothers: The Prison Letters of George Jackson," came out late last year.

He dedicated the book to his dead brother, Jonathan, "scourge of the unrighteous, soldier of the people"; to his mother and to Angela Davis, and promised, "to the destruction of their enemies I dedicate my life."

It was this kind of revolutionary talk that angered and frightened prison officials. Violent incidents in prison, particularly the unprecedented murder of five corrections officials in 18 months, were traced back by authorities to this "kill the pig rhetoric" by prison officials.

The officials made sharp remarks about attorneys and radicals inflaming trouble in the prisons. More than once the authorities suggested that lawyers were acting as message carriers between violent inmates.

ANGRY

Most alarmed and most angry about this were the corrections officers themselves. Until two years ago or less, their jobs had slowly been getting better.

They dropped references to themselves as "guards." Under Proconier's leadership the "joints" were loosening up. Inmates could make telephone calls, receive family visits.

The Adult Authority was releasing men on parole at a faster rate than ever before. The prison population was declining because the manageable inmates were being let out early if they went to prison at all under new probation arrangements.

But the violence inside the walls was deadlier than ever before — and seemingly without reason. Officers were killed not by men who were trying to escape, but by inmates certain to be caught.

Correctional officers them-

selves were on the verge of mutiny against the administration by Saturday. They demanded tighter controls, more guns on the walls and less attention to the political influences of reformers.

DEMANDS

The fact was, that despite the demands for reform, both modest and strident, California prisons were ostensibly more liberal and obviously more violent places than ever before. In the long run, it appeared likely that even further reforms, however slow, were on the way. George Jackson's book and the political supporters he rallied helped that cause.

The Soledad Brothers trial was scheduled to begin within two weeks, and it was expected to bring more pressure and controversy about prison reform. As early as today, there was to be a preliminary hearing fraught with tensions brought from San Quentin.

It was in that context that Jackson took the skin search early Saturday afternoon and went, under guard, to the visiting room. Through with the visit, the officers marched him back across the pleasantly landscaped mall to the iron-stiff adjustment center where he was to be skin searched again.

BROTHER

"This is it!" Jackson is reported to have said as he whipped out a gun — the same words his brother used in the Marin county courthouse.

He was shot down within an hour as he sprinted for a 20-foot wall topped with barbed wire. There were four dead men in his concrete cell.

But there remained a question about why — one that George Jackson asked himself months before after his younger brother was shot to death.

"If I'd known ahead of time," he said almost exactly a year ago, "I would have stopped him. I know the guards here. I knew they'd shoot. I knew they'd kill Jonathan."