



BY DOUDLEY M. BROOKS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Following security precautions, officer Andy Knight handcuffs William Dunne before taking him from a holding cell.

Hard Time: The Mission at Marion

Federal Prison Revives Debate on How to Handle Incurable Felons

By Michael Isikoff
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MARION, Ill.—Robert A. Litchfield, convicted bank robber and self-styled “con man,” used to pride himself on being able to escape from any prison. Then they sent him here. “It’s payback time,” Litchfield, 43, said with a shrug, his pale face peering out from behind bars.

For the past 15 months, Litchfield has been confined to an 8½-by-7-foot cell where he sleeps on a concrete slab and eats meals slipped through a slit in the door. He gets one hour of exercise daily: Three guards enter his cell, shackle him with leg irons and

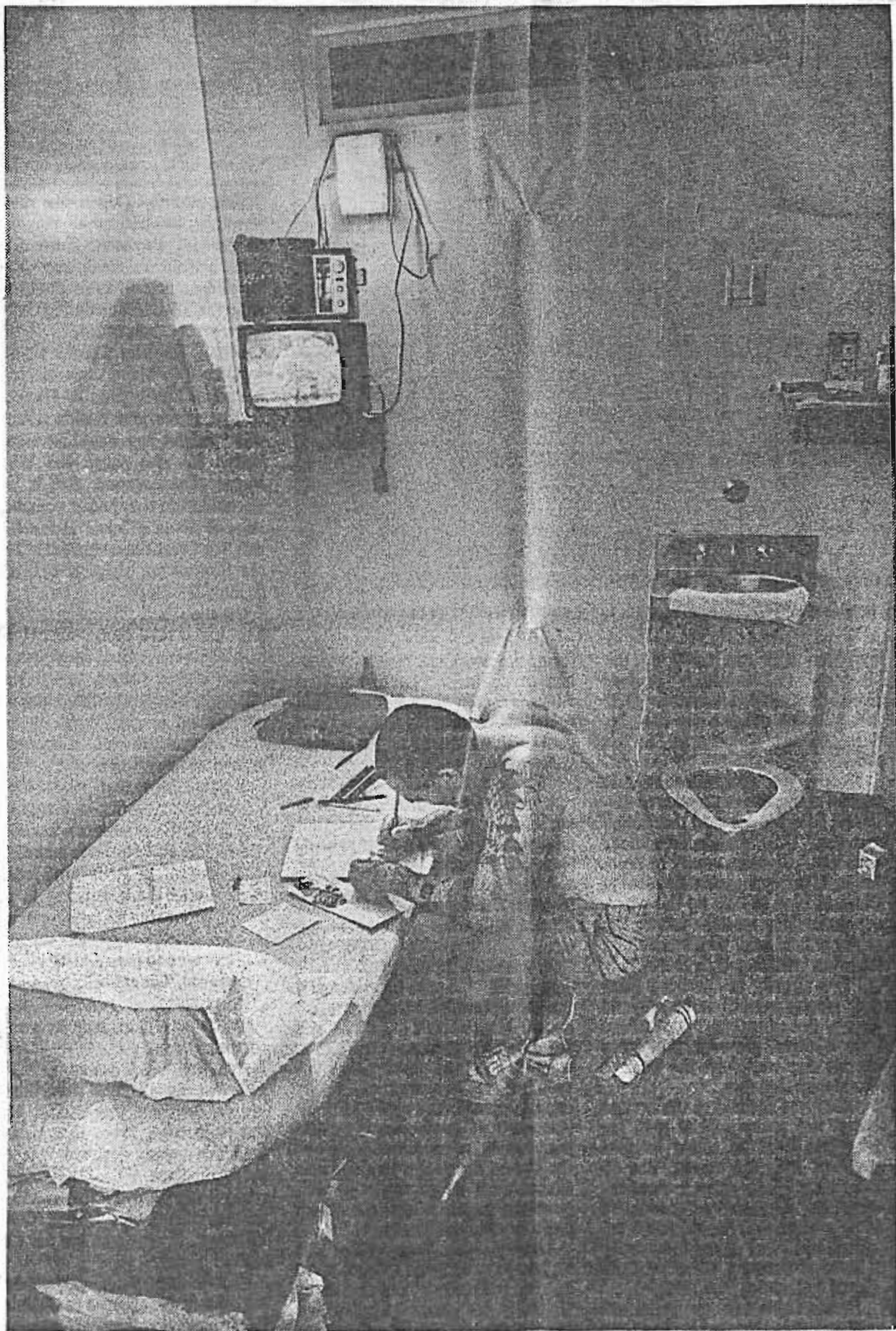
handcuffs, and escort him to an indoor recreation “cage” four feet away.

This is life at Marion, a prison that critics say has pushed American penology to new frontiers of sensory deprivation. It is not a popular place among inmates. “What they are doing here is creating monsters,” said Juan Matta Ballesteros, the former Honduran drug kingpin serving a life sentence without parole. “This is not a place to have a human being.”

Over the past decade, the nation’s prison and jail population has more than doubled to exceed 1 million—an unprecedented growth fueled by sharp increases in drug trafficking, violent crime and tough,

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Prison: Hard Time for Hardened Criminals



Edgar Quan-Guerra draws cartoons to pass the 23 hours a day he is kept in his cell at the "super-maximum security" site. BY GUYLEX M. BROWN—THE WASHINGTON POST

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mandatory sentences enacted by Congress and state legislatures.

In the process, the Marion model is provoking renewed debate over how the country should deal with its most violence-prone and incorrigible felons.

Located in a remote forest in rural southern Illinois, surrounded by 15 layers of stainless steel barbed wire, Marion is the Federal Bureau of Prisons' only "super-maximum security" facility, the successor to Alcatraz. It is also home to some of the federal government's most high-profile inmates: the spies John Walker and Jonathan Jay Pollard live here and Manuel Antonio Noriega is expected if he is convicted in his upcoming drug trial.

But among corrections officials, Marion has another claim to fame: In 1983, when two guards and an inmate were murdered in a near riot, Marion became the first U.S. prison to operate a permanent "lockdown," meaning that most of the 333 inmates live in virtual solitary confinement, confined in cramped cells alone for 21 to 23 hours a day.

In that sense, Marion is unlike all other federal institutions. There is no central library in which to browse and no work for most of the prisoners. Education and training programs are limited; inmates complain there is nothing for them to do and little to prepare them for life in the outside world. Yet for some, there will be no outside world: The average sentence for Marion maximum security inmates is 40.1 years. Seventy are serving life.

It costs more than \$40,000 a year to house, feed and guard each of Marion's maximum security prisoners, more than twice the average for all other federal inmates. Yet as Federal Bureau of Prisons officials see it, Marion is a success story. While state prisons continue to experience disturbances, such as the melee at the Maryland Correctional Institution last week that injured 14 guards and 44 inmates, gang violence and assaults in federal institutions are down—in large part, officials said, because inmates fear they will be shipped to Marion.

With the explosive growth in the federal prison population, "the Bureau of Prisons should be blowing up—but that's not happening and the reason is because of Marion," said John Clark, a former Roman Catholic priest who has been the warden here for the past two years. "Guys don't want to come here, and after they've been here they don't want to come back."

Other prisoners have problems with drugs being smuggled in to inmates. Random drug testing of Marion inmates hasn't produced a positive urine result in three years. "Yeah, it's restrictive in terms of the amount of freedom an inmate has," said Clark. "But the place works."

As a result, the Marion system is increasingly being adopted by state governments. A recent survey by Marion staff found 36 states have built prisons, or "control units" within their prisons, patterned after Marion. California last year opened up Pelican Bay, a massive lockdown prison in the northwest corner of the state that some experts say is even harsher than Marion.

To prison reformers and social critics, the trend is throwback to the Dark Ages of penology. Prolonged isolation, they argue, is inhumane, breeds anti-social tendencies and makes prisoners more likely to commit crimes when they get out. In 1987, Marion became the first U.S. prison to be criticized by Amnesty International, the international body that monitors human rights abuses.

"Marion is an experiment—to see how much a prisoner can take before he breaks, to see how far they can dehumanize somebody before they completely lose their sanity," charged Jan Susler, a Chicago lawyer who has unsuccessfully challenged the constitutionality of Marion and works with a group called the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown.

The inmates at Marion are classified by the Bureau of Prisons as the most dangerous and threatening in federal custody. When gang violence erupts at other prisons, the guards quickly identify the leaders and ship them off to Marion. Today, Marion counts behind its walls at least seven members of the racist Aryan Brotherhood, as well as leaders of the Mexican Mafia, the Black Guerrilla Family, the Texas Syndicate and The Order.

There are also more than 50 inmates—about 15 percent of Marion's population—from the District of Columbia. Most of these inmates have proven too unruly for the city's prison at Lorton, Va., and have been turned over to federal custody. Another 25 are Marielitos—criminals from Cuban prisons dispatched to the United States by Fidel Castro during the Mariel boat-lift of 1980.

Mathew Granger, 34, his teeth rotting, his body covered with tattoos, matter of factly explained to a reporter why he was sent to Marion two years ago. Granger is handcuffed for the interview, inspected by a team of guards before and af-

ter he enters a special glass enclosure. At a federal prison in Wisconsin, where he was serving time for murder, "I pulled two knives and stabbed a guard in the heart," he said. "I cut out his eyes, I cut out his throat. Then I took a towel and wrapped him around his neck and strangled him. Then I took a fire extinguisher and crushed his whole skull in."

Not all inmates are here for the same reasons as Granger. One unit at Marion is reserved for informants and "snitches," who Clark said are here solely for their protection. Susler charges that some are "political prisoners"—like Sekou Odinga, a black revolutionary who was convicted in the robbery of a Brinks truck in which two policemen died. Bank robber Litchfield has no record of violence; he is considered an escape artist. In 1985, he escaped from a federal prison in Alabama when he posed as an undercover federal drug agent and "arrested" the prison dentist.

The key to Marion's "program" is a system of segregated "control units," with each layer progressively stricter than the other. The most severe controls are in the prison's west wing, where inmates are confined to their cells 23 hours each day, limited to three showers per week, and one 10-minute telephone call per month. Each time, they move out of their cells, they are restrained with handcuffs and leg irons and escorted by three prison guards yielding "rib spreaders"—yard-long black clubs with steel bearings.

In the units in the prison's east wing, controls lighten up slightly. Prisoners are allowed out of their cells up to three hours each day and permitted two telephone calls per month. Eventually, said Clark, they can work their way to the pre-release unit—and then be sent to another federal prison. More than 700 have passed through Marion since the lockdown was imposed in 1983; about 30 have never made it out.

The system means "there is a light at the end of the tunnel," said Clark. "There's always hope. . . . All we ask they to do is quit being bad."

But some inmates fall outside the system. In the underground K-unit, Marion houses its most notorious residents. They include Walker, Pollard, Edwin P. Wilson, the former Central Intelligence Agency official who sold guns to Libya, and Bernard Welch, the Washington area "super-thief," who murdered physician Michael Halberstam. They live next to each other in specially constructed 200-square-foot cells—with private showers, color televisions and typewriters.

K-unit prisoners are never permitted to associate with anybody outside the unit. Clark said they have been burned so often by the

press that they will rarely grant interviews—except for Pollard, who would like to be interviewed. But under the terms of his guilty plea, he is not permitted to talk without the presence of U.S. intelligence officials. When a reporter visited the unit recently, Pollard had been removed for exercise by prison officials; Walker, Wilson and Welch pulled down their window shades and refused to come out.

One K-unit prisoner, however, did agree to talk—Joseph Paul Franklin, an avowedly racist serial killer who murdered an interracial couple in Wisconsin, killed two black joggers in Utah, and bombed a synagogue in Tennessee. Franklin, who calls himself a “political prisoner” because of his white supremacist views, said that K-unit inmates rarely even talk to each other. He, for instance, hasn’t said a word to Pollard in six years, even though they live within a few feet of each other. “We have nothing in common,” he said.

The existence of such high-profile prisoners—Carlos Lehder, the Colombian drug trafficker, and Nicodemo Scarfo, the Philadelphia mobster, also live at Marion—has prompted the Bureau of Prisons to take extraordinary security measures. Marion’s defenses include wall towers and a helicopter deterrent system, grids of cables and poles. All staff members, including secretaries, are trained in the use of M-1 rifles and other weapons. Nevertheless, the FBI recently began investigating a plot by outsiders to attack Marion and free one of its more well-connected inmates. “It would have involved serious firepower,” said Clark, declining further comment.

Every morning, Clark tours one of the prison’s cell units to give inmates a chance to express their gripes, or voice suggestions. Clark prides himself on being responsive, but as he made the rounds one recent morning, many inmates ignored him—turning their backs or refusing to look up from their tele-

vision sets. Reginald J. Causey, 34, serving 25 years for bank robbery and violating parole, showed the warden an advertisement for a digital keyboard he wants. Causey said he is a musician who used to play in a band. “I have to keep my dexterity,” he said. “I have to think about when I get out.”

Clark tells Causey he’ll look into it. But as he walks way from his cell, he leaves little doubt what his answer will be. “People make weapons out of items like that,” he said.

The search for weapons—or other contraband—is the prime concern of Marion staff. A few years ago, the prison’s metal box-spring beds were replaced with concrete slabs to prevent inmates from making weapons from the metal. But despite the security measures, there have been five murders and one suicide since the lockdown was imposed. In the past six months, there were three stabbings—most recently by an inmate who made a metal “shank” from a piece of the recreation yard fence and attacked a fellow prisoner.

Yet in interviews, inmates complained of the relentless tedium of solitary, of prisoners who cry out in loneliness during the middle of the night, and of small arbitrary cruelties by the staff—who force them to undergo humiliating strip searches and sweep through their cells and remove items, like coffee jars or cardboard boxes, that could be turned into weapons.

“You really have zero to do. It’s the endless repetition of the same day over again,” said William Dunne, 37, serving 75 years for armed bank robbery and attempting to escape from prison. Dunne is an articulate, self-described “anarchist” who publishes lengthy tracts critiquing Supreme Court decisions and denouncing the “American Gulag Archipelago,” a reference to the Soviet detention camps, in a Canadian newspaper.

“There’s no community to connect with,” he said. “If they see you getting too close to people, they move you into another unit. They want to make sure that you don’t have any bonding or any association with anyone else.”

In such a world, the smallest things take on large importance. Granger said he looks forward to his weekly copy of Newsweek magazine. Litchfield tries to follow the stock tables and the real estate market in the newspapers. But most of all he waits for Wednesdays—when guards deliver the one order he is permitted from the prison commissary, a pint of ice cream and a bag of M&M candies.

“It’s the highlight of my week,” laughed Litchfield, who is serving an 80-year sentence. “But in another way, it saddens me that something so simple would make me so happy.”



BY BRAD WYE—THE WASHINGTON POST