'The Day We Shook the Yard Down'

By Charles Howe

Sergeant Ivanov had taken a shank — a home-made knife — from a Chicano inmate and the word was that a fight was brewing inside San Quentin Prison.

"The word is that the Los Angeles Chicanos are feuding with the El Paso Chicanos," Ivanov told the five of us. "Maybe it's gambling, maybe something else. We're trying to find out what the beef is so that we can cool it.

"While we find out, you guys go out in the upper yard and start shaking down."

On that morning there were some 2000 inmates moving in and out of the yard, on their way to work or school or a myriad of other places. Each carried a laminated card with his picture on it, plus a piece of paper — all paper in prison is called a ducat — showing what his assignment was.

A cold wind was swirling about the yard and the shakedown — which concentrated mainly on Chicano inmates who make up about 18 per cent of the prison's population — produced nothing.

Simple

The drill was simplicity itself. An officer would face an oncoming inmate and slightly spread his arms. "Shake," one of us would say, and the inmate stopped in his tracks.

All of the man's personal possessions — plastic coffee cup, pipe, pencils and whatever — were held in his hand. Then he spread his arms wide. Facing him, the officer ran his hands down the man's arms, from waist to armpit.

A long brush down the man's back (a knife can be concealed there if tied around the neck on a string) then a pat on the ribs, then circle around front.

Then the waist, then the crotch, then hands down the man's legs, ending up at the trousers. Some of us pulled the trousers up for a peek of ankle; others didn't.

It was old stuff to the inmates, who average several shakedowns a week apiece and if they were offended they said nothing.

'In Shoe'

"Let's make it easy," said one young white man with a scar that ran from lip to ear. "I've got a shank in my shoe."

"Christ, which shoe?" asked Officer Camp, my partner.

"I'll never tell," said the inmate. He had no knife.

"This shake isn't going to produce anything," said Camp, a young man in his late 20s who sported a pig on his tieclasp. "The word's all over the yard by now."

And he was right — but we kept it up until rain started falling.

Later, Camp and I were detailed to the Adjustment Center, which housed 30 of the 90 men at San Quentin who have been condemned to death and are waiting for a decision from the U.S. Supreme Court.

A prison within a prison, the pink three story box that is the Adjustment Center is almost antiseptically clean and was deathly quiet.

Tall Black

We picked up the condemned man: a tall black who was thin as a fence-rail. One of us walked in front of him and one behind. We were a solitary procession going across the yard, with the officer in front calling out "condemned man, stand aside," when inmates wandered too close.

They stared at us as we made our way to the hospital. Some of the inmates looked at the black man with pity; a few with envy of a perverse sort. For he had what they called "a death top" and his crime, they likely thought, was the greatest.

We took the man to the hospital where a doctor treated his foot. None of us ever said a word.

Despite the cold and the light rain, the black man walked slowly on his way back, his feet almost hugging the ground. It was the first time he had been outside the Row in weeks and he savored the walk and we did nothing to hurry him.

In the afternoon Sergeant Ivanov took me on a tour of the big upper yard. Inmates were clustered about, talking, moving quietly. A few of them looked at us: most ignored our presence.

A San Quentin inmate (with outstretched arms) was shaken down in the yard

Locations

"The blacks always gather near the North Block," Inanov said. "The Okies, Nazis and Hells Angels shape up around the East Block. You'll find your Chicanos next to the messhall and the few American Indians near the north end of the mess hall. The other whites have no special place.

"They've been doing it that way for years," he said. "Its tradition — like everything else in this joint."

Ivanov had extensive dossiers on the troublemakers among the various inmates — by race and politics.

"Most of the inmates in here are conservative," he said, "and I mean politically conservative. You've got a few radicals from the left, I guess, but you've fot a lot more Nazis. They talk about inmates getting it together but I don't think it'll ever happen. If they could get it together they wouldn't be in here in the first place."

A prisoner tossed him an apple and Ivanov made as to eat it, then tossed it back.

"Never accept a favor from an inmate," he said, waving at the man and smiling. "If you do, he'll have something on you. It starts out small and gets bigger. In the end he can run you like a train and he'll have you bringing in money, dope, even a gun."

Helmet

An old black man wearing a football helmet wandered past.

"He's an epileptic," Ivanov said. "We got him the helmet because he was always banging his head on the ground when he had a fit."

It was nearly time for the four o'clock lockup. The most dangerous incident of the day had been a low swoop from a seagull which deposited a load of guano on my hat.

It had been, also, a very long day; a day of what could be called tense boredom.

"This old place is kind of like a troopship that never puts into port," said the Georgia Cracker, who joined me in the yard as we prepared to herd lines of men into their cellblock for the four o'clock count, one of four during each 24-hour period.

"You get a few fights every now and again but most are pretty good old boys," he said, waving back an inmate who tried to sneak into his cell block before the authorized time.

The Rain

We stood about in the yard waiting for four to come and then the rain began to come down in buckets. Inmates and officers alike cursed the rain and the wind that swirled about in the yard, searching for an outlet it never found.

"Why don't you bastards let us into our houses?" one inmate yelled, knowing we couldn't because of regulations, but still angry at someone.

They started to boo us and some of us booed right back. Then a few — bolder than the rest — flashed what is called "the social finger."

Some of us, as miserable as the inmates, flashed the finger right back.

It was that way for perhaps a minute, with inmates booing officers and officers booing inmates and it seemed that the only way to tell us apart was by the clothing we wore.

Then the bulls inside the cellblocks opened the big iron gates and the inmates, half of them laughing, ran for cover — and home.

And we followed them in, rain dripping in our faces, laughing and joking as we prepared to lock them up for the count.

Tomorrow: The "Goon Squad"

'Most Dangerous Inmate' Accused of Having Knife

A man described as "San Quentin's most dangerous inmate" was accused in Marin Superior Court of having a weapon in his cell that was used in the stabbing of another prisoner.

Marin Deputy District Attorney Jerry R. Herman said that a home-made knife was found in the cell of Leo Estrada Robles, 26, who also is accused of three murders and housed on Condemned Row.

The weapon, fashioned from a borrowed typewriter, was assertedly used to attack Million L. McShane on Sunday.

WOUND

McShane was taken to the prison hospital after officers found a puncture wound in his chest. The weapon was described as a seven-inch spring attached to a broom handle.

News of Robles' asserted involvement in the stabbing of McShane, sentenced to death for kidnaping for robbery with bodily with bodily harm, came during the penalty phase of Robles' trial.

RE-TRIAL

He is being re-tried for the 1965 execution by hanging of a fellow inmate at Santa Clara county jail.

Robles also is charged with attempting to throw a home-made knife at Sergeant Charles E. Lawrence, a Condemned Row correctional officer.

Prison spokesmen said Robles threw the weapon at Lawrence on Thursday.

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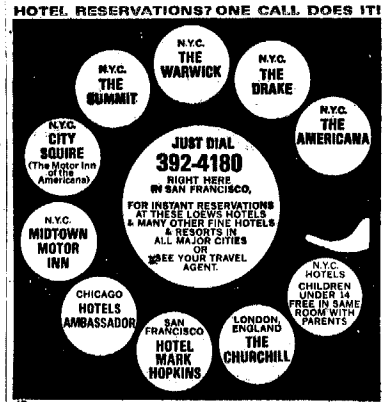

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