

# FROM PRISON HELL TO PENITENTIARY HEAVEN

by

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Racial segregation, routine violence, and controlled chaos filled my sleep with nightmares and sweat. This is the legacy of that San Quentin Reception Center left me with after I transferred to the historic penal site, leaving the “cushy” San Mateo County Jail behind in 2006. Fear is the one word I could use to describe my emotional state during my time in San Quentin.

Everything about San Quentin scared me: the physical structure, the guards and the other inmates. The physical structure was large and intimidating. The corridors were narrow and many people had been stabbed or even killed within these constricted passage ways; passage ways to one part of the prison to another or passage ways straight to death’s hell. The cells were so small that I could stretch out my arms and my wing span could simultaneously touch both walls, yet they stuff two of us in each cell. The overcrowding made it even more dangerous because the men were irritated, no, mad! With all the hateful looks, I got the feeling the other guys didn’t just hate me, or each other, race-wise, but they hated themselves. All the vermin, creepers and crawlers made me fear for my health. The last thing I needed, on top of a capital sentence, was to get a serious infection.

The physical structure of San Quentin was definitely intimidating, but only indirectly. Direct and purposeful intimidation came from the other prisoners. Inmates standing at the entrance of the showers, watching other men bathe, was just the beginning. There were ten shower heads. The racially segregated structure allowed every race a shower: 5, 2, 2, 1. So the

blacks got five showers, the Hispanic and whites got two showers and all others had to share the last. Some of the more depraved stared at other men's genitals. The shy and the weak bird-bathed in their cells. Showers were every other day, so I decided to take my chances. As uncomfortable as it was, I never had any problems.

Exercise yard was only twice every seven days. The yard was all concrete, small and crowded, and the entire area was also divided by race. The mixing of races was absolutely forbidden. I'd never seen anything like it before, ever. Fights, lumps and blood, and tear gas or pepper spray were as routine as the yard period itself.

Every race has a shot caller. On my first night at San Quentin, the white shot caller boldly walked into my cell. He said he wanted to talk to me and my cell partner. The shot caller explained that there was something called "mandatory yard." He warned that if we didn't participate, we would be stabbed. He was very matter-of-fact about it.

I was being forced to join a racial group, and take orders from men I wanted nothing to do with. With their rules of separation, and hate, they were trying to convert me into a racist, something I've never been before.

The really scary part was when a guard walked by and saw three of us in the cell. I thought the guard was going to order the shot caller out, cuff him and haul him away – like they do now. Instead, the shot caller told the guard -- he didn't ask the guard – to come back in 15 minutes because he needed to talk to us. And the guard did exactly as he was told! That's when I began to understand the severity of my situation.

I learned later that the guard actually ran the prison – with their guns, extraction teams and the law. But the guards *allowed* the shot callers to "run things" through reluctant consent. It is actually easier for the guards when we govern ourselves, even through chaos.

The walk to chow was almost always eventful. That's when the guards showed their aggressive side. Rebellious prisoners would get thrown against the wall, or prisoners would decide to have a spontaneous knockout contest to see who could dominate who. At the end of the day, the guards always got the last laugh. It really sucked when these incidents happened in the chow hall. Our meals inevitably got pepper sprayed, along with the combatants.

The chow hall was yet another place where the ugliness of racial segregation would show itself. If I, as a white man, accepted food off of a Black's tray, I could get stabbed for that. Whether I liked Blacks personally was irrelevant, I was forced to practice racism with the state's blessing.

I was overjoyed to be transferred out of that place. To be fair, again, I was housed in the reception center of San Quentin, not the main yard where all of the great programs are at. In fact, on the reception center there were no programs, not even chapel services.

My next destination just happened to be another of California's notorious penal institutions, the infamous Pelican Bay State Prison. Pelican Bay was a much newer institution, and more modern. The cells were also a lot larger, room enough for my cell partner and I to move around at the same time. The water was also clean, the air was fresh, surrounded by redwood trees and the comforting scent of the nearby Pacific Ocean.

For instance, the racial politics were just the same, if not more intense. It just so happened that I was assigned a cell down the tier from some skinheads (a white supremacist group). They preached the same rules of separation. To keep my peace, I purchased a sack of cocoa for them every month. I felt all alone in that situation. It was me verses a pack of wild dogs. I felt powerless, and the prison system was no refuge. Ironically, it was something as simple and childlike as cocoa that kept the wolves at bay.

Everything was fine for me until I saw an old Black friend of mine, and I hugged him. The skinheads approached me aggressively and gave me my first and last warning. Actually, it was my second warning from an earlier, similar incident. On that occasion, I'd gone after a loose handball that rolled into the Asian's "territory." I instantly went to retrieve it, and almost caused a riot. Running into another race's area is seen as a threat; they think they're being attacked. As I ran "out of bounds," the yard went eerily quiet, everyone froze, and all eyes were on me, including the guards. I was lucky, I caught myself and stopped.

Another white guy wasn't so lucky. Though I'm not sure what his offense was, I was witness to the consequences of it. As this white guy was returning from canteen, walking across the yard with his groceries, a group of skinheads approached him. I was deaf to the conversation, but after they said whatever they said, the five or six guys started ripping items out of his bags and running off with them. The victim stood there in shock, saying nothing, and doing nothing, just like the guards. I felt for the guy. I felt bad for him because I knew what it felt like to be helpless.

My college education opened the door for me to be assigned as a tutor, helping others earn their G.E.D.s Some men really appreciated my help, and it was a very rewarding position for me. The position gave me purpose, and helped me escape the idleness. Through that position, I was able to gain respect among my peers without having to prove myself in some senseless, macho way.

Many guards at Pelican Bay were just as disruptive and dishonorable as the inmates. As you might imagine, with all of the riotous activity, lockdowns were frequent. With lockdowns came cell searches, mass cell searches where dozens of guards ransacked our living quarters, breaking

what little property we had. Mixing up our property with our cell partner's property, especially mail and legal work.

After four and a half years at Pelican Bay, I was transferred to Corcoran. Upon arriving at the state prison at Corcoran, we were given a weird orientation by the guards. They warned that the whites would stab us as soon as we hit the yard. This "warning" went on for 30 minutes. We knew something was fishy, because we know the guards care nothing for us, so why the concern now? Their aim was to convince us to go into protective custody, an old program CDC was trying to expand. After there were few takers, the guards reluctantly escorted us to the general population. Corcoran was pretty much of the same, racial segregation, individual riots and all out melees, and punitive searches to follow. There were very few programs and chapel services were cancelled regularly.

We arrived on the yard without incident, but due to the lack of programs, and the routine violence, I stayed in my cell for most of the two years I was there. I gained a lot of weight, questioned my worth, and frequently asked where the rehabilitation was. I prayed for something better.

Eventually, my disciplinary-free record earned me the privilege of going to a medium-security institution. I immediately chose the state prison at Lancaster, also known as the Progressive Programming Facility. When I told the other whites on the yard about my choice, I was labeled a "sellout."

I didn't care at that point. I knew I had a better opportunity on a programming medium-security facility, at least that was my hope. I had heard that the PPF housed a population of guys just like me. Guys who didn't do drugs, that wasn't into gangs, racists or otherwise, and they didn't separate themselves by race.

When I arrived at the PPF, there was no room for me, all of the beds were full. So they put me in administrative segregation, or what we call “the hole,” until a bed opened up. The hole was filled with prisoners who had lost all hope. There were a lot of mentally ill prisoners in the hole, or very evil men who meant serious harm to anyone around them. There were also a lot of prisoners on suicide watch, or men who dressed and acted like women. The shocker was the sexual deviants whose doors and windows had to be covered because they walked around their cells naked or they masturbated all day.

Thankfully, there was a civilian staff member assigned to the hole. Every day she would come by and say encouraging things; she would also bring a sheet of paper with the latest sports results and puzzles. After just a little over a week, I was “freed” from the hole and placed on the PPF.

The majority of the men who volunteered for the program were older and more mature. Younger prisoners tend to have something to prove, and get involved with prison politics as a cause, or gangs and other negative ideologies.

My first mission on the PPF was to find the “White” area and check in, see what the climate was on the yard. I needed to learn the “rules” of the yard. Instead of being told a bunch of restrictions and do, and don’ts, I was told that I was free to go anywhere, and associate with anyone I wanted to. Man, what a relief! I felt like a huge weight had been taken off my back.

It took a while for me to get used to that. Every time I walked by a table, or a shower, or a phone, I was conscious of what race was there, but each time I passed a table they were all mixed. When I jogged around the track, I was leery of run-away balls and thought twice about helping others. But again, all of the races were mixed, playing basketball, hanging out or even

running together. I had never seen anything like it, a tension-free prison yard. Compared to the hell I had been through on the other facilities, this prison facility was a slice of heaven.

There were Bible-study groups on the yard, sitting in the grass. There was no hate or mean looks. Every one respected the privacy of the others, and the talk on the yard was pro-social, not negative and anti-social.

Since the Lord Jesus is a very important part of my life, I attend chapel services. And to my delight, the chapel is open daily. We also have many outside speakers visit to give a good word or run off a sermon for us. I am always encouraged by their visits and words of faith.

In addition to signing up for church, I also signed up for the Arts and Crafts class. I am actually painting and learning to draw. The participants are super helpful, approachable and friendly. And with all of my years in prison, I have never been outside after dinner. But here there's night yard where I can walk and actually see the moon and the stars, and feel the coolness of the evening air. I can watch the unique sunsets, the wild cloud patterns, and I will never again take them for granted. For years I used to look out of my tiny cell window and dream of experiencing the night elements, and now I can actually live it.

Here on the PPF, the guards are much more respectful, fair and approachable. I haven't seen or heard of any abuse by the guards since I've been here. For the most part, everyone simply gets along on the PPF.

What I've come to understand over time is that the PPF prisoners are striving to hold themselves to a higher standard. A standard that reflects personal and group accountability, pro-social ideals, healing and making amends.

It wasn't easy to remain disciplinary-free all those years at the other prisons, but being here at the PPF now made it all worth it. Finally, I found a place that has some rehabilitation in it. The PPF is my slice of heaven.