

Article

USP Marion: A Few Prisoners Summon the Courage to Speak

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Abstract: USP Marion is the first supermax federal penitentiary. Marionization refers to the experimental control program used at this prison. The prisoners speaking in this article suffered many years of solitary confinement. This research brief discusses some of what they experienced in their own words. These are the recollections of a few Marion prisoners that have summoned the courage to speak out and share their darkest memories.

Keywords: USP Marion; marionization; supermax; prison ethnography; auto ethnography

1. Introduction

I have been to United States Penitentiary (USP) Marion twice [1]. Richards wrote ([2], p. 8), “USP Marion is located 300 miles south of Chicago and 120 miles east of St. Louis in the southern tip of Illinois. Marion is a small penitentiary used to isolate high-security male prisoners.” Officially, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), the only prisoners designated to Marion are men sanctioned in internal disciplinary proceedings for violence that threatens the orderly function of an institution. Typically this refers to predatory inmates already housed at maximum-security federal penitentiaries that are sent to Marion for punishment in solitary confinement. Marion is the first federal supermax prison that became the model for many of the supermax punishment prisons built in many states and foreign countries.

My first time at Marion was in 1985. I was a prisoner of the BOP, serving a first offense, non-violent, nine-year sentence for Conspiracy to Distribute Marijuana. Arrested in 1982 and charged with 10 counts of Conspiracy to Distribute Marijuana, I faced a possible sentence of 150 years, 15 years for each count. The feds accused me of smuggling 10 tons of pot, although I was never accused of smoking or possessing or selling the evil weed. In fact my presentence investigation (PSI) written by a

federal parole officer said I did not use illegal drugs. There was no transaction where money was exchanged for pot, and no marijuana was sieged in the case. Instead I was prosecuted for allegedly having knowledge of another person's attempt at buying pot from federal agents. Apparently, there was a "reverse sting".

So why was I at Marion? I plead not guilty your honor, lawyered up, bailed out of jail in Charleston, South Carolina, and went home to Madison, Wisconsin. In 1984, at the Strom Thurmond Federal Courthouse in Charleston, after a three-day jury trial, I was found guilty of one count and sentenced to nine years in prison. I then fought the conviction through appellate and the U.S. Supreme Court. For exercising my right to trial and appeal, and refusing to plead bargain or cooperate, I was designated to USP Atlanta (maximum-security level 5), and would then spend the next year on the bus doing time at FCI Talladega (medium-security level 4), and after USP Marion (high-security level 6), at USP Leavenworth (maximum-security level 5). In total I spent time at eight different federal prisons, in six states, from supermax to prison camp.

I would later learn that federal prisoners could be transferred to high security confinement for many unofficial reasons that have nothing to do with official BOP policy statements on classification of prisoners [3]. In fact, many Marion prisoners had no record of violence, as either criminal conviction or prison behavior. He may have been identified as a prison gang associate, for example Aryan Brotherhood, Mexican Mafia, or Chicago Outfit. Maybe he was thought to have witnessed a shanking, introduced dope into a penitentiary, enjoyed reading Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), or Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867), filed a law suit against staff, or insulted the warden.

Winter 1985, I arrived at Marion at night, one of 200 men riding 40 to a bus, with five buses each guarded by three prison guards armed with pistol grip shotguns, one the driver, the other two stationed at the front and rear of the bus in fenced enclosures. All the convicts wore stainless steel restraints, including double handcuffs covered in black metal boxes to prevent picking the lock, belly chains, and leg irons. We were barefoot, dressed in old worn out military uniforms, and as angry and defiant as tigers in a cage.

The five buses parked overnight in the parking lot at the front of the institution. The prisoners stared out the windows at the front entrance, gun towers, and double fence covered in razor wire. Suddenly a large number of guards emerged from the front entrance and lined up facing the buses at the top of the stairs. They carried long riot batons, black with stainless steel tips. They banged the sticks on the concrete, getting our attention immediately. Then the guard in the front gun cage began calling out inmate numbers. Slowly, each man stood, walked forward and exited the front door of the bus. As he did three guards met him, with one behind, and one on each side, to escort the prisoner up the staircase and through the doors into the prison. I do not know why, maybe a man walked too slow or the guards were getting cold or bored, but some men were poked in the back with the sticks. Then the next man was lifted up, as the two guards at his sides stuck their batons under his armpits and lifted him into the air, as they walked him up the stairs. Finally, one man fell off the sticks and tumbled to the concrete, got tangled in his leg restraints, and was unable to stand. The guards lifted him again with their sticks and then turned on the juice. We watched in horror as the prisoner danced in mid-air as the current arced between the cattle prods and his steel restraints.

The last man to exit my bus was a handsome fellow. As he stood at the front of the bus he said to the rest of still seated, "What you looking at, I am the same as you". I have been haunted the past 30

years by his words. My number was not called out that night. I never left the bus to enter Marion. Instead, as the sun rose that morning, the five buses left Marion proceeding on to USP Leavenworth, where I was placed in solitary. The BOP just fills cells. In the 1980's the prisons were beyond capacity, men slept in hallways, maybe they ran out of beds at Marion?

My second trip to Marion in 2002 I was a criminology professor conducting research for a book. I brought along my old friend and colleague Greg Newbold, an ex-convict criminology professor from New Zealand. I had secured official permission to tour the prison and talk with prisoners and staff. I recall my car was searched and our photos were taken upon arrival at the prison. While both trips were under very different circumstances, each time I was less than pleased to be there, and quite relieved to eventually leave.

Marionization is the process by which Auburn style prisons (congregate) are converted into Pennsylvania style prisons (separate). Immarigeon [4] wrote:

The “Marionization” of American prisons suggests that prison systems throughout the United States rely more and more on penal regimes that emulate or exaggerate conditions and policies found at the U.S. Penitentiary in Marion (Illinois): reportedly the “toughest prison in America”.

This conversion of prison systems includes: (1) the “marionization” of prisoners, which refers to the damage done to the prisoners; and (2) the “marionization” of prison systems, when different states and countries adopt the penal practices pioneered at USP Marion. As the very first modern supermax penitentiary, USP Marion became the model for building new hi-tech high-security dungeons in the United States (U.S.) and other advanced industrial countries.

The following focuses on the “marionization” of prisoners doing time at USP Marion. What happens to prisoners after many years of solitary confinement in concrete cells where they pass the time alone? What do the prisoners write about their personal experiences with long-term imprisonment in segregation cellblocks?

I include no representative sample of Marion prisoners, only a few voices. There are very few Marion prisoners that have written about their experiences. Jack Henry Abbott was one. I know of a few more. The BOP has never allowed academics inside to interview even a small sample of prisoners. Many prisoners never made it out of Marion. They died inside of suicide or poor health. Most of those that made it out, after many years locked away talking to themselves, just wanted to be left alone. Like combat veterans, they do not want to relive what they had survived.

2. Welcome to USP Marion

A prisoner entering USP Marion is first assigned to a housing unit. He is locked in a cell, issued a uniform and the “Institutional Admission and Orientation Handbook” [5]. As this is a special disciplinary penitentiary, the Handbook was written as a public relations piece for the public, and is quickly dismissed by most convicts as Bureau propaganda. The BOP uses the handbook and Program Statements to hide the experiments at Marion. For example, the handbook does not mention that prisoners will be force fed powerful control drugs, or beaten in their cells, denied visits and phone calls, and locked in solitary for at least three years, and probably many more. The disparity between

what the handbook says and what this imaginary convict might think of what he reads, illustrates how both the administration and prisoners are both cynically inclined. The handbook is nonsense. The convict rips it into shreds.

Imagine a new prisoner at USP Marion reading this Handbook in his cell. This is a hardcore veteran convict [6] that has already done years of time in maximum-security prisons. Over the years he has read many inmate admissions handbooks at different prisons, and understands it is as the formal rules. He will wait to learn the informal rules from the other prisoners. I provide excerpts from the Handbook, followed by this imaginary convict's interpretation ([5], p. 4):

The United States Penitentiary, Marion, Illinois, is one of approximately 93 correctional facilities [in 2013 the federal system has 118 prisons] that make up the complex of the Federal Prison System. This institution was erected and became operative as a Federal prison camp in 1963. In January 1964, Marion was designated as a penitentiary. This is the smallest of the penitentiaries and accommodates approximately 500 men. It is constructed primarily of one-man cell units. The site of this institution was selected because of its central location within the geographic boundaries of the United States and because it is in close proximity to the academic advantages of Southern Illinois University and the John A. Logan Junior College.

In reply, a convict might wonder why he needs to know there are colleges nearby USP Marion, when there are no college courses taught at the prison. Besides, he doubts the warden is concerned about these dangerous inmates getting a college education.

The official handbook reads ([5], p. 4):

The administrative staff has an Executive Officer, the Warden, who is assisted by two (2) Associate Wardens, and seventeen (17) department heads. The remaining employees are assigned to various departments that are outlined in this booklet. The purpose of this booklet is to assist every inmate in his day-to-day living and bring about a smoother operation of this institution. These procedures may change from time to time for various reasons. Such changes will be posted on the bulletin boards of your housing unit or conveyed to you by staff members or taped broadcasts. It is important you read this booklet carefully. It may answer some questions you have about Marion. If you have more specific questions, ask a staff member who can give you guidance.

Given the fierce and brutal reputation of Marion among federal prisoners, the convict expects harsh punishment at Marion. Therefore, he has absolutely no interest in the various administrative departments of the prison, or the "smoother operation of this institution". The prisoner already knows he will never receive "guidance" from guards.

The official handbook reads ([5], p. 4): "During your admission and orientation phase of introduction to Marion, staff will orient you to all aspects of Marion's operation". The convict is a bit concerned about the grim tone of "all aspects of Marion's operation". Eventually, he will learn what to expect through communication on the informal "inmate telephone system". The prisoners empty the water out of their toilets and then talk from cell to cell through the vacant sewer pipes. Some of the

men, that may have been former Boy Scouts or in the military, use Morse Code, which they tap out on the concrete walls.

Now in his one-man cell, the prisoner already knows he is in a Level 6 prison, classified for solitary confinement, and expects the worst [7,8]. Having spent short stretches in special housing units in other prisons, he has few illusions, although he wonders if he can handle the “program” of long-term solitary confinement at Marion. The official handbook reads ([5], p. 4):

You are required to appear before your unit team for Initial Classification. Your participation is important because your unit team, with your assistance, will determine what your program will be while you are at Marion.

Walking into the cellblock, and placed in a cell, the convict has no intention of participating in the program or being cooperative in any way.

The official Handbook continues ([5], p. 4):

In order to begin your stay in this unit on a positive note, unit staff will conduct a decentralized admission and orientation program for all new commitments and transfers, which focus on familiarizing new inmates with the staff, institutional procedures provided by staff and expected behavior.

The convict thinks, “Begin your stay in this unit on a positive note?” This is not a hotel! “Living unit? Is there a dying unit?” Decentralized admission and orientation program? The convict, having just arrived at the prison, and still wearing hand, belly, and leg restraints, understands decentralized admission as he is considered too dangerous to be let out of his cage.

Upon arrival at USP Marion, all the prisoners know this prison is special. The convicts quickly learn that the prison architecture, demeanor of the hacks, and design of the cellblocks, are different than a mainline maximum-security penitentiary. Eddie Griffin, a former Civil Rights Movement activist and Black Panther, spent 12 years in federal prison for bank robbery, beginning in the early 1970s. He did time at Marion in the 1970’s, in the early days, when the prison still had controlled movement, before all the prisoners were locked in their cells all day and night. Eddie Griffin wrote ([9], p. 1):

Upon first glance, Marion differed radically in its appearance from what one would believe from the horrid myths. The ominous sword of Damocles over the prison system appeared to be no threat. But the human eye can be deceived by what is contracted on the phenomenal level. A vague but bleak sensation invades a man's being when he passes through the grill doors into the prison’s interior. Each electronically controlled grill seems to alienate him more and more from his freedom—even the hope of freedom. A sense of finality, of being buried alive, is raised to the supra-level of his consciousness. He tries to suppress it, but the clanging of each door leaves an indelible imprint on his psyche. This is the first evidence that Marion is more than a physical star-chamber. It is a modern “behavior modification laboratory”.

The prisoner senses that he is being watched, even studied by the prison staff. The other prisoners warn him that there are video camera and hidden microphones in the hallways, on the ranges, and even in the cells. Griffin ([9], p. 2) continues:

But the omnipotent is also omnipresent. Nothing escapes Marion's elaborate network of "eyes". Between television monitors, prisoner spies, collaborators, and prison officials, every crevice of the prison is overlaid by a constant watch. Front-line officers, specially trained in the cold, calculated art of observation, watch prisoners' movements with a particular meticulousness, scrutinizing little details in behavior patterns, then recording them in the Log Book. This aid provides the staff with a means to manipulate certain individuals' behavior. It is feasible to calculate a prisoner's level of sensitivity from the information, so his vulnerability can be tested with a degree of precision. Some behavior modification experts call these tests "stress assessment". Prisoners call it harassment. In some cases, selected prisoners are singled out for one or several of these "differential treatment" tactics. A prisoner could have his mail turned back or "accidentally" mutilated. He could become the object of regular searches, or even his visitors could be strip-searched.

3. The Physical Layout of USP Marion

USP Marion is one large building with four wings. Without the gun towers and heavy security, it might look like a large high school constructed in the 1960's. The prison architectural design is called "telephone pole". Picture the prison as a rectangle with four sides, with each side shaped like a telephone pole. The front of the prison, with the main entrance to the building, houses the administrative offices. The two sides are designed with long broad hallways intersected by a series of cellblocks. The back wing contains the kitchen, workshops, gym, additional staff offices, and UNICOR (Federal Prison Industries).

3.1. The Outside Security Perimeter

The penitentiary has no great brick or stonewall, like USP Leavenworth (KS), USP Lewisburg (PA), or USP Atlanta (GA). Instead, there is a double fence separated by many rolls of razor wire surrounding the prison. The walls of the building are solid concrete block and act as an exterior wall. There are five gun towers located outside the fence, four of these situated on corners where the fence turns at a 90 degree angle, providing a clear field of fire between the fences, and the fifth guarding the main entrance to the institution. The gun towers are huge structures with black glass windows and manned 24 hours a day by heavily armed officers. An "outrider" officer armed with shotgun and pistol driving a white pickup truck patrols outside the fence.

The prisoners are confined in cellblocks or housing units that have only very small windows covered with metal plates, with small round holes, looking out on interior courtyards. The convicts have no view of the security fence that surrounds the prison or the countryside beyond. The housing units interior courtyards are composed of fenced in exercise areas with a small brick wall that connects one wing of the building to the next. A prisoner that tries to escape from a housing unit must negotiate

a total of six interior fences plus the small wall, just to reach the outside exercise area of another housing unit.

3.2. *The Inside Security System*

Again, compared to a standard federal penitentiary USP Marion is small, almost miniature. Although the corridors are wide, there are few places to walk, even if an inmate is issued a hall pass. Griffin ([9], p. 2) reports what the prison was like in the 1970's:

The constructs of the prison are somewhat peculiar. Some not-so-outstanding features do not make the least economical sense, and are often totally out of physiological order. But these features, when viewed from a psychological angle, begin to take on new meaning. For example, the prison is minced into small sections and subsections, divided by a system of electronic and mechanical grills further reinforced by a number of strategically locked steel doors. Conceivably, the population can be sectioned off quickly in times of uprising. But even for the sake of security, the prison is laced with too many doors. Every few feet a prisoner is confronted by one. So he must await permission to enter or exit at almost every stop. A man becomes peeved. But this is augmented by the constant clanging that bombards his brain so many times a day until his nervous system becomes knotted. The persistent reverberation tends to resurrect and reinforce the same sensation, the same bleak feeling that originally introduced the individual into the Marion environment. It is no coincidence. This system is designed with conscious intent.

The inside security is straight out of George Orwell's nightmare vision of totalitarianism in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) [10,11]. The prison was constructed as an electronic panopticon, to keep close surveillance on the inmates [10]. Griffin ([9], p. 2) reports:

Every evening the "control movement" starts. The loud speakers, which are scattered around the prison resonate the signal: "The movement is on. You have ten minutes to make your move". The interior grill doors are opened, but the latitude and limits of a man's mobility are sharply defined, narrowly constricted. His motion, the fluidity of his life, is compressed between time locks. There is a sense of urgency to do what prisoners usually do—nothing. It is just a matter of time before the last remnants of a prisoner's illusion become obliterated.

At the end of the ten-minute limit, the speakers blare out: "The movement is over. Clear the corridor." The proceedings stop. Twenty minutes later the routine is repeated, and so on, until a man's psyche becomes conditioned to the movement/non-movement regimentation, and his nerves jingle with the rhythmic orchestration of steel clanging steel. In prisoners' words, it is "part of the program"—part of the systematic process of reinforcing the unconditional fact of a prisoner's existence: that he has no control over the regulation and orientation of his own being, too accept without question the overseer's power to control him.

Even before 1983, when the entire prison was locked-down, the prisoners locked 24-7 in their cells, and all the housing units converted to Control Units, the prison felt like a control experiment to the inmates. They sensed, even as far back as the 1960s, that they were the laboratory mice.

4. The Housing Units

USP Marion opened in 1963 as a disciplinary penitentiary, designed to house 500 difficult to control inmates [11–13]. Originally, in the 1960's, through the 1970's, and before the entire prison was converted to Control Units in 1983, the prisoners were allowed out of their cells, to walk the narrow area in front of their one man cells, and to leave the units to go to their work assignments and meetings. The convicts took meals in the dining hall, and worked in the UNICOR factory. The housing units were small, with less than 72 men, as compared to as many as 500 men in the "mainline" penitentiaries. Dowker and Good wrote ([14], p. 6):

USP Marion comprises nine living units, B through I and K. Conditions vary between units. The five general population units, B through F, are located on Marion's East Corridor. Among these units, D, E and F are the most restrictive. C-Unit is slightly less restrictive than these three units and holds prisoners who are being considered for transfer to B-Unit. B-Unit is a pre-release unit with conditions similar to those in most maximum-security prisons. On the North Corridor are located the prisons' four "special living units". I-Unit, the Disciplinary Segregation Unit, holds prisoners from the East Corridor units who are on disciplinary or administrative segregation, and those who are being considered for transfer to H-Unit. G-Unit is similar to I-Unit and also holds prisoners in protective custody. H-Unit, or the Control Unit, holds prisoners who are on long-term administrative segregation ([15], pp. 491–92). K-Unit, or the Director's Unit, holds prisoners assigned there specifically on the order of the Director of the Bureau of Prisons.

The movement of prisoners was from one housing to another tightly controlled and limited. Although, there appeared to be a system of steps, where B Unit has the most privileges, and there are less as prisoners are moved to C through I units. Already by the 1960's four of the 9 housing units were Control Units (G, H, I, K).

In effect, B and C still allowed prisoners out of cell and housing units to work and eat in the dining hall. D, E, and F Units allowed prisoners out of their cells each day, but not out of the housing unit, except under escort by guards. G, H, K and I were total Control Units, with the harshest conditions, and there was no K unit. Dowker and Good ([14], pp. 6–7) report:

D, E and F-Unit prisoners are let out of their cells one and a half hours each day. By comparison, in the rest of the Federal prison system prisoners spend an average of thirteen hours per day out of their cells. The hour and a half of daily "recreation" is usually spent in the narrow hallway immediately outside the cell. This time provides little stimulation and no real exercise opportunity. One hour of outdoor recreation in a fenced area is offered once a week in winter and three times a week in summer. The only chance prisoners have to take showers is during the exercise period.

The cells progressively got worse as a prisoner moved from B to G-I. For example, the Control Units had cells with solid steel doors, as compared to most of the units that still had doors with open bars in the 1970's.

In general, all the cells in the entire institution were austere and small one-man cells. Dowker and Good ([14], p. 7) write:

The cell itself measures six by eight feet. Meals are taken through the bars and eaten in the cell—there is no congregate dining. Beds are concrete slabs with pads laid on top of them. At each of the four corners of the bunk is a ring so that the men can be strapped down whenever prison authorities think that it is appropriate. Jackie Leyden from National Public Radio reports that “guards have the power to chain a man spread-eagled and naked to a concrete bunk” [16]. Prisoners have reported being chained like that for days at a time.

5. Transfer from Supermax to Big House Maximum-Security Penitentiary

In general, no prison system can afford to have prisoners do all their sentences in long-term solitary confinement or supermax prisons, even if the prison administrators don't care about their health or well-being. It is simply too expensive [17]. Most Marion prisoners do a number of years, at least three, usually more, and then are transferred back to an Auburn style maximum-security U.S. Penitentiary. A few, like Mr. Huskey below, are transferred to similar state prisons.

The long-term effects of Marion's control unit design on the physical and mental well-being of prisoners is an important empirical question that requires research. John Irwin and James Austin discussed the consequences of lockup as a self-fulfilling prophecy, including severe psychological and social impairment, and possibly serious mental or psychological pathologies. Austin and Irwin wrote ([18], pp. 136–37):

Many inmates held for long periods in lockup, during which they have been subjected to extreme racial prejudice, harassment by the guards, and threats and attacks from other prisoners, are converted into extremely violent, relatively fearless individuals who profess and conduct themselves as if they do not care whether they live or die.

Austin and Irwin suggest that many prisoners of long-term solitary confinement suffer paranoid delusions, mental breakdowns, schizophrenic episodes, depression, hysteria, anger, and assorted psychiatric illness ([18], pp. 137–40).

At the very least, after many years of confinement at USP Marion, most prisoners are profoundly damaged. Having survived the rigid and lonely ordeal they suffer serious social impairment [19–24]. Upon transfer to mainline federal penitentiaries they have great difficulty adjusting to life in a congregate prison, where they must socialize with other prisoners.

6. Release to the Community

What happens when prisoners locked down in Control Units, after years of brutal conditions and bizarre socialization, are released to the “free world” without the benefit of programs, services, furloughs or halfway house? Predictably, their problems only multiply if they ever make parole and are released from the prison system to community supervision. After spending years in max and supermax

confinement they are ill prepared for free society. Returning to the community without decompression time in a social setting, like a year in a minimum-security camp and a number of months in a halfway house, invites disaster, possibly suicide or violent assault if provoked or threatened on the street.

Marion prisoners, when their prison sentences are completed, go directly to the street because they are thought to be too hardcore to live in a halfway house. Very few community programs will even accept their assignment. After many years in prison, without family and friends, they struggle on the street, usually unemployed and homeless.

Jack Henry Abbott's book *In the Belly of the Beast* (1981) [25] to this day remains one of the most widely read book about prison. Upon release from USP Marion, Abbott went to New York City to see his literary mentor Norman Mailer, while enjoying his brief fame as a celebrated author. Mailer, one of the more famous American novelists of the 20th Century, had corresponded with Abbott while he was at Marion, and from the letters he received from Abbott, pieced together the book. Mailer made the book possible, and promoted the work in interviews he had with major newspapers.

Unfortunately, Abbott was insane [26], after spending many years in solitary confinement at USP Leavenworth and then USP Marion. After just six weeks of freedom he killed a waiter outside a New York City café. Apparently he felt threaten and defended himself with a knife, probably a learned reaction from his many years in federal penitentiaries. Anybody reading his book, which was primarily about his time at Leavenworth and Marion, would suspect he was a dangerously damaged individual that would require intensive mental health care to overcome his delusional fear of people. Marion prepared Abbott for the murder he committed in New York City. Given the many years he spent in solitary confinement in USP Leavenworth and then USP Marion, it was sadly predictable.

7. What do the Prisoners Report about Their Own Marionization?

The best way to explore this question is to give the prisoners a voice, and opportunity to speak about their time at USP Marion. The use of ethnography and autoethnography to study prisons has a long history [27–38]. The use of first-hand accounts, interviews, and correspondence with prisoners serves as an ethnographic window on a shared reality. We get closer to the “truth” of how long-term solitary confinement affects prisoners by listening or reading their personal recollections.

Arnold R. Huskey, now imprisoned in an Oregon state prison, wrote the following account. Mr. Huskey has done over 36 years in high-security prisons, including over ten years in solitary confinement at USP Marion. Huskey wrote to me in a series of letters that speak to the complexities of a human being doing hard time [39]:

In 1978, I was committed to USP in Leavenworth, KS, for kidnapping for ransom, with a 30-year sentence. That sentence was subsequently reduced to 20 years. I was transferred to several different federal institutions over the following five years. Due to an escape [from prison] and receipt of State time while on escape, I ended up in the state of Wyoming in January 1984. I escaped from Wyoming State Penitentiary later that year. While on this escape, during the hijacking of a semi tractor-trailer and its subsequent abandonment, the driver of the vehicle was left secured in the trailer and tragically, accidentally, died from a rope that tightened around his chest. I believe I explained this in my previous letter.

I subsequently received a life sentence, with a 20-year minimum, in the state of Oregon, for this crime of aggravated murder. The aggravating factor was my escape status. I was returned to federal custody in February 1985, and initially placed at USP Leavenworth; but two weeks later was transferred to USP Marion, Illinois, for greater security purposes. I arrived at USP Marion on 18 March 1985. Within days of my arrival, George Wilkerson, then North Central Regional Director, came to my cell and told me that here (USP Marion) was where I would remain until my release.

Arnold Husky arrived at USP Marion in 1985, after the prison had been ordered into complete lockdown, which in effect turned all the housing units into Control Units. October 1980 two guards were stabbed to death. Four days later a prisoner was found murdered in his cell. In 1983 the BOP retaliated by locking down the entire prison for the next thirty years, creating the first federal supermax penitentiary. Arnold Husky continues [39]:

Marion had been on lockdown for about 17 months then, and the atmosphere between staff and inmates was one of full-fledged war. Inmates there had been brutalized for the last year and a half, as was well documented at the subsequent congressional hearings on the lockdown. I had just received a life sentence in the state of Oregon, and as you might imagine, I did not adjust well to the Marion environment. I felt as if I had nothing to lose or to live for, and I acted accordingly for the most part.

Most of my time at Marion was spent in solitary confinement, in one form of segregation or another. I spent most of my time there in a cell with a solid steel door, with a six-inch square glass window, and a tray slot that stayed locked except for meals. The cell was concrete, with a roll-open window in the back of the cell behind a stainless steel plate with pencil sized holes drilled in it. The sink-toilet combination was set in the front of the cell, opposite side of the door. There was a screened air vent on one wall of the cell. There were I believe 36 cells on the tier, with an upper and lower tier. When I first arrived at Marion, the cells still contained the old steel bed frames and a ceramic sink/toilet; but around 1986 the cells were remodeled and a concrete bed platform, a concrete stool and desk, and a stainless steel sink/toilet were added. I was only allowed an AM/FM radio during those first years, but after the remodeling, I was issued a 10 or 12 inch black and white television as well. I received five one hour outside rec periods a week, and three ten minute showers a week.

The program that existed at Marion during those years, 1985–1995, supposedly allowed an inmate to earn their way to a modified open-population unit (C-unit), through good behavior and programming. In reality, no inmate was allowed to advance through this program unless/until the Marion administration wanted him to do so, regardless of his programming and behavior. The program was a joke and everyone knew that...just part and parcel of the cruel and extensive behavior modification research and experimentation they routinely engaged in there.

Convicts at Marion either went crazy or devised strict daily disciplines to pass the time alone in their cells. Husky goes on:

A typical day for me was to wake up about 4:30 a.m., and after a brief toilet, begin my daily workout routine. I would ace-bandage peanut butter jars filled with water to each hand and shadow box for a half hour, then go immediately into step-ups on the bed platform, for about two hours or until breakfast trays were delivered to the tray slot. I would usually break then and eat something, usually just a piece of fruit from canteen, and peanut butter on the toast from the tray, about the only palatable part. After breakfast I would usually be given an opportunity to go outside into an individual rec cage for a single hour's exercise on pull up and/or dip bars. I was allowed five such exercise sessions per week. I would be strip searched before being handcuffed behind my back and escorted to the outside rec cage by a guard holding the handcuffs, with another guard on each side of me holding a three foot black lead filled baton with a steel-ball rib spreader on each end of it. When the guards would jab an inmate in the ribs with these batons, the steel-ball was just the right size to tear the ribs apart and tear the cartilage, causing excruciating pain when the inmate even breathed and with every breath.

After an hour outside in the rec cage, I would be handcuffed and escorted inside, and strip-searched again after being placed in the cell. After being strip-searched I would redress and continue to work out in the cell until call for a shower. Guards would handcuff me behind my back and escort me to the shower on the end of the tier, where I would be locked inside the shower stalls and then handcuffs removed. Same procedure as being escorted to rec. I was allowed ten and sometimes fifteen minutes to shower, then returned the same way to my cell. I would spend the rest of the afternoon either studying, doing legal work, or reading or writing.

After dinner, I would allow myself to turn on the television for national news and usually a nature show or occasionally a movie. I would end my day with a half hour meditation or prayer and usually be asleep by ten p.m., if none of the mentally ill were screaming all night on the tier. There was a cell on the front of each tier that was converted to a law library and the inmates in the unit could request an hour at a time in there. College tests were also proctored in there. The library consisted of a cardboard box of dog-eared paperback books that you may or may not have access to on any given day. I enrolled in the college studies offered through the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and I spent many hours, days, weeks and months immersed in those studies. I never sought any degree program, but only the knowledge available to me.

Husky's 36-year journey through prisons has included the BOP, Wyoming, Minnesota, and Oregon. Today, he is still in prison. Huskey relates the rest of his life story:

In late 1987, I was given the opportunity to transfer to a maximum-security institution in the state of Minnesota for one year. The BOP had made an arrangement with the state of Minnesota to help them with their corrections budget and they paid the state over one million dollars a year to house ten federal prisoners, usually USP Marion prisoners. I spent one year at Oak Park Heights, in Minnesota, where I worked as a media specialist, operating the institutions two television and radio stations, and was returned to USP

Marion in 1989. I remained at USP Marion until August 1995, at which time I was transferred to MCFP Springfield, for medical treatment, and then transferred on to the new supermax, ADX Florence, Colorado, where I arrived in April 1996. I remained there until my release to the state of Oregon in May 1998. My cell at ADX Florence was significantly different...and bad as ADX confinement was, it was better than USP Marion.

I have done hard time in the truest sense, I suppose. All those years in solitary forced me to turn inward for survival, and face the person I truly was, with all my faults, weaknesses and strengths. I had to come to know and like the person I was...for myself. I endured those years and decades only because of the love, the faith in God, and the inner character and strength my parents had instilled in me (despite my behavior). Education played a vital role in helping me survive those years. I survived USP Marion and the ADX Florence by turning inward and finding a deep-seated spiritual well of strength to draw upon. I hungered for the knowledge I could acquire...and I lived in that mental, spiritual world on the inside of the self...while physically functioning in the day to day world of brutality and suffering around me.

Arnold Huskey's tells the story of how as a human being he survived the day-to-day rigors of solitary confinement. His letters suggest a man that has spent many years reflecting on his mistakes. In a recent letter he wrote:

The 13½ years I spent there (USP Marion) are still and will forever be the hardest time I ever did. By comparison, the final (federal time) 2½ years I spent in ADX Florence were a piece of cake.

Today, still in prison in Oregon, Mr. Huskey is married with children, and hoping that one-day he may be allowed to rejoin society.

8. Conclusions

Long-term confinement in solitary confinement is torture. Prisoners suffer solitary confinement in juvenile lockups, county jails, and in state and federal prisons. Over the years, conducting research, administrating programs, visiting prisoners, or speaking at events, I have spoken with hundreds of prisoners and toured dozens of prisons. I estimate that on any given day in the U.S. as many as 200,000 people, nearly ten percent of the total jail and orison population of men, women, and children may be locked away in some type of solitary confinement. All these prisoners suffer, more or less, the mental torture of solitary confinement, where they struggle with the onset of mental illness every day, including voices in their head, paranoia, depression, and anxiety. They also may suffer from lack of heat, or too much heat, poor ventilation, substandard food, and filth.

The U.S. Government has experimented with solitary confinement as a means of torture, to break prisoners, force them to "debrief", and enforce obedience to penal authority. Some of the most horrific experiments were carried out at USP Marion. Some of the men went crazy, others committed suicide, many went mute, and only a few remain articulate. As criminologists we owe what little comprehension we have of the phenomena to the very few convicts that have summoned the courage to tell us their stories, and shed some light on the dark secrets of the prison industrial complex.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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injunctive and monetary relief. On 1 August 1985, the court certified the case as a class action, with the class defined as present and future prisoners at the Marion facility. According to the plaintiffs, prison conditions existing in connection with a “lockdown” resulted in the constitutional violations. These conditions included use of excessive force, rectal searches, lengthy confinement in cells, and arbitrary procedures by which prisoners were placed at and transferred to Marion.

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