

## One Month at Mid-State

August 23, 2001. This is my third prison. I have no written observations from the first 20 months I spent at Passaic County Jail in Paterson, NJ because I had frequent visits from Georgia and local friends.

At the second prison, CRAF (Central Reception and Assignment Facility) which was a brief but tough experience during which I had no visitors at all, I was able to describe the ordeal in daily letters to Georgia. When I get a chance to review those letters I may record a separate memoir of CRAF.

But now I'm at Mid-State Correctional Facility. Mid-State is located at the west end of Fort Dix, abutting McGuire Air Force Base. Mail reaches us through Wrightstown, NJ. I've been here for exactly one year today.

Mid-State has about 600 inmates. I'm in a large dormitory-like cell (referred to here as a tier). There are 16 tiers. I share my tier with 37 other prisoners. During this past year, however, there has been at least one complete turnover of personnel, so I've had perhaps 80 cellmates so far. Of the 37 who were here when I first arrived, only a handful remain.

With most of my fellow inmates I have only superficial contact. However, even such contact is enough to size up the variety of personalities. With a few men – notably those in my immediate vicinity – I have much closer relations.

August 24. My tier is 150 feet long and 15 feet wide. My personal space is exactly six feet by five feet – that is, a lower bunk with 1 foot alongside the right hand side. My “bunkie” above me owns the 1½ feet on the left side. Very tight. This is the first aspect of prison one has to deal with – *no space*.

The second is even harder – *no privacy*. Twenty-four hours a day: absolutely no privacy.

The third aspect is *the noise*. It never ends: gates clanging, men talking at the top of their voices, COs screaming, the TV blaring, planes practicing take offs and landings all night long at McGuire. Sometimes I think I'll go crazy.

A horrendous, noisy old fan is positioned directly in front of my bunk. It runs day and night since we have no air conditioning, but I benefit not at all from it since it's pointed away from me.

August 25. Our second-floor tier is made of concrete blocks that soak up the summer heat. It's rarely less than 90 degrees within the tier from June through September. It's noon. I'm sitting here beside my bunk naked except for a pair of boxer shorts.

I'm forced to listen to two loud-mouthed guys berating each other at highest-decibel levels. Why are they arguing? One of them needs to use our latrine. But the other refuses to allow him into the area (though three stools are available) because he's masturbating and doesn't want to be disturbed. The heat is getting to every one, as various men jump in to take sides on behalf of one or the other of the quarrelers.

August 26. At the moment our tier is composed of black, hispanic, and white men in the ratio of 55-25-20 respectively. Half of the hispanic men are black, so black predominates. Everyone is aware of color – race is an ever-present feature in American life – but, as in the military, everybody works at defusing latent tension.

By and large, we all get along, as Rodney King would have us do. Men who have been incarcerated longest know the importance of preventing emotions from getting out of control, and serve as mediators. A great deal of forbearance is exercised. When real quarreling erupts, it often concludes with mutual apologies

Yet shouting and cursing is constant – the three most used words in prison, by COs as well as inmates, are shit, motherfucker, and nigger – the latter exclusively by African Americans.

August 27. Most men have friends from among the other two main racial groups. On the other hand, there's a natural tendency to group by homogeneous units. Hispanics enjoy talking to each other in Spanish, which sets them apart.

The black guys tend to monopolize the TV set, which is at the opposite end of the tier from me. The anglos are generally quieter than the other groups, perhaps because they are the smallest minority.

The percentage of homosexuals at Mid State seems to be higher than in the general population. Or perhaps it's just that in prison gay men can be more open. At one point, of the five men above and to either side of me, three were gay.

At Mid- State, a medium security prison, men do not get raped, as happens in high security institutions where men are serving much longer sentences. But a fair amount of homosexual activity is obvious.

August 28. This morning a CO (Correction Officer) spotted a man wearing tinted glasses and carrying a case with a spare pair. I observed the whole incident from beginning to end.

The CO confiscated the glasses. The man protested: 1) he had brought the glasses with him into prison; and 2) he is medically authorized to wear them. This was obvious to any onlooker; his eyes could not handle bright light; they were narrowed to the barest squint.

The CO wouldn't listen to his explanation. Why the second pair? The prison doctor had ordered them. Why wasn't he wearing the State-issued glasses? Because the prison doctor forgot to have them tinted. He had reminded the doctor and was now waiting on the doctor to remedy the error.

All this medical inefficiency, or perhaps mere indifference, is routine. In my own case, the doctor told me he would order my blood pressure checked weekly – he never did. The dentist cancelled my appointment and promised to re-schedule it – he never did.

I reported two broken eyeglass stems to the eye doctor as an emergency (since I read and write constantly). It took him a month to respond. My reading glasses are still stemless, however, as I wait (how many more weeks?) for a replacement.

So the inmate's story is credible. Nevertheless the CO, loud-mouthed and bullying, wrote up a charge against the inmate for "attitude." He also confiscated the tinted glasses and left the inmate with the useless untinted State glasses. And threatened to lock up the inmate if he opened his mouth again!

For the most part, COs appear to be little more than robots, unable to think for themselves, quick to judge before getting the facts, inflexible in any unusual situation. The inmate is always wrong – especially when he's right. Only once in the year I've been here have I heard a CO apologize for mishandling a situation.

The COs reflect a flawed prison system, in my opinion. This is partly because of relatively low IQs required for employment, partly because of the kind of temperament that is drawn to exercising authority by brute force, and partly because of the kind of training and supervision in place. After all, sergeants and higher officers come from the ranks of COs.

August 29. Another example of the callous attitude prison officials take toward inmates: For the past ten days the temperature has been in the 90s – as it will be frequently throughout September as well. Ordinarily inmates get a cup of ice cubes once a day, about 8:30 p.m. During his daily inspection, we asked the lieutenant for, and *received* permission, to get two cups a day, the earlier one at 3:30 p.m. But no ice cubes were made available.

Each tier has an inmate “tier representative.” Our tier rep suggested we write up formal request slips – the routine way to handle grievances, etc. We did this. The lieutenant called our tier rep into his office and threatened to lock him up for “instigating a riot.” This usually means two weeks or more of “ad seg” – solitary confinement at another prison.

The tier rep stood his ground, however, and this afternoon, for the first time (and I hope not the last) we received a cup of ice cubes at 3:30 p.m.

August 30. Joe Cannon, the former superintendent (warden) here at Mid-State, was sentenced this week to 364 days in jail for molesting a teen-age girl. It was a plea agreement designed to keep the girl from having to testify in court.

COs here fall into three easily predictable categories. You have those who, like Trimble this morning, are either obnoxiously rude and disrespectful or, like Dansby, robots who enforce every conceivable rule irrespective of reason or circumstances. (Even the other COs make fun of Dansby.) It is this group of men – 15 or 20 percent of the total – who make life miserable for the inmates. Call them Type 1.

A second category, Type 2, opposite of the first, are those like Manipac, who endeavor to relate to prisoners with respect, or, like Pinero, our first shift CO with whom we have most to do, relate to prisoners as individuals and in a friendly, though often foul-mouthed, faux-belligerent manner, probably because that’s the way they see many inmates behaving.

Type 2 officers are flexible in the way they enforce rules, yet they maintain adequate control. Pinero, by his own admission, began his career as a Type 1, but over time changed to Type 2. Type 2 COs make prison life tolerable and may even contribute to rehabilitation by treating inmates with respect and providing a predictable framework for living and relating.

August 31. Bed 1, the lower bunk to my right (I’m Bed 3), is inhabited by Wilmer Woodrow Wilson (“Bud”) Watts, a

60-year-old long distance truck driver. He fell asleep at the wheel on a cross-country job, had an accident in which one person was killed. So he has a five-year sentence for manslaughter. He will have to serve 85% of that: four years and three months.

Bud is basically a good man, hard working, married for 30 years, with three grown children – one of them a Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force. His wife is a college graduate, but he himself is just barely literate, reading at perhaps the second or third grade level. I help him with his reading.

In some ways Bud is like a little boy, insecure, always putting himself down, constantly needing personal attention. I bought him a Bible, which he reads rarely, not so much for lack of interest as because he reads with such difficulty.

September 1. The *style* by which a Type 2 officer shows respect may differ from one CO to the next, as in the comparison between Pinero and Manipac. But in both cases it is a kind of respect, and prisoners recognize it as such. As with Type 1, Type 2 officers constitute 15 or 20 percent of the staff.

Type 3 includes all the rest, 60 or 70 percent of the total. They are basically timeservers. They don't particularly like their jobs, but the pay is better than they could get elsewhere, so they do their time.

They may joke about it, using inmate idiom, "I still have "eight more years before I 'max out.'" They focus on their jobs and their relationships with other officers. They show little personal interest in prisoners per se.

Korinko, our second shift officer, is of this type. Even here there are variations, however. I see some COs who visibly shirk their responsibilities, doing the very minimum. Others, such as Korinko, do their jobs well, but get upset, even panicky, at the least variation in their routines. Korinko can be considerate, as he usually is to me, but gives the impression of being so for his own convenience, not the inmate's.

About ten percent of the COs are women. My observation is that they fall into the same patterns already noted. Many are as foul-mouthed as the male officers and inmates. The only additional comment I might make is that some of the female officers emphasize their female identity more than the others, as with the use of perfume and makeup. A couple are rather "motherly," which inmates appreciate.

September 2. Bud has a severe case of emphysema brought on, I presume, by a lifetime of smoking. He goes into exhausting coughing fits several times a day. These are so bad the whole tier is concerned he will die before he gets out of here.

A fellow named Frank occupied Bed 1 when I first got here. He was dying of AIDS. Over six feet tall but weighing no more than 120 pounds, he seemed literally skin and bones. He too was a chain smoker. Smoking is against the rules here, but the rules are never enforced. The only enforced rule is “Don’t smoke in front of the lieutenant.”

September 3. Labor Day. Rather meaningless to us here. We don’t work hard here. My job is keeping the latrine clean.

Out of 38 men on the tier there are always, one or two who are schizophrenic, who act a little crazy most of the time. And there are always two or three whose emotions – whether overly aggressive or depressive – are kept sedated. There are at least a half-dozen who have diabetes, and some, such as myself, who take medication for high blood pressure.

Most of the men are of average intelligence, though not well educated, and whose experiences are limited to the ghetto. There are never more than one or two who have more than a secondary education – I’m the only one on the tier at the moment. (I’m also the oldest man on the tier by far – twelve years older than the next-oldest )

There are rarely more than three or four, out of 38, who strike me as having a below-average IQ, though some may appear so initially because of inability to read and/or write. One or two men have surprising artistic talent, and several – though not as many as one might expect – have good athletic ability.

I should note that the intelligence of inmates here appears to me to be about the same as the typical CO or sergeant. The main differences seem to be the environment in which each was raised (ghetto/projects versus suburbs) and the fact that a number of the COs and other officers have completed one or more terms of military service.

Of course, personal decisions play a huge role. Some COs grew up in the projects. And some inmates, such as myself, never experienced the ghetto.

September 4. For awhile Bilal Jefferson occupied Bed 2, the upper bunk to my right.. He is a big, black man who has spent more than half of his 40 years in prison. His

parents were storefront pastors who both died while he was still a teenager.

He seems to have been searching for God—or at least some convincing religion to practice – ever since. For some time he studied with the Jehovah's Witnesses. But a few years ago he converted to Islam.

In order to dialogue with him I'm re-reading my Qur'an. We've had many discussions and he trusts me. I don't attempt to re-convert him. I try instead, with some success, I think, to help him understand certain aspects of Islam better. For example, the important thing is not how many extra prayers above and beyond the mandatory five one offers daily, but whether through prayer he is developing a personal relationship with God.

Bilal is a self-taught jailhouse lawyer with three or four suits going against the government at any one time. Here again I was able to help him by purchasing a Self-Help Manual for Prisoners. He credits this with his first successful suit in the amount of \$3,500 – enough to keep him afloat for a few months after he was released from prison. He's gone now and appears to have made a good adjustment to the outside. I've received a couple of letters from him.

September 5. A big fight on the tier today. "Sho," the current tier bully (there's always one) picked on a new inmate. Unexpectedly the new guy stood up to Sho and fought back. Although smaller, he knows some karate. By the time the riot squad arrived, the new guy – nobody knows his name; he arrived just this morning – had given Sho a split lip, cutting his own hand in the process.

We all were forced to line up while the COs inspected each one of us for damage, trying to discern who was fighting. The two quarrelers were identified without difficulty by their cuts and bruises and were led off to lock-up.

Earlier I noted that most inmates are not short on I.Q. But *emotional* intelligence is another matter altogether. I think it is fair to say that most inmates have greater difficulty managing their emotions than most civilians have. I include myself here.

September 6. A young African American named "Bo" occupies Bed 2 now that Bilal has maxed out. He's good natured, but schizophrenic and overly aggressive at times. He's sedated each day. I feel sorry for him. He thought he was due to be released last week. But it turns out he had lost

most of his comp time for misbehavior, and now has another nine months to go. Depressed, he sleeps a lot.

Bed 4, above me, is occupied by a 35 year old of Italian American – an archetypical New Joiseyan as I stereotype them. Fortunado's incarcerated for a sexual offense, which he claims he's innocent of, and I believe him. Roman Catholic, he's experienced some kind of spiritual conversion as a result of his trauma. He spends a lot of time reading the Bible and other devotional literature.

However, this is his first real encounter with either the Bible or devotional literature, so I'm able to help him with his questions. I admire Fortunato for his emotional self-discipline in confrontation with COs or belligerent inmates. He handles himself with much more aplomb and detachment than I can manage.

September 7. Types of reaction to belligerency I've observed on this tier: 1) men who won't fight or defend themselves at all, but who will complain to the CO, perhaps asking to be placed in protective custody. Officers and inmates alike generally consider them cry-babies. But they may be acting on the principle that it's the authorities' job to maintain peace and order. Or they may be acting out of Christian conviction.

2) Men who will not allow themselves to get into a fight because of the high likelihood of being locked up when the riot squad arrives to quell the quarrel. But – and these are usually the smaller, weaker men – they might put a lock in a sock and take revenge on their attacker while he's sleeping. Or they might boil water in their hot pot, put a spoonful of Vaseline in it, and pour the scalding mix on their foe.

3) Men who will not initiate a fight but will invariably fight back, even if it means going to lock-up. They may be karate experts (as was the case yesterday), confident of their ability to defeat an opponent, or raised on the streets and conditioned to return blow for blow, win or lose. They cannot accept anybody "dissing" them.

September 8. Rahim, African-American, but not Muslim, occupied my bunk previously. At that time I was in Bed 4, immediately above him. Because he was on the breakfast crew Rahim had to get up early in the morning. Consequently he needed to get to sleep at night earlier than most. He slept again in the morning, or tried to, after he returned from breakfast prep.

Of course, this was difficult, if not impossible, because at both times, the rest of the inmates on our tier were up and about and, as always, noisy. I tried to be quiet during these times and won his friendship as a result.

He was a body-builder and, like a half-dozen other men on the tier, preoccupied with sex. He read porno magazines at every opportunity, and masturbated under the covers every day.

At the same time, he was avidly homophobic. When a gay man moved into a bunk near us Rahim made his life miserable, at one point beating up on him. (A group of Rahim's friends shielded this action from the attention of the COs.)

Eventually Rahim got too stressed out for lack of sleep and managed to get a transfer out of our tier. When he transferred out, he arranged for me to get his bunk. Everyone wants a lower bunk, and I am no exception (though climbing up and down from my upper bunk twenty times a day did give me some needed exercise).

September 9. Sunday. No church services. These are held on Saturday and Monday. A fair number of guys attend the services, a half-dozen or so from each tier. Most attend for the music, or simply to get out of the tier for an hour.

My experience is that in each tier there are always two or three fellows who are sincerely trying to live the Christian life. Others obviously have a religious background (they are forever showing off their knowledge of Scripture, especially prophecy) but just as obviously have rejected the faith.

I don't attend church services myself. Both Muslim and Christian pastors do a lot of good. I admire their work and their results. But the Christian chaplains all seem to be of the red-neck, fire and brimstone variety, or hyper-emotional Pentecostal types, and I find the services too stressful for me. My distancing myself from overt religious activities doesn't appear to negatively affect my witness on the tier, however.

September 10. Although prisoners lead a boring life, we are always stressed out over something or other. There are numerous reasons for this and few opportunities to relieve it. Prisoners sleep a lot, or try to – sleep being one of the few ways available to manage stress.

Some inmates sleep 12 or 15 hours a day. I myself sleep, or *try* to sleep, seven or seven and a half hours a night, then take a couple of cat naps during the day. God "gives his beloved sleep" (Psalm 127:2). I also take high blood pressure

pills, morning and evening. (I haven't found the Scripture to validate that yet – perhaps Paul to Timothy: take a little wine for your stomach's sake.)

I quarreled with one of my bunkmates this morning, Bo, in Bed 2. A nice boy, still in his 20s, but reared on the streets with no concept of how groups of men live together at close quarters – and he's schizophrenic to boot.

September 11. Fortunato came rushing up to me breathless, an hour ago, saying a plane had crashed into one of the Twin Towers in Manhattan and that the tower had collapsed. Thinking of the light plane that crashed into the Empire State Building some years back, doing minimal damage, I assured him he must be mistaken. But he wasn't. I've just returned from watching TV which is airing the whole event live. Two planes. Both towers. Incredible. Hard to believe.

September 12. All anybody is interested in today are the events of yesterday. Muslim terrorists, news reports say. The Muslims on our tier are really on the defensive.

Today I will follow my usual routine, spending most of the day reading or writing my commentaries on the Gospels and Paul's Prison Epistles, staying out of arguments.

Contrary to expectation, I find that time passes quickly in prison, presumably because I keep busy. Most of my fellow inmates respect my routine and leave me to myself. I must admit that, by the grace of God, I have adjusted to prison life reasonably well, through it is never easy and often psychologically painful.

One of the things I am most pleased about (I hesitate to say proud, though that's probably not far from the mark) is that I have earned and maintain the respect of my fellow prisoners. I overheard a CO tell another CO that I am the most respected man on the tier. I'm encouraged by the fact that I relate well to most of the guys and am not intimidated by the bullies.

September 13. Falwell and Robertson have been quoted on TV as saying some really inflammatory stuff. And our President isn't helping. He seems ready to launch his own Jihad. Judging from newspaper reports, everyone wonders "Why do they hate us?" Having lived in the Middle East, I could tell them. But they probably wouldn't or couldn't understand if I did.

Actually, I tend to agree with Falwell and Robertson about September 11 being a judgment on America, or at least a wake up call – but for far different reasons than they.

September 14. I stood at the gate of our tier for 12 minutes – I timed it – yelling for the rookie CO to let me out to go to a dental appointment. No matter what the CO is doing, he/she is not supposed to keep an inmate waiting because the inmate has only a ten-minute window in which to complete his movement.

When I complained to the CO he tried to shift the blame to me, saying I was not yelling loud enough. I've been here over a year now and have dealt with many COs. None has ever suggested I didn't yell loud enough. The truth is, the CO wasn't doing his job right and was unwilling to admit it.

September 15. To my left, in Bed 5, the lower bunk, is Joe Murphy, whom we call Mo. African American, about 35, he has been in prison the past 15 years. He's currently serving a sentence of 20 years-plus, but will soon be eligible for parole.

Mo is one of a kind. He is a scrounger par excellence, like the G. I. in *Catch 22* whose name slips me now. Mo knows where to steal anything. (I, for instance, depend on him for my supply of brown bread. I repay him with junk food I get from the canteen that he can't afford.)

Our regular COs like Mo a lot because when they run short of supplies, such as shower curtains or ironing board covers, they can usually depend on Mo to have an extra one stashed away under his mattress. Also, Mo is often willing to do some of the dirty work other inmates are unwilling to do.

Mo's biggest problem – the one that occasionally earns him lock-up time – is that he cannot accept a direct order. He recognizes this but has no intention of changing. "That's me," he declares. We get along well because – unlike some others – Mo gives me the emotional "space" I need.

September 16. The young Dominican in Bed 6, upper bunk to the left of me, is Montero. He's from Paterson, but we don't speak much because he knows about as much English as I know Spanish.

A quarrel. "Tiny" weighs about 300 pounds, is incarcerated on drug charges. A loud-mouthed bully, he is totally insensitive to other people, their wants or needs. He invades the bed space of others as he wishes, and is constantly cadging food and cigarettes off others.

We quarreled today when he invaded my space once too often, refused to leave, and I chastised him for it. He cursed me out roundly, but ultimately backed off. His main problem is that he is bored to death and doesn't know how to relieve the tedium. He doesn't read, attend classes, or engage in physical exercise.

September 17. Barbers are the elite group among inmates. They are the most valued and they are paid more (\$4 a day, as compared with \$1.30 for most of the rest of us). In addition, they demand, and get, special favors from each inmate whose hair they cut – in the form of candy, food, cigarettes, etc. Next highest in the hierarchy, in terms of pay, are inmates on the maintenance crew and those who work in the kitchen.

The effect of racism in the prison system is apparent in one odd respect: Most of the African-Americans (including those from the Caribbean area) who are incarcerated in Mid- State are notably dark in skin color. At least two-thirds, maybe three-fourths.

Perhaps I'm mistaken, but I suspect lighter-toned African Americans manage to work their way out of the ghettos and projects and into the middle class easier than dark-toned men. American society seems to be more receptive to lighter skinned black people, opening doors to them, providing more opportunities to move out and up.

September 18. A young white fellow with a Dutch name, from Arizona, is in Bed 7. He's about 25 and by his own admission has been stoned for most of the past decade. His natural intelligence level is high, but has been seriously affected by drugs.

Vander Koft functions at a third-grade reading/writing/math level, but sees himself as very clever. He invents science fiction-type games and occupies the afternoon trying to write exceedingly poor science fiction stories.

September 20 (continued): I wouldn't mind going outside if we were allowed to return inside whenever we wished. In that case I would take my exercise, walk four or five times around the yard – the equivalent of a mile or a mile and a quarter – and then come back inside.

But this we are not allowed to do. We must remain outside as a group for the whole duration, which ranges from one and a half hours to two and a half, depending on the day. And with nothing to do except walk (it takes me 25 minutes

to walk a mile) I get bored silly. No books are allowed outside, not even a New Testament. I tried to sneak one out once, and was berated soundly for it.

The upshot is, I'd much rather stay inside, reading and writing, even though I know I will not be in good shape physically when I finally max out.

September 21. "The Giant," as we call him, is a gay man six feet six and weighing more than 300 pounds. He's inordinately fond of mackerel. So I keep him supplied with mackerel and he does my laundry for me.

We have one fellow, Bob, who has no sense of self. He appears to take the sum total of his existence from his attachment to another individual whom he latches on to. He is currently attached to Mo. It is not an overtly homosexual attachment but a psychological one.

He makes himself available to Mo, doing Mo's chores for him, running personal errands for him. He is never out of Mo's presence. Mo treats him like a slave, belittles and abuses him. This doesn't bother Bob at all.

September 22. "Bud", the guy immediately to my right, is somewhat similar. Bud is foul-mouthed, easily riled, and belligerent. For reasons I don't fully understand (apart from the fact that I befriended him when he first came in, something he mentions frequently) he has put me on a pedestal. He spends hours each day at his bed just watching my every move

"Your writing is very neat," Bud will say from six feet away. "Is that story you're reading what I think it is?" "Why do you scratch your chin as you read? He mimics my behavior. Now as he reads he has begun to scratch his chin.

I find this incessant surveillance unnerving. At first he would interrupt me a hundred times a day, to share whatever haphazard thought was crossing his mind at the moment. But I told him I needed a *little* privacy to survive prison, so he has laid off – but for how long?