

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

December 14, 2011

LOCKDOWN IN STANLEY

The prison authorities rarely ever use the PA system in Stanley but today they made an exception at 7:52 a.m. to announce a lockdown of the institution. A "training day" was planned for today which means we are confined to our living units while staff show up for work but don't have to do any work. Instead, they engage in training exercises. It's all top secret. Prisoners mustn't be allowed to know what the training consists of. From comments I've heard over the years, training can consist of CPR, self-defense classes, riot control. I'm sure there's much more but I don't know what.

Essentially, training days are spent training for emergency situations that should never occur in a well-run prison. For instance, I read in the Wisconsin State Journal this week that the guards' union president was complaining that the incidence of staff assaults had increased and that it was the result of too many inexperienced officers. Apparently, prisoners know when inexperienced officers are working and only attack guards at that time. The point of this "news release" was that Gov. Walker's union-busting policies were making prisons more dangerous for guards.

In my opinion, the reason there are assaults on staff is that prisoners are treated so poorly and live under conditions so austere that there is very little incentive for a prisoner in maximum security to obey the rules in order to avoid segregation. Add to that the fact that there are hundreds - perhaps thousands - of prisoners now serving sentences in Wisconsin prisons who will spend most or all of their lives in prison with no chance of release or transfer to minimum security. When you take away hope, what is left? Some men may find a spiritual path and give their lives to God. Most men will devolve in to savagery when mistreated for a long period of time.

But getting back to the lockdown, today was supposed to be a training day but instead we're having a lockdown. At this point, the major difference is that we are confined to our cells and cannot get into the dayroom area. For me, this poses two problems. If I want a cup of coffee, I must use tap water which does not get very hot. No big deal, just a petty irritation. Secondly, our toilet is in our cell. For either my cellmate or me to use the toilet, we must do it with our cellmate for company.

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Let me get a show of hands, how many of you reading this would like to have another person right there with you when it's time to take a poop? Not many, I suspect. But for the duration of the lockdown, and for every person double-celled in a maximum security prison, that is what all of us at Stanley will have to do.

I assume the lockdown will only last for the day. Rumor has it that some "hooch" (homemade alcoholic beverage) was found in one of the units so that unit will probably be searched thoroughly. The window of my cell faces out into the prison compound and I can see that they brought in 7 dogs to sniff for drugs. Think of it, the dogs get on-the-job training, their handlers most likely get overtime wages and everybody has a war story to share over the holidays with family members. I like to say I can describe Stanley with 3 verbs: poorly designed, poorly built and poorly run. The last verb can apply to the entire DOC in my opinion. But since I'm just a pooh-but inmate, my opinion doesn't count.

However, I will say this: I am grateful to be in my cell during the lockdown where I have a radio, books and my typewriter so I can keep busy while the lockdown drags on. If perchance it is extended beyond today, I'll keep a lockdown journal and post it here.

M E R R Y C H R I S T M A S E V E R Y B O D Y