'I was a guard in Pontiac prison'

A Tribune reporter's chilling description of 'deadlock'

By William Recktenwald

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THE CELLBLOCK was filled with trash, excrement, and spoiled food, all of it soaked with water that collected in puddles. The air reeked of tear gas, MACE, and smoke. A pile of bedding was on fire, and all the windows were closed. Men in the cells began screaming and clanging on the bars.

This may sound like a description of the Pontiac state prison at the height of the riot there last July, when three guards were killed and three others seriously injured. And so it might have been in July.

But this was Pontiac on Oct. 11, almost three months after the riot; it was the scene as I entered the segregation cellblock to begin my first day as a prison guard.

Exclusive

Reporter William Recktenwald, who took a job in the state prison at Pontiac to view conditions there, is no stranger to "inside" investigations. As chief investigator for the Better Government Association before joining The Tribune, he worked undercover in probes of the nursing-home industry, ambulance services, and vote fraud. This is the first article in a series from the assignment he describes as his toughest yet.

By Oct. 11, the Pontiac Correctional Center had been on "deadlock" for almost three months. Deadlock is a prison word. What it stands for is a living hell in which everybody loses, guards and inmates alike.

FOR AN INMATE, deadlock means:

- You are locked up 24 hours a day in a 9-by-5-foot cell, probably with another inmate. The toilets are often broken, but after a while the stench doesn't matter so much. You and your cellmate have had only one shower in three months.

- You eat all meals in your cell. The cells weren't designed for that, so the food is slopped on paper plates that have to be bent and crammed through the bars. Some guards take care with this. Others delight in watching the food drip over the inmate and his cell. The food that arrives is often cold and almost always unappetizing.

- Cookies, the only consistently tasty item on the prison menu, acquire a value like that of water in the desert. Cookies become a form of prison currency, and inmates will lie, steal, threaten, perhaps even kill for them—especially the ones with raisins, which can be saved to make "hooch."

- You are dependent on the guards

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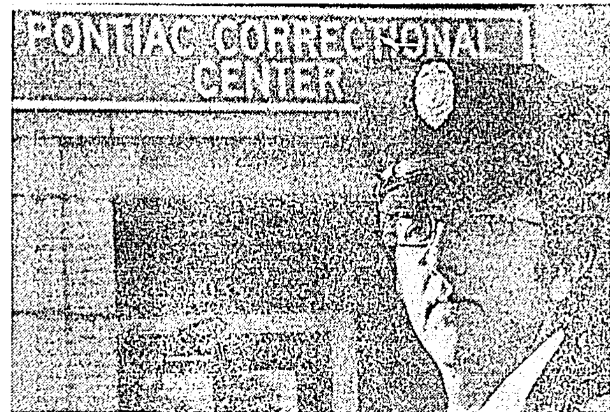

William Recktenwald: "I began to understand how . . . three men died."

'A huge arm shot through the bars...'

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for the smallest of services, like getting a pencil sharpened or a cigaret lit. Many of the guards won't be bothered with doing anything for an inmate. Normal privileges like once-a-month telephone calls are suspended for most inmates.

FOR A GUARD, deadlock means:

○ You are in constant danger of attack by inmates who seem to become more crazed each day. When you walk on a tier, inmates can reach out and grab you. You quickly learn there's no justice: Do a favor for an inmate, and he may thank you profusely—or he may toss a cup of urine in your face.

● Your duties change. You're no longer just a guard, you're a prison janitor. You have to sweep up the rotten food and excrement hurled by the inmates from their cells. Sweeping it off the floor is better than cleaning it off your clothes.

○ You begin to believe you're on the firing line all alone and nobody beyond the rank of lieutenant gives a damn. In the seven days I worked at Pontiac, I never saw the warden [Thaddeus Pinkney, who has since been fired]. What shocked me was that some guards who'd been there more than a year said they'd never seen him either.

● And the reason for the deadlock always sticks in your mind. At Pontiac, three people who wore uniforms like yours died in a riot, and three more were seriously injured.

WHEN I ARRIVED for my first shift, 3 to 11 p.m., I had not had a minute of training except for a one-hour orientation lecture the previous day. I was a "fish," a rookie guard, and very much out of my depth.

A veteran officer welcomed the "fish" and told us: "Remember, these guys don't have anything to do all day, 24 hours a day, but think of ways to make you mad. No matter what happens, don't lose your cool. Don't lose your cool!"

I had been assigned to the segregation unit, containing 215 inmates who are the most trouble. It was an assignment nobody wanted.

To get there, I passed through seven sets of bars. My uniform was my only ticket through each of them. Even on my first day, I was not asked for any identification, searched, or sent through a metal detector. I could have been carrying weapons, drugs, or any other contraband. I couldn't believe this was what's meant by a maximum-security institution. In the week I worked at Pontiac, I was subjected to only one check, and that one was cursory.

THE SEGREGATION unit consists of five tiers, or galleries. Each is about 300 feet long and has 44 cells. The walkways are about 3½ feet wide, with the cells on one side and a rail and cyclone fencing on the other. As I walked along one gallery, I noticed that my elbows could touch cell bars and fencing at the same time. That made me easy pickings for anybody reaching out of a cell.

The first thing told me was that a guard must never go out on a gallery by himself. You've got no weapons with which to defend yourself, not even a radio to summon help. All you've got is the man with whom you're working.

My partner that first night was Bill Hill, a soft-spoken six-year veteran who immediately told me to take the cigarets out of my shirt pocket because the inmates would steal them. Same for my pen, he said—or "they'll grab it and stab you."

We were told to serve dinner on the third tier, and Hill quickly tried to fill me in on the facts of prison life. That's when I learned about cookies and the importance they have to the inmates.

"THEY'RE GOING to try and grab them, they're going to try and steal them any way they can," he said. "Remember, you only have enough cookies for the gallery, and if you let them get away, you'll have to explain to the guys at the end why there weren't any for them."

Hill then checked out the meal, groaning when he saw the drippy ravioli and stewed tomatoes. "We're going to be wearing this," he remarked, before deciding to simply discard the tomatoes. We served nothing to drink. In my first six days at Pontiac, I never saw an inmate served a beverage.

Hill instructed me to put on plastic gloves before we served the meal. In view of the trash and waste through which we'd be wheeling the food cart, I thought he was joking. He wasn't.

"Some inmates don't like white hands touching their food," he explained.

Everything went routinely as we served the first 20 cells, and I wasn't surprised when every inmate asked for extra cookies.

SUDDENLY, a huge arm shot through the bars of one cell and began swinging a metal rod at Hill. As he ducked away, the inmate snared the cookie box.

From the other side of the cart, I lunged to grab the cookies—and was grabbed in turn. A powerful hand from the cell behind me was pulling my arm. As I jerked away, objects began crashing about, and a metal can struck me in the back.

Until that moment I had been apprehensive. Now I was scared. The food cart virtually trapped me, blocking my retreat.

Whirling around, I noticed that mirrors were being held out of every cell so the inmates could watch the ruckus. I didn't realize the mirrors were plastic and became terrified that the inmates would start smashing them to cut me up.

THE ORDINARY din of the cell house had turned into a deafening roar. For the length of the tier, arms stretched into the walkway, making grabbing motions. Some of the inmates swung brooms about.

"Let's get out of here—now!" Hill barked. Wheeling the food cart between us, we made a hasty retreat.

Downstairs, we reported what had happened. My heart was thumping; my legs felt weak. Inside the plastic gloves, my hands were soaked with sweat. Yet the attack on us wasn't considered unusual by the other guards, especially in segregation. That was strictly routine, and we didn't even file a report.

What was more shocking was to be sent immediately back to the same tier to pass out medication. But as I passed the cells from which we'd been attacked, the men in them simply requested their medicine. It was as if what had happened minutes before was already ancient history.

FROM ANOTHER cell, however, an inmate began raging at us. "Get my medication," he said. "Get it now, or I'm going to kill you." I was learning that whatever you're handing out, everybody wants it, and those who don't get it frequently respond by threatening to kill or maim you. Another fact of prison life.

Passing cell No. 632, I saw that a prisoner I had helped take to the hospital before dinner was back in his cell. When we took him out, he had been disabled by MACE and was very wobbly. Hill and I had been extremely gentle, handcuffing him carefully, then practically carrying him down the stairs. As we went by his cell this time, he tossed a cup of liquid on us.

Back downstairs, I learned I would be going back to that tier for a third time, to finish serving dinner. This time, we planned to slip in the other side of the tier so we wouldn't have to pass the trouble cells. The plates were already prepared.

"JUST GET IN there and give them their food and get out," Hill said. I could see he was nervous, which made me even more so. "Don't stop for anything. If you get hit, just back off, 'cause if they snare you or hook you some way and get you against the bars, they'll hurt you real bad."

Everything went smoothly. Inmates in the three most troublesome cells were not getting dinner, so they hurled some garbage at us. But that's something else I had learned: Getting no worse than garbage thrown at you is the prison equivalent of everything going smoothly.

I had noticed at roll call that day that absenteeism was very high. Several guards told me the segregation unit was always shorthanded. Nobody wanted to work there, they said—and some guards simply can't, because the inmates are known to consider them "marked men."

What with the absenteeism and the trouble we'd had, an entire tier still had to be served dinner. The inmates began shouting and banging on the bars. I suddenly felt trapped in some old prison movie. The whole building seemed to reverberate with the noise.

THIS TIME I was paired with another man, a veteran black guard named Willie Rocket, who told me how we were going to avoid a whole lot of trouble.

"The way I avoid all this crap is if they ask for more, like a piece of bread, and I have it, I just give it to them," he said.

We had been warned to watch out for cell No. 842 because the inmate there was "real bad." When we reached that cell, we were confronted by a huge man who started waving a steel pipe at me and demanding more cookies. I had some left over, so I gave them to him. He quieted down immediately.

It seemed incredible that the man was allowed to keep such a weapon, but Rocket assured me it was not at all unusual.

THE CELLS of half a tier are locked by a single system, he explained, and getting into one cell would require opening many others. There wasn't enough manpower to assure security, especially in segregation.

Besides, Rocket said, no one wanted to be the first man in the door to try taking that pipe away. All in all, it was a lot easier to let the inmate keep it and cool him down with a few extra cookies.

Rocket and I took a break for dinner. After serving the ravioli, I could barely look at it, so we opted for some ham loaf. It tasted vile. Neither of us could eat more than a few bites.

I could barely sit down. The adrenalin was still pumping from my first night on the galleries. Rocket explained to me his philosophy of how to run a "good house."

"YOU WRITE them up every time they get out of line," he said. "You write them up, and when they start losing their TVs, their phone calls, and their commissary privileges, then they'll understand that we don't have to take any bull around here. That's the only way you have a good house."

Another rookie guard joined us. He'd been in the South Cell House, and the worst thing that had happened was that some inmates threw cups of water at him.

"I'm not going to let anyone or anything chase me out of here," he vowed. "I'm going to stick it out." He would be gone in less than a week.

When I got back to segregation, I was assigned to phone rounds. A few inmates were to be permitted 10-minute calls, their first contact with the outside world since the riot.

A GUARD warned me that all I was going to hear was a bunch of guys calling their girlfriends to talk about sex.

It proved to be nothing like that. The first call went to a young inmate's home, and I could hear him tell his teen-age brother that he was now "a changed man" and wouldn't ever be going to prison again. His mother was in church, but he wanted his brother to be sure to tell her that he had changed.

After the call, he asked me for some advice. He had written his mother to ask for $40 for bus fare because he was getting out in 30 days, but she had sent only $10. He wanted to know if he should "show her" by sending it back.

I told him that might be all she could afford right then, and it would be wrong to shame her by sending it back. That seemed to make him feel better, and it made me feel good for the first time all night.

ANOTHER INMATE told me I seemed "okay" and said there were a few decent guards, but he explained that most of the prisoners hate all guards because they see them as the equivalent of the police.

"They think you put them here," he said. "They don't understand you just keep them here."

As soon as I plugged the phone into a jack to let the inmate in 407 place a call, the man in the next cell began demanding his phone call. He was listed as "C" grade, which made him ineligible, and we told him so.

"I'm 'B' grade," he began shouting. "I want my ——— phone call."

Then he became hysterical, screaming: "Get off this gallery. Get off this ——— gallery right now or I'm going to blind you."

HE GRABBED a can of cleanser and ran to the sink to fill a cup with water. The mixture of cleanser and water is a favorite weapon used against guards. A well-aimed throw can temporarily blind the victim, and even a poor throw can make a mess of his uniform for the rest of the shift.

As the man readied his throw, the keeper—chief guard of the cellblock—arrived on the tier and stood holding a can of MACE, which he aimed at the inmate.

We disconnected the phone, cutting the inmate in the next cell off in midcall. It didn't seem fair that he was being punished for what the other man did, and he began pleading with us to let him finish his call.

"No more calls for anyone," the keeper ordered, and we retreated behind his can of MACE.

"The other prisoners will take care of that guy for us," the keeper told me. "They'll know it was because of him that the phone calls ended."

THAT NIGHT I paced my motel room for hours. Even a six-pack of beer didn't calm me down. Images raced through my mind. The first inmate I had seen at Pontiac was a tall young man. His face was ashen, his eyes glazed. Two guards were walking him to the prison hospital as blood dripped from five broad gashes across his left arm.

Later, he would tell me that he had only four months to go on a one-year term at Pontiac, but he couldn't take it anymore. He had slashed his right arm so the psychiatrist would send him to Menard, the state mental hospital for inmates. When that hadn't worked, he had cut up his other arm. He was delighted because he'd gotten his transfer.

"I just couldn't stay here," he explained. "Man, you don't know what it's like to be locked up in one of those cages. Those little cages are ——— hell. You can't believe how bad it is."

I'm not a bleeding heart. I know that prisons are filled with violent people. But for that eight-hour shift I was a prisoner too, and I functioned out of fear. I kept thinking there must be a better way—and I was beginning to understand how easy it was for three men to die in that prison last July.

Monday: Working the North Cell House, where the three guards died.

The background

THE TENSIONS that always seem to simmer at large maximum-security prisons exploded in violence on a Saturday morning last July inside the state correctional center at Pontiac.

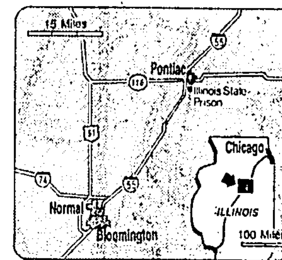
The rioting left three correctional officers dead, three others injured, and damages estimated at $4.1 million to buildings and equipment.

Immediately after the riot, the inmates were placed on deadlock—confined to their cells virtually 24 hours a day and denied exercise, showers, and family visits.

AS THE DEADLOCK continued, lawyers representing inmates and their families went to federal court, seeking a judge's order to end the restrictions and charging that the deadlock violated prisoners' constitutional rights.

The facility was built in 1871, originally as a boys reformatory. As a state prison, it has been the scene of five major riots; at least 10 inmates and guards have been killed, and dozens of others have been injured.

The prison, considered overcrowded and structurally dangerous by the National Clearinghouse for Criminal Justice Planning and Architecture, housed nearly 2,000 inmates at the time of the July 22 riot. The official capacity is 1,250. Since the riot, the population has declined to about 1,600 inmates.



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