

# San Quentin's Elite Force In Action

For three months, Chronicle reporters Charles Howe and Tim Findley lived in the iron world of California's prisons. As part of the assignment, Howe spent a week as a guard at San Quentin.

Today, he tells what it was like on San Quentin's "goon squad"—the elite squad of correctional officers who are the prison's trouble shooters.

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By Charles Howe

During the day I spent on the Special Security Squad at San Quentin Prison — inmates call it "the goon squad" — we ripped off Papa John's cell.

We carried out seven pillowcases full of everything from porn to extra clothing to unauthorized books and a surplus of cigarettes.

We crawled through the prison's sewers like fugitives from "Les Miserables" searching for cut bars, heroin, or anything that could be construed as part of a prison break — or for the thousands of items which are contraband for prisoners.

The elite squad which also doubles in brass as the prison's Tactical Squad is led by Sergeant Kelley, a lithe man who distantly resembles James Cagney. It operates out of a shack on The Alley, where workshops are located and where inmates come to haggle for their goods after their cells have been gone over.

The search this day was for Pruno — inmate-made liquor — and for a typewriter that had been used to grind out a hate sheet called "The White People's National Socialist Party Newsletter."

## Document

In addition to this "Nazi" sheet we were also looking for a black sheet called "National Organization of Warriors," a counterpart of the Nazi document.

Wearing zip-up coveralls and carrying toolbelts that jangled like an over-armed cowboy's gunbelt we hit the West Block — the joint's honor block.

Papa John, we discovered, had a forged hobby card, which meant that the paintings and ceramics and bric-a-brac in his cell were contraband.

Perhaps a hundred pounds of other items — including watches — not shown on his property card at the prison's main office were also declared contraband and carted off.

Technically, Papa John could have been written up on a Form 115, a disciplinary complaint which is used throughout the prison system.

If found guilty by an administration disciplinary court he could have drawn up to 29 days in isolation as punishment.

"Papa's coming up before the parole board soon," said one squad officer. Like most of my peers, the man had each inmate's dossier at his fingertips.

"Hell, there's no point in beefing a man who's

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## Behind Prison Bars

# 'Goon Squad' at Quentin

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on his way out to the streets."

Papa later came into our shack, and with a sly smile he "negotiated" for a portion of my belongings. "I done wrong," he admitted. "All I want is to have them butts back." He'd had more than 30 packs of cigarettes — the maximum permitted by institution rules — but he got the rest back.

"You got to play these things by ear," one officer said.

Later in the day I found a nine-inch knife tucked in the ventilator at East Block, across the yard.

"You can figure you've put in a good day's work," Kelley said, shinning down from a steel girder where, a week earlier, he had found 16 knives taped together in a bundle.

"Who knows? Maybe you saved somebody's life."

That night I worked East Block, which houses 960 inmates. It was the most depressing place in the

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joint: five stories high, inmates milling about and four of us to watch them.

There was the four o'clock lockup and we ran up and down stairs, throwing bars, spiking cell doors (inserting keys and locking them) and then making the count.

### Bungled

I bungled every count I made, necessitating a recount. "Perhaps you are rebelling against having to lock men up," a psychologist friend was to later say, over a cold beer.

"Perhaps the experience goes badly, no?"

He was right; some of the experience went badly.

I promised an inmate on the fourth tier that even though I was locking him up for the eight o'clock lockup (only those on special passes are allowed out after that) I would get the electrician to fix his cell light.

I forgot, running up one tier and down another, and the next day he reminded me I had forgotten him.

"But that is all right, senior," he said softly. "I have been here 11 years and others before you have forgotten, too."

There was a little black inmate tier-tender who saved by bacon on my first lockup. A prisoner, it was his job to unlock the padlock which controls a cell unlocking bar that can let some 60 men out of their cells at once.

"Could I make a suggestion, Mr. Howe?" he asked me each time I committed some gaffe, and each of his suggestions amounted to sound advice. Without his "suggestions" I surely would have been chewed out by the watch sergeant.

### Another Watch

Later, on another watch and in another area, I paused to give a black man inside a cell a light for his cigarette after he had asked for it. He was locked up for the night and without matches and I lit his cigarette.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Officer Nerd, who witnessed the act. "Now that coon's got something on you."

Nerd, a middle-aged fat man, was one of only two officers I met at San Quentin who uttered what amounted to a racist slur. In no instance did I hear an officer make a racist remark to an inmate.

Near the end of the assignment I did something that some critics could say was a mark of my own dehumanization, while a few others might call it "carrying out orders to the letter."

While monitoring the early morning breakfast line I saw an inmate getting an extra piece of French toast. Three was the ration and he took four.

"Put it back," I said, gesturing at the extra slice of toast on his tray.

"Man, don't touch my food," he yelled in a strangled scream.

Several officers moved in close, sensing trouble, for a messhall with 1500 inmates in it always carries a potential for a riot.

The man put the toast back and flashed me a look of hate. The next day he told me he "had just



A guard gave out apples to some San Quentin inmates

been testing me," but I don't know if he meant it.

Worse, at a later feeding Officer Knowles, a jolly and portly man in his 50s, let a number of inmates receive extra portions.

In each case, however, he commented: "Be sure and eat that, now; don't leave nobody hungry."

### Sunny Day

My week at San Quentin ended on a sunny day and in my mind I tried to sum up what I had seen.

My fellow officers were not brutes; they were, in the main, solid working class men who could have been running punch presses or driving tractors in another setting.

Half of the inmate population was black or Chicano and they were, in 1971, neither more nor less than the grandparents of the guards had been: at the low end of the totem pole as regards jobs and status and opportunities.

There had been no physical brutality; no lockstep, no violence. Merley the inexorable certainty of one grey day following the other, like hired mourners at a pauper's funeral.

The inmates, truly, looked no different than the average man on the street and I had never been afraid of them. Though I had searched their cells minutely and had felt of their clothing, sometimes wet with the sweat of anticipation — or worse — I could not truly discern the big difference between them and us.

### Coffee

The Georgia Cracker, still believing I was what I had claimed to be, bought me a last cup of coffee.

"These places ain't as bad as they say and they ain't as good as they could be," he philosophizes. "Hell, to some of these old boys, they're just like home. And to others..."

He let it trail off, for he understood why they keep coming back no better than I.

He got up. "Think I'll hit that yard a lick. Come back soon, hear?"

I said that I would but it was a lie. For the things that it takes to be a good officer — patience and an even temper and the ability to dispense good prison justice — are things I do not have.

And the things that it takes to be a good inmate — patience, an even temper and the ability to get along with The System — are also things I do not have.

But most of all, I thought as I left the bleak prison on a Sunday afternoon, the thing I do not have is the ability to understand the awful mystery of why it is that some men must remain behind bars while other men must guard them.