

# Reporter's Story -- 'I'm in Soledad'

## *Serving Time With The Cons -- 'We're Dead Men Here'*

For three months, *Chronicle* reporters Charles Howe and Tim Findley lived in the closed world of men and women behind the gates, bars and fences of California's prisons.

They went everywhere — from "model" institutions to places where men are caged like animals 23 hours a day.

They probed what it is that makes one man a prisoner and another a guard. They lived in cell blocks and they lived with the men in the gun towers.

In the coming weeks, *The Chronicle* will disclose their candid, personal reports.

Today Findley writes about the week he spent living in Soledad Prison.

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*By Tim Findley*

Soledad Prison sits just off the edge of Highway 101 about 20 miles south of Salinas.

Winter slugs in off the Pacific and drops a taste of snow at the very top of the Sierra de Salinas to the west before sliding down the mountain and curling into the valley in a chilly, early morning mist.

And the goddamn bell goes off so loud the inside of your eyeballs splash bubbles and pits of red.

"Reveille! Reveille!" an impersonal monotone squawks over a loudspeaker. You cannot even understand the words for the first few days.

The ferocious gulping of toilets up and down the tier is the real cue to open your eyes and try to look humble again in the face of that morning's intimidating sneer from the six inches of concrete in your face.

### *Bible*

A black man — a low riding dude named Masters who spent two years in the hole here before they put him on the bus for the Men's Colony at San Luis Obispo — said being in Soledad was like you were dead.

"The Bible called Lazarus a dead man," he told me in that even unemotional voice, "and it said Jesus made him stir.

"We're dead men here — righteously dead to the world that put us here. The only thing they could do for us in here is to make us stir."

I didn't understand him then, but I nodded and wrote it down, and now, days later as the puffy-eyed correctional officer, going through the motions of the final task in his shift, turned the lock with a thunk and opened up the door of the wing on the mainline, I started thinking about it again.

### *Machine*

A free man in free man's clothing, because the authorities feared for my safety as an inmate, I lived in Soledad for a week — not a true prisoner, but as much a captive of the mind-smothering machine as the 3000 people who live and work there.

Prison is never as simple as the tin cup tanfruits and zoo cage-loathing people insist on visualizing.

"You got a little world in there, a little society," said a corrections official, adding a sage like

# The Life Behind Prison Bars

## 'We're Dead Men,' The Inmates Say

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turning to his forehead to bring weight to the most trite pronouncement in penology. "Everything that happens on the outside happens in there — only in there it's just more intense."

"Hey man, I live here, I've lived in this stinking joint for five . . . -ing years," a man named Campbell said with the same gut bitterness with which he talked about nearly everything. "But, know what, those bastards . . . those bulls — don't have to be here — they come in here eight hours a day every day because they want to, man, and nobody here understands that."

You don't have to go to chow in the morning. You can sack in your cell — your "house" — until around 8:30 if you're accustomed enough to the clangor smacking and pinging in echos upon echos in the three-tiered concrete and steel wing.

### Pictures

The loudspeaker spits again: "Release for early chow and diet line."

The cell is five feet by nine feet — a single cot most of the time, some shelves for your gear with a small surface to hold little pictures of whatever's left on the outside. Nothing on the walls. One paste-up picture and the man may write you up with a form 128 or a more stringent 115 that goes in your "jacket" — that grey folder with all the multi-colored slips of paper that grows thicker with a man's life and always outlives him whether it's in here or haunting him on the outside.

The old cliché of a calendar with the days crossed off on the wall is senseless in a place where the indeterminate sentence means you do a year or a lifetime: a place where if you break a simple rule — like making a mark on the wall — your "attitude" may keep you here longer.

Under one stack of fresh blue denimis specially starched to make them "bonarero" you might have a "hot dog." They call them girly magazines on the street.

### Contraband

Hot dogs are representative of what gets to you after a while. You never know if they're really contraband or if the goon squad that periodically shakes down the cell will consider them so, or if they don't, if the wing officer might.

"I had this hot dog in my house last week, man," one inmate recalled, "and the bull comes in and takes it and says he's going to write me up."

"Know what? This week the same bull comes up to me and says 'get some more hot dogs, Dexter, I won't confiscate 'em.' He must have really liked that first one."

Technically, there is really no such thing as contraband literature, but nobody is quite sure. It's still a big risk to keep the book "Soledad Brother" in your house; you might get nailed as an "organizer."



Inmates in the three-tiered concrete and steel B Wing of Soledad, a prison housing some 3000 convicts and workmen, where things are more 'intense' Photos by Barney Peterson

There are always 30 packs of cigarettes, and, if you can get away with it, even more.

Cigarettes are legal tender — stakes open for a pack in the racehorse games at the back of the tier. For a couple of packs you can get in on the prison — prison made booze — that the tier tender tips you off. For five packs you can buy a welding rod smuggled in from the shops; for a box (a carton) and a half you can get a better piece of iron to make a shank stiff and sharp enough to cut a man's back bone.

For as little as three boxes, you can buy a ticket on another man's life.

"People don't hate each other in here any more than they hate each other on the outside," said Franks, a black man with a kind of easy self assurance that makes him a natural leader. "A dude who gets snuffed usually asked for it some

way. Maybe it's gambling debts he didn't pay; maybe he was pressing somebody too hard; or maybe somebody put a snitch jacket on him. There's always a reason, man."

### Dangerous

Martens, a sallow-faced guy with a build too average to be dangerous, is doing one to ten on a bust for weed — marijuana — the kind of beef that isn't supposed to be happening anymore, because they keep telling you that everybody in here is a robber, a rapist or a killer or a combination of all three.

"When I drove up (arrived) here from Vacaville, man, I was really scared," Martens said. "I'd heard all that about the racial stuff and the violence coming down here and how this place was a gladiator school. I just locked up as much as I could, man, for the first week."

He was sitting at one of the coarse cloth-covered tables on the first tier in a group almost too perfect to be accidental — Martens, the white dude; Lopez, a gregarious chicano; and Franks, the black man everybody respected.

"You learn anything here, man, and it's gotta be that that 'racially torn' crap is mostly bull. What there is, man, is agitated by those bulls. If they keep us fighting each other, we won't have time for them."

Red made, house in order, and maybe breakfast — at least some coffee — would be good, so you put your own key in the iron door with the little square steel-meshed window and shoulder it open on another morning.

Soledad. In Spanish, it means lonely.

Tomorrow: How much is a life worth?



CHRONICLE REPORTER TIM FINDLEY  
He lived behind bars at Soledad for a week



A typical cell at Soledad is five by nine feet, with a single cot and some shelves for personal gear