

The Cell House by Michael Hojnacki

As I walk to C Cell House, enjoying a cool quiet night, I look around realizing there is no longer a view. A wall, some 30 feet high, topped with a high voltage cable and coils of razor wire, obstructs my sight. Continuing toward C cell house, which is the largest of the cell houses, I step onto Main Street. To my left I have a view of A and B cell houses, which are a little smaller. The silhouettes of D cell house along with E and F dorms, where offenders with less serious charges are housed, are in the distance. There are 1800 offenders within this small city. I call this a city as it consists of a church, hospital, barbershop, offender store, laundry, school, fire station and the many wood, metal, and paint shops where some of the offenders hold jobs. I start thinking about how it must be not seeing the outside world for the many that make their home here now.

C Cell House is a long and narrow brick building with 5 floors. The floors are called ranges, with sixty cells on each range, totaling three hundred cells. The cell structure stands in the middle, almost like a building within a building. Fenced in walkways encompass the outer edge of each range with metal stairways at each extremity. The interior walls are painted a rather neutral color of light gray with a white ceiling. Architectural designs on the ceiling give you the impression of an old ballroom and the craftsmanship of yesteryear. That illusion is broken by the sight of gun stands attached to the walls twenty feet in the air. These were once used by armed guards to watch over the cell house and protect officers on the floor. Concrete and steel shows its age as this building, built in 1890, is one of the oldest and largest still used within the State Correctional System. This State Prison is a Level 4 maximum-security prison. Tonight I have a full house.

I'm the OIC, Officer In Charge, working along with one other officer. We relieve the officers from the third shift, and head for the stairway to begin our security check, the first of many done once an hour each night. I begin with the fifth range working from top to bottom, but never doing a check the same way twice as not to set a routine.

The midnight watch goes from the quiet outdoors to the sounds of 300 male offenders locked down for the evening. With televisions all tuned to the same channel, Jerry Springer begins his show and hundreds cheer as the first guest is introduced. You can always tell when it's a female guest as the roars are at their loudest. A few quiet moments bring the sound of music echoing through the building as a couple offenders opt for the radio over television for the night. Many are in conversation about the guest on the Springer show while a few are playing cards with their neighbors through the bars.

The five hundred range, almost 40 feet up, is uncomfortably a lot warmer. It's dark in many cells as some have called it a night and turned in. Walking the range is a little like walking down a dark dismal downtown alley around midnight. There is the feeling of many eyes watching as you see a couple cells down a mirror, then another and another peek out from between the bars. I know this is the only way for an offender to see from within his cell and I have come to accept it, but sometimes it sends a chill down your spine as you see dozens glance in and out as you make your way from one end to the other.

The purpose of this security check is to make sure all are present, all cell doors are double locked and all are safe. Safe, to get a better understanding, is to make sure everyone is alive as suicide is very common. If they appear to be asleep, the aid of a flashlight allows me to make sure their chest is moving as they breathe. Many will say, "Hi", or give a little nod with some yelling out "five-o" as you pass. This is a warning signal for those who might be doing something they shouldn't, like smoking or fermenting fruit into wine called hooch. You may happen upon someone exercising or masturbating, hoping you were a female officer doing the check. Flashes of color catch the corner of my eye as some offenders still have their lights on. Offenders wallpaper their cell with centerfolds or some very artistic paintings and drawings to brighten up an otherwise dark world. As I walk down each range I attempt to pinpoint the source of many smells; tobacco, marijuana, or hooch (each of which has a very distinct odor) while trying to block

out the odors of bodily functions. I have come to believe many plan their bowel movements to cover and detour from further investigation of their cells.

Most are very friendly and just desirous of someone to talk to. Some have simply left out request forms for supplies or a piece of mail to be placed in the outgoing mailbox. I may pass someone that has been there for 20 years and next to him someone that has only been there 20 days. It's the offender that has been there for 20 days that I need to watch a little more carefully. Being new, they may feel that they are wrongfully imprisoned for what they have done. Feeling a little revengeful against the system, they take out their anger on the officers doing everything from calling out names to trying to gun us down. "Gunned down" is an offender's term, which consists of concocting a mixture of their every bodily fluid in a Styrofoam cup and throwing that at a passing officer. Being gunned down is a serious matter for both the officer and the offender. The officer goes directly to the hospital, his/her eyes are washed, mandatory showering is next, then receiving a change of clothes and beginning a series of tests for HIV, hepatitis, TB and other known diseases that are transmitted through bodily fluids. The offender ends up in the IDU, which is the Internal Disciplinary Unit, similar to solitary confinement.

Official counts are done twice each shift in addition to the security checks. Around 4:00 a.m. it's time to start getting ready for breakfast. All offenders go to the Prison Dining Room, or PDR, for all their meals. With C cell house located on the opposite end of the compound, each offender must walk over for their 30 minute meal time, rain or shine, with the exception of offenders that are locked down for the day as a punishment for rule violations.

The unlocking of hundreds of cell doors is done one at a time. This is an old prison with old cell door locks and old brass keys about four times larger than a normal sized house key. When turned the deadbolt produces a loud clank as it moves. Many offenders use this as a wake up call as they know the call for chow will come promptly. This still doesn't allow the cell doors to open as each is double locked by use of a heavy steel bar above the door the length of each range that is controlled by a crank in a locked gearbox at the end next to the stairways.

After each cell is unlocked, we wait for a radio call from the PDR announcing that they are ready for C cell house. Only one cell house goes to the PDR at a time to cut down on rival gang fights. I would announce on the PA system with reverberation, "chow time," and the other officer and I would unlock the gearboxes on each range and turn the crank, watching an arrow move from lock to unlock, the sound of old gear sets grinding against one another, producing a high pitch squeal as the bar slides in its guide, allowing the cell doors to open. Hundreds of offenders spring out of their cells like racehorses at a starting gate, making their descent down the stairways and through a single doorway to the outside. Shortly after, the food cart would arrive with boxed meals for the offenders that were locked down. This would always fill the air with the smell of crisp bacon, eggs, pancakes and coffee. It always smells so good you could almost taste it, probably because I was starting to get a little hungry by then. I was able to grab a hot cup of coffee before C cell house returned from the PDR.

Soon the offenders begin to return. They are free to roam the cell house visiting with friends or taking a quick shower, located at the boundary of each range. This is the most dangerous time of the shift for an officer. If anything is going to take place, this is the time. Anything from fights, riots or the possibility of the cell house being taken over can happen now; with 300 to 2 odds, there wouldn't be a contest. Most of the supervision is done by television camera with each end of each range monitored from the officers' station, which is next to the front doorway and is like a large cell in itself for the officers' protection. As I get a radio call that the last offender is back from breakfast, I lock the front door and announce 10 minutes to lockup. Soon this becomes a 2-minute warning, then the announcement of lockup. Heading back to the gearboxes marks that their time is up. If an offender were not in his cell, he would be rolled out, unable to open his cell door, and would receive a write-up for rule violation. Most of the time everyone would be back in his cell.

Time to key lock the doors again. Once completed, the final official count of the shift takes place. Subsequently, it's pretty much a night as from then on it's just waiting for the second shift to relieve you.

This was a good night. As you can imagine, many things could and have gone bad in the past. This environment isn't for everyone and I don't recommend it to anyone that does not have a strong desire for this type of work. It takes a special person to see this side of society and how human beings can be toward one another. The anger and the fear almost make you wonder when some of humanity turned to animals.

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