

It's a Form of Warfare: A Description of Pelican Bay State Prison

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The bus ride from Folsom State Prison to Pelican Bay State Prison is breathtakingly beautiful. You pass through Clear Lake with its raised boat houses, wander up Highway 101 through towering redwoods and alongside the Eel River until you reach Eureka and the Pacific Ocean. You stare, mesmerized, at crashing waves on glorious California beaches and at pretty women in shorts and miniskirts enjoying this warm May day. You cannot get enough of the sights, sounds, and smells; then you reach Smith River and the prison.

At first glance, there is nothing remarkable. It is just like all the other new California prisons (Ione, Corcoran, Tehachapi, etc.) built in the mid 1980s. That perception changes as you are escorted off your bus by two baton-wielding correctional officers, down a long enclosed hallway to your new home.

California's newest prison, Pelican Bay, is also touted as its most secure and innovative, technologically speaking. It is home to the supposedly strongest 'hole' in the United States. The Security Housing Unit (or S.H.U.) is literally and figuratively a world unto itself.

There are two facilities, called C and O. Each facility is divided into ten units. The units are subdivided into six pods. These pods contain eight two-man cells. Not all the pods are double-celled, although they will be shortly as the S.H.U. fills. Each pod has a 'yard' with approximately 200 square feet of space, with twenty-foot walls. There is no exercise equipment. Nothing but you and a camera mounted behind thick steel mesh that covers the 'open sky' portion of the yard. Each prisoner is allowed an hour and a half of yard each day. There is one shower per tier. You are given ten minutes to shower and shave (without a mirror) and return to your cell.

The doors, run pneumatically, are opened and closed by a guard in

a centrally located booth in each unit. Since the guard controls the doors and all traffic s/he is called 'control.' This guard has a rifle, usually a 9mm semi-automatic assault type. All prisoners are strip searched and handcuffed before a door is opened to allow you to go to or from the yard, the law library, the doctor or dentist, and elsewhere. Each prisoner is escorted by two guards carrying their nightclubs at all times.

Visiting is via phone and behind a thick plexiglass partition only. There are no contact visits or conjugal visits ('family visits') for S.H.U. prisoners, as the rest of the state's prisoners enjoy. Even the law library is caged. Working behind glass are the free-person-law-librarian and his/her guard. You knock on the window and your order is filled. Books cannot be checked out. The library, which is only a law library, is understaffed and the collection is not up to even the simplified standards for a S.H.U.

Personal clothing that belongs to the prisoner is limited to the basics: running shoes, t-shirts, socks, shorts and thermal underwear (all white). All other clothing is 'state issue' and consists of a mustard yellow jumpsuit which ties instead of zips or snaps (for metal control), white socks, t-shirts, shorts and so forth. Items such as deodorant, shampoo and soap are either what you brought from your sending institution or what you purchased here at the canteen. The toiletries are placed in bags or paper container after being removed from their original wrappings. Deodorant is taken out of its plastic housing. Things evaporate or dry up quickly, or go stale in the case of cookies or chips. Coffee, tea and Koolaid are sold, but no tobacco items. There is no smoking in S.H.U., no 'dip' or 'chew' either, no matches. Staff routinely smokes or 'dips' in front of you, but I haven't been able to smoke since I arrived, nor will I.

You are forced to send any other personal property home. If you are unlucky enough to be alone, you can either donate your property or destroy it. You cannot have your property set aside for you when (hopefully) you reach a 'mainline' prison after your S.H.U. stay is up. There are no rules which allow this practice and it only applies to S.H.U. prisoners. So you send all your

personal belongings home; stuff it has taken you years to accumulate: your photos (you can only keep fifteen), books, tapes, headphones, levis, sweatshirts, pants, all the stuff which over the last ten years has made doing twenty-one to life bearable.

Mail comes every day except Sunday. It often takes nine days or more to reach you even from close by. It is either the Post Office's routing or the delay is here; you cannot find out which.

The former Governor of California, George Duekmejian, and the Director of the California Department of Corrections, James Rowland, both claimed that this new S.H.U. is only for California's worst prisoners, but you know that this is patently untrue. It is home to whomever a warden or program administrator wishes to send here. Although the majority of prisoners are here for either violent acts inside prison or for gang membership, gang association or both, there are many prisoners who are not here for these reasons. Some are drug users/dealers inside the prison, some are merely the unfortunate ones who have run afoul of some officer or staff member and were shipped up here.

The criteria for being housed here are specific, but not always followed. Like all prisons, there are prisoners who simply 'fall through the cracks' in the rules, and there are ones who get shipped 'just because.' Either way, the prisoners here are placed in S.H.U. for either a set term (e.g. fifteen months) or 'indeterminate.' Indeterminate is supposedly designed to control the gangs, gang associates, and anyone the Department of Corrections deems dangerous. It is to keep anyone named 'indeterminate' from ever going to a mainline prison until he breaks and 'debriefs.' Debriefing is a euphemism for 'snitching.' Until the prisoner debriefs and tells on himself and his comrades, he is here for 'life' or until he is deemed 'okay' by a judgment which is entirely arbitrary.

The whole set-up is designed to cause mental, physical and emotional stress. First off, the prison is located in a remote corner of the state near the Oregon border. Most of the

prisoners are from the southern section of California, like Los Angeles and San Diego. This means that visitors must travel more than a thousand miles to get to the prison. Most prisoners and their families are poor. Travel costs present a hardship for these families. That is why visitors are rare.

The isolation goes on even inside the prison. Contact with staff is kept to a minimum and what occurs is formal. You cannot see out from your cell as in other prisons. The 'sky' in the yard is your one source of 'outside.' Even your senses are kept dulled. Colours when used are muted, mostly just white, off-white and grey. Although the food is outstanding in taste and warmth, the menu is unaltered and soon becomes predictable. These things taken separately mean little or nothing, but when placed together they take on an altogether sinister form.¹

Television is an example. To those few who are lucky enough to own a personal television, the situation is bizarre. The speaker wires are cut to facilitate the use of earphones because headphones are prohibited. Even though the region surrounding the prison uses local cable television or satellite broadcast, this prison points its dish at (of all places) Denver, Colorado. Satellite dishes are not taxed according to where they are pointed; therefore, there is no fiscal advantage to the prison for tuning-in Denver. Denver is at least 1500 miles and a couple of time zones away. Even the guards cannot explain it. I suggest that the reason is to isolate us from local events. Again, by itself this is nothing, but along with the grey walls, the limited personal property and similar restrictions (e.g. you are given one book a week to read) the intent seems quite clear. Most people simply 'zone out' on Denver television or become exercise freaks, or both.

Even the cells are eerie. There are no mirrors. The only time you can see yourself is on the little knob in the shower. You shave on your knees looking at the 1 inch reflection. There is very little for you to control in your cell. The light switch is a silver bump and no one seems to know how it works. You have, of course, the usual sink/toilet combination to play in. Since showers are every other day 'bird baths' are the order of

the day. There is a weird, overly cemented table/desk/seat arrangement which is uncomfortable at best, and a couple of cement bunks. The lower bunk has a couple of 'lockers' or shelves which are very poorly designed. They are so deep that anything pushed back is almost beyond salvage and requires a pole or whatever to drag, push or pull it out. Though the cells are more than eighty square feet, with or without a 'cellie' (cell mate) they quickly shrink when you are inside them for twenty-two hours a day.

It is a physical and psychological form of warfare being carried out against you. No one could honestly say it is by accident that all these things 'just happened' at once. This is done to break you, to punish you, to ruin you. After spending years in here, what comes out will not be quite 'right.' But, of course, the California Department of Corrections has that solved. When or if you are released from S.H.U. you are sent to Pelican Bay's mainline. They have a semi-lockdown type of 'step' program there. If you screw up (an entirely arbitrary decision by some staff member who may have taken a disliking to you) you return to S.H.U.; if not, you are sent to another equally strict prison.

I lay there in my bunk thinking. Fairly soon, with all of California's prison building, this state will surpass all of the country's prison systems for sheer volume and will pass Russia's also.² This is the thought that passes through your head as you lie thinking in your Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit bunk; this and a few stray ones of beautiful redwoods, pretty women in shorts and miniskirts, and northern California beaches with big Pacific waves rolling in.

ENDNOTES

1. James McConnell writing in *Psychology Today* notes, "I believe the day has come when we can combine sensory deprivation with drugs, hypnosis and astute manipulation of reward and punishment to gain absolute control over an individual's behavior. It should then be possible to achieve a very rapid and highly effective type of positive brainwashing that would allow us to make dramatic changes in a person's behavior and personality" (McConnell, April 1970: 14).
2. The American Civil Liberties Union reports that the incarceration rate in the United States is the highest in the world. For "every 100,000 Americans 426 live behind bars. In South Africa, 333 of every 100,000 are in prison; in the Soviet Union, 268; Great Britain 97; Spain, 76; the Netherlands, 40.

Perhaps even more shocking is the finding that Black males in the United States are imprisoned at a rate of four times that of Black males in South Africa: 3,109 per 100,000 compared to 729 per 100,000" (Ed. Note. Elvin, 1991: 1).

REFERENCES

- Elvin, J. (Winter 1991) "U.S. Now Leads World in Rate of Incarceration" *The National Prison Project Journal*, 6 (1):1-2.
- McConnell, J.V. (April 1970) "Criminals Can Be Brainwashed - Now." *Psychology Today*.