

Monument *New York Field Marshall*

The eight foot high granite memorial stone sits outside the front wall of Attica Correctional Facility, facing a public road about a hundred feet away. Engraved on the stone in the New York State Seal are the words: “In memory of the employees who gave their lives in the riot of September 9-13, 1971. Man’s inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn”. The names of 11 deceased employees follow those words.

Altogether, 43 people died in this riot. A prison guard and three prisoners were murdered by prisoners. Thirty-nine were killed in the September 13th retaking of the prison - 29 prisoners and 10 employees. All were shot to death by state troopers and prison guards. While some of these deaths were accidental, many murders were committed that day by troopers and guards, and none of them was ever prosecuted for his or her crimes.

Crimes that were committed by prisoners during this riot were pursued with vigour by the prosecuting authorities, while those committed by state troopers and prison guards were covered up. It is not my intention to write about this cover-up. That subject has been adequately covered in the book *The Turkey Shoot* by Malcolm Bell, one of the Assistant Attorney Generals assigned to handle the investigation and prosecution of those guilty of crimes related to this riot. In conflict with the powers that be at that time over this cover-up, Mr. Bell resigned his post. My interest is in the Attica riot monument.

Forty-three human beings died in the Attica riot, yet only 11 names appear on this memorial stone. It does not matter who killed who, why, or how. Everyone who died in that riot was a victim, and every one of their names belongs on that memorial stone.

It is easy to blame the prisoners for the deaths that occurred in this riot. But while the prisoners rioted, it was not the prisoners that brought the riot about. It was caused by subjecting human beings to horrendous prison conditions, without affording them proper and adequate recourse to change them. It was the state itself that caused the Attica riot (Wicker, 1976). This does not justify what the prisoners did, for nothing justifies violence, but those in authority were not ignorant of the fact that, if you make a situation unbearable and hopeless, without recourse or possible remedy, then violence will occur. Has history not taught us this on many different levels? Are revolutions not born of such conditions?

The quote on the stone: “Man’s inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn”, is attributable to Viktor Frankl, a *prisoner* of renown,

who survived the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. What does this quote mean on *this* stone?

“Man’s inhumanity to man” - does this refer to the “inhumanity” inherent in the prison system that caused the riot? Does it refer to the prisoners who participated in the riot? Or does it refer to the troopers and guards that shot and killed all but four who died in the riot? Only one out of the 11 employees killed was killed by a prisoner. Ten deaths, and probably most of the deaths of the 29 prisoners killed at that time, were unnecessary and avoidable.

If the employees are seen as its innocent victims, then should the three prisoners who were murdered by other prisoners also be considered its innocent victims? And if the troopers and guards “accidentally” shot the 10 employees, how many of the 29 prisoners were also “accidentally” shot? I say that “Man’s inhumanity to man” refers to the mentality that says the death of a prisoner weighs less than the death of a prison employee. It refers to the mindset that deems it is alright to abuse, mistreat, beat, and even kill prisoners. And it certainly refers to caring so little about human lives that you just start shooting at anything and everything, not caring who or what you hit or kill.

All who died during the Attica riot were victims of “Man’s inhumanity to man”. The prisoners who died had committed crimes to be there. The employees that died chose to be there, working in a penal system that typified “Man’s inhumanity to man”. Neither should have been where they were, but the fact that they were does not lessen the wrongness of their deaths. In death, employee and prisoner were brought together as brothers killed by the prison system. That granite memorial stone should bear the name of every single person who died in that riot.

At the time of the riot, the name of the facility was Attica Prison. The aftermath of the riot brought many needed reforms and a name change for prisons to “correctional facilities”, as if changing the name would change what it was and did. Prisoners stopped being prisoners and became “inmates”. I was 22 years old when the Attica riot took place, and was housed at the New York State Prison, Sing Sing. It is to my great shame that I confess to having lived over three decades behind prison walls, and most of that has been within the New York State prison system. I know of prison conditions then, back in 1971, and I know of them now. Sadly, conditions are no better now than they were way back then; indeed, in a great many ways, they are much worse.

But it is not my intention to go into detail here on those conditions. It is the nature of the beast to disguise itself while being highly resistant to any and all positive and progressive changes. To further highlight this point, I quote a paragraph that was published in March of 1883 in the *Report of the Committee on State Prisons upon the Charges of the "New York Star" against the Management of the Prisons of this State*:

The State seems not yet to have discovered the fact that society is better protected against a criminal by transforming him into an honest and law abiding citizen, an industrious and useful member of the community, than it can by confining him within prison walls. And justice is best satisfied, not by vindictive punishments, but by inducing men to become just. Herein, as we believe lies the true philosophy of all prison management. It should aim at the reformation of criminals, and subordinate to this all other considerations.

That statement pertained to the prison system over 120 years ago, and it *still* applies today. Michael Siferson reflects this in his testimony given on February 22, 1883 during the aforementioned investigation, when he said:

But now the average released convict is a broken man, ruined in health, his body foul and distorted by disease and neglect, his mind dense in its ignorance, and his heart callous and steeled against society, which has treated him worse than you would a mad dog or a wild animal. His soul is changed within him, and he is a modern Ishmael, and this poor wretch is the type of hundreds who graduate from our State prisons, and whose reclamation to honesty and respectability would seem almost an impossibility.

We have learned nothing in the past 125 years, and we have learned nothing from the Attica riot. We have raised an eight foot monument at the site of the system's greatest visible tragedy, compounding that tragedy by including names of only 11 of the 43 victims of the system. Those listed on the stone did not *give* their lives in the riot, as is engraved - their lives were *taken* from them, and from the 32 prisoners who were killed. They were not given a choice to live or die, it was decided for them. It was decided by

those that made prison conditions what they were, which caused the riot, and it was decided by those who took those lives.

If we could now question the dead, if they had a say in whose names were to appear on such a monument, I daresay that every one of them would want their names on it, and want everyone who was killed in the tragedy on it. This monument is not to honour their “sacrifice”, for they did not willingly give up their lives for a noble cause or worthwhile purpose. They are not heroes. The 11 employees, like the 32 dead prisoners, are nothing more than tragic victims of a degenerate penal system. What need do the dead have of a monument? Are such things not for those left living, a visual reminder to us that one cannot escape death?

It is sad to admit that I remember not one name of any of the 32 prisoners who died in the riot. However, none of the names of the riot’s victims are important, prisoner or employee. We need to remember the “inhumanity” that caused the riot, and that took place during the retaking of the prison and after in the abuse and beatings that were inflicted upon the prisoners in retaliation. It is inherent in the system to this present day. To ignore and forget this inhumanity dooms us to being its victim yet again.

REFERENCES

- Bell, Malcolm (1988) *The Turkey Shoot*, New York: Outlet.
Wicker, Tom (1976) *A Time to Die*, New York: Ballantine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author was a prisoner in a New York State Correctional Facility when this article was written.