

- TO: The Michigan Humanities Collaboratory

FROM: Jack S. Copeman

Re: Conditions of Confinement Testimonial
(Me Tales of Woe) (7/8/20)

Dear Reader,

Would you like an unsolicited piece of advice straight out of the crime world? Well, here you go: Never hide your expensive shit in a drawer in your bedroom. That's the first place to look for valuables. Even the dumbest thieves know that. Make yourself a little hidey-hole somewhere else in the house or use a bank. Either one is a better choice instead. Save you some loss and a headache.

Unless you believe in the unfailing service of technology and the police force being there to support you, good citizen, then sure... whatever... nevermind.
Just sayin'.

Welcome to another installment of my conditions of confinement testimonial. It is now early July and so miserably hot here at SRF that the grass has dried up and turned into hay. Combine that with the raging outbreak currently sweeping across our COVID Nation, while the most inept federal administration ever produced continues to bungle along stupidly. Put yourself into a situation where you have no control over any decisions regarding your health and well-being, then ^{maybe} you would know how I feel about it all.

Summer and hot weather always particularly mean in the MDOC, where there's no ice; no a/c outside of the school building; only allowable self-purchased fan is a 2-speed, 6-inch clear plastic piece of mediocrity. Then alas, you would also know how we all feel subjected to their correctional heat. Sweating non-stop wherever we go. Slipping and sliding across American Standard tiles is what I have referred to as "The Moist Season" once again. Each bug on the handle, an apt metaphor that consumes, that swirls, that disappears as if nothing had ever been there before. Likewise those that have indeed come and gone. Flushed as our faces. Exasperated. ^{obscure.}

Whoopsie! Didn't mean to wax poetic. Sometimes it just happens whenever I lose control of the rudder - a turn occurs. Then I have to come about and get back on course. Nautical terms. It's something I've been taught. Read on and you'll understand.

Umm... let's see. Oh yeah, some of the narrative will be in a semi-chronological order so as to keep the confusion to a minimum. If you ever need or want a more detailed explanation about anything, please feel free to specify. This would be no problem. So here goes another paper series called:

Box Me Up and Ship Me Home! (No. 2)

"Man aspires to greatness, but all too often his hopes are submerged by the primitive instinct to survive at any cost."

— William Craig
Enemy at the Gates

Joining the United States Marine Corps at 18 yrs. of age is very formative. I mean who else would take a slightly troubled, somewhat confused under-achiever and turn them into a "lean, mean, fighting machine" as they say in the Jar Head Factory (U.S.M.C. Bootcamp). Seriously. Why?

First and foremost, the Marines want Killers. Or... at least moldable minds they can turn into killers. Don't let anyone try to convince you that isn't so.

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Polite speech and rhetoric aside, the basic principle of this organization is that "Every Marine is a rifleman." Point blank. And it is indeed a requirement that you must qualify on the rifle range, achieving a certain minimal skill level in order to be successful. And the Marines only shoot for one reason — to kill. Of course there are other methods they teach along the way. Things that stay with you — four active-duty years' worth — all crammed into my head to these many decades later. Still.

How to cleave someone's head off with an entrenching tool (a military term for a shovel). How to deliver a butt stroke or perry, thrust or slash with your rifle and fixed bayonet. Knife fighting and hand-to-hand combat training, techniques and tactics. There are explosives: grenades, mortars, rockets, flares and mines. There are many many classes to attend on patrolling and ambushing, cover and concealment, constructing fighting positions.

Utilizing automatic weapons. Day fire. Night fire.

Gas mask, chemical suits, nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) training that culminates into going into the gas chamber and removing your mask. Exposing you to tear gas, making your hot sweaty body absorb the effects of heat-activated irritants. Making you wait, count to 10 slowly. They want to see who panics and runs out, known as "spasing." Noting the spastic individual as a liability, they will apply more pressure to them, try to get them to quit and refuse training. The Marines don't want

anyone who can't handle intense pressure. Because that's what combat is. That's what being in battle is all about—intensity under fire. Maintaining control, doing what you're told and continuing the mission through training and discipline.

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All taught, all instilled but for one overall purpose: to kill the enemy. Of course there's so much more that goes into the 13-weeks it takes to produce a Marine. Such as learning their history. This is HUGE with the Corps. They spend a lot of time on history; the rank structure; uniforms; military law, known as the Uniform Code of Military Justice (the U.C.M.J.), which are essentially codified regulations. There are charts full of medals and awards to memorize; charts on enemy aircraft and armor to study, considered recognition, this would actually be useful on later deployments and during my time in Iraq. Knowing what a T-72 Soviet tank looks like is part of ~~the~~ warcraft. Now you can devise a means to destroy it.

There are mission statements, learning objectives, post-orders, standing orders and general orders that you had better know because they will be asking at every nightly inspection. The end of day ritual where you and your bunkie get on line at the foot of your rack (bunk bed) while the drill instructor (the D.I. in the Marines. Never call him or her a "drill sergeant." That's Army. To do so would cause a fit or conniption like you wouldn't believe.)

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Steps in front of you, executing turns with military precision, while you stand there clad only in your white boxers and t-shirt shaking in fear, as he ask you your fifth General Order? Showing him the top and bottom of your hands first, then your ankles. This is called the "hygiene inspection," as he will be looking for injuries that may have happened during training. Also, checking to see what kind of job your doing with shaving. Any missed spots will send you straight to the head (another nautical term being the Marines are, in fact, a Department of the Navy, thus, you will learn their language.) to fix it promptly. To be corrected is a "gig." Accrue too many gigs and you will be labeled a shitbird. Someone who ~~wants~~ needs extra attention and proper motivation through intense physical exercise. This is known as a "thrashing." Being worked out to exhaustion and beyond, to total muscle failure. Shitbirds are not to be confused with the platoon fuck-ups. PTF's can't ~~do~~ seem to do anything right. Typically they're overweight so they enlist in the Marines as a means to get in shape. This is a horribly bad idea. First of all, the Marines are not only a premier gun and shooting club, they also believe in running. A LOT! Not away from the fight but to it. Out of all the other branches of armed forces, the Marines have the longest required run (3-miles) to be completed within a set time limit based on age. You have to make your cut-off time or you'll fail. Failures are then scheduled to run it again. Double failures are sent back

to the following series. Meaning you are held back for two more weeks, dropped from one company to be picked up by the next. Graduating... maybe... with them. Meanwhile, the Marines love running so much they have an annual marathon they organize in Washington D.C. Believe me, you don't want to join if you hate exercise and can't run more than a mile or two. Falling out on any kind of run will be an insult to them and you will become a much reviled target of derision. To this day I still run, for once they get into you, they're never coming out.

At this point I think it's appropriate to mention the generational zeitgeist regarding physical assault. As I did describe how the people and their beliefs were different in my youth. From parents to schools to the military, it was all considered normal to get smacked around during the 1980s. Yes, they firmly believed in hitting us, this is true. We were threatened and struck on a regular basis. It happened. We just dealt with it "like men". Never knowing at the time that such modeling was problematic and toxic. That attitudes and opinions have progressed since then. Later, while incarcerated, I enjoyed watching the Discovery Channel's coverage on modern-era Marine bootcamp. And what caught my attention was seeing drill instructors reading mandated "Stress cards" to the recruits, informing them of their right to feel free from threat or harm. I found this astounding!

In contrast to 1984-85 when I was at Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) San Diego, 8.
the D.I.'s openly suggested that if we had a problem with them, that they would gladly take off their cover (hat) and duty belt and we could step inside the Whiskey Locker (closet) to "handle it."

Moreover, we were told "those of you who tell your Mommy to call your Congressman, well... we'll find out who you are."

And so those were the times. You just accepted it as normal and kept going. Never knowing that you had been indoctrinated into their culture. They don't tell you that part of it.

We were just focused on getting through the next moment during each hygiene inspection. Keeping our eyes forward while answering questions about the first Marines and their accomplishments. About the sustaining or cyclic rate of fire of an M16-A2. Or the killing radius of a M67 fragmentation grenade. Who the Commandant of the Marine Corps is? Or Secretary of Defense? You had better not be so dumb as incapable of answering even the simplest ^{of} questions. Like the name of the president or how many states there are. Such stupidity would see you labeled as a dummy or worse yet, a "rock." Meaning you knew as much as one and were of the same

value and worth. Rocks were used to hold doors open or watch the gear outside. Make sure nothing came up missing. These guys, as the D.I.s knew, had to be micro-managed. So they were told ^{when} to drink water, they were appointed a buddy to help "square them away" (nautical: sails + folds) by keeping up with the rest of the platoon. When they failed, it was the buddy who paid the price. This almost always caused resentment—especially if it was the same rock who was a chronic offender—a PTF that caused the whole platoon to suffer. Well... anyone who has ever watched Full Metal Jacket or been through Marine Boot Camp knows what happens next. It actually happened to my bunkie while there. Rocks, there's always a few in every company. That's why they're called this—they're everywhere! Bend over and pick one up.

During hygiene, the D.I.s would listen to us fumble for answers, eyeing our shaking bodies, their countenance scowling, doubtful of our chances to make it through. To become a Marine is an honor and a privilege. It takes courage and determination, athleticism and pride and aggression to earn the title. Most do, some don't. Once attained, there is an ironclad non-refundable point of pride behind the whole physical and psychological ordeal.

is this guaranty: "Once a Marine, always a Marine." This promise holds true for life. Even now.

As a relevant illustration of this, there are many former service members working for the MDOC. Having met more than a few jar heads (a term describing the descriptive Marine haircut; nothing on the sides and short on top.). So with U.S.M.C. decals on my footlocker, whenever another Marine sees that, guard or not, it is an instant conversation starter as like recognizes like. Asking when and where I served. Asking about commands (military units) and deployments, seeking commonalities and associations. Swapping stories of hardship.

All the while mindful of inconsistencies and obvious exaggerations; as mentioned before about all the liars and wannabees and fakes, frauds, phonies and poseurs there are running around the streets and in the prisons claiming to be veterans.

This is actually a thing, you know. Not making this up. In fact, at one point during all the recent wars, these imposters were so prevalent that Congress had to pass the "Stolen Valor Act" in order to deter such behavior. Videos making news reports regularly. People wearing uniforms that never served. Worse yet, displaying ribbons and medals they never earned. Purple Hearts (for being wounded in battle), Bronze and Silver Stars (for heroic acts),

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Commendation Medals, Combat action ribbons and the Infantry Badge. I volunteered to join an airborne unit once getting out to the Fleet Marine Force (FMF), so after passing three more grueling months of intense physical training, called "indoc" (indoctrination), I was sent to Army Jump School at Fort Benning, Georgia. So I am permitted to wear jump wings on my uniforms.

The point being that whenever you reveal that you served, whether in peace time or during a conflict, be it with distinction or not, these stories of blood and glory better sound right, better ring true to an experienced ear. To another veteran. Over the years of my incarceration I get asked "test questions" by guards all the time. Asking me the date of the Marine Corps birthday, which is a big deal and such an event that every Marine knows it's 10 November, 1775. This was drilled into our heads with such intensity that it is akin to knowing how many oceans or continents there are. As opposed to not being able to answer just exposed you as a liar and a fraud. And these fakers don't deserve any respect at all! Just contempt. And that's letting them off easy.

-Topic Shift

In order to keep these papers from being one long, continuous drone, I shall write them with various topics, areas, and my continuing updates on COVID-19 and the MDOC. To include answering some of the Project's Overview Questions along the way.

Here's an easy one to answer, for instance, requesting the prisons I've been to along with dates:

- Jackson (SMI) Central-Complex or behind the wall. 1992-1997. (Level 5 and Level 4)
- Standish Max (SMF) 1997-1998 (Level-5)
- Alger Max, Munising, MI 1998-2000 (Level-5) (LMF)
- Marquette Branch Prison (MBP) 2000-2002 (Level-5)
- Ionia Bellamy Creek (IBC) 2003-10 mos. (Level-4)
- Ionia Corr. Facility (ICF) 2003-2007 (Level-2)
- Ionia Bellamy Creek (Again) 2007- (Level-2)
- Lakeland Corr. Facility (LCF) Coldwater 2007-2011 (Level-2)
- Jackson Cotton Facility (JCF) 2011-2012 (Level 2)
- Chippewa/Upper Regional Facility (URF) 2012-2014 (Level 2)
- Thumb Corr. Facility (TCF) LaPeer 2014-2015 (Level 2)
- Saginaw Corr. Facility (SRF) Freeland 2015-present (Level 2)

As you may have noticed that I started my time in prison at the Maximum-security (Level-5) facilities. This is because I tried to escape

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While awaiting trial in the county jail.
Long story. Will get to it later.

Any escapes or attempts, the MDOC will classify you as high-risk (no doubt a desperado) and put you in Level-5 (Max) custody. Where there is very limited movement, almost no leisure time activities, timed showers, no jobs, no free weights, restricted property and a whole lot of locked in cell sleeping and television watching going on.

Each and every incident of escape or attempt for classification purposes is = 5 years of growth and maturity to contemplate the errors of one's ways. This will be notable as you will see by my list that I did 10 years of stimulating max "re-education" (camp) time. An even longer story. This part would be laughable if it wasn't so Kafka-esque. Now it's just depressing as I write this and realize what a complete and wasted life I've had. Ugh! No wonder I feel wretched.

If there's anything positive to be said about MDOC Security Classification as applied, it is that I am FINALLY nearing the end and have reached Level-1 (Minimum) status.

Not that I expect to ever go, knowing they will never grant me a gate-pass to be outside of the fence cutting grass or picking up trash. Looking for bottles in ditches. Whatever they do at these places other than be highly-exposed to coronavirus.

The way my crimes and thus sentence is structured, the court gave me another 2 yrs-8 mos to 4 yrs for such impetuous behavior. So yes... had I better impulse control at the time, I would indeed be free right now. What can I say about that? Excuse me? Sorry? My bad?

Anyway, here's answering another research question:
 ✓ "How have the physical and social conditions of Michigan prisons changed over time?"

This is a good question to ask someone with nearly 30-years of imprisonment. Having been around long enough to experience much physical and social change. Personally, I believe that the answer goes both ways. When I first entered prison, they were still using those old-style cells at Jackson's Central Complex, noted for being the "World's Largest Walled Prison" at the time. Huge blocks filled with cages, hundreds of them (400-500) stacked five-stories high. A narrow walkway called a gallery or tier

Was the only thing beside the waist-high handrail that kept you from meeting open space. As the center of these blocks were hollow, spanning a distance of 60-80 ft, so that each side was separated but facing between the abyss. Having locked up on fourth gallery in Twelve-Block for two years, I could tell you with certainty that a fall from ~~the~~ either of the top two galleries would have been devastating, if not fatal. (Don't know why they never put up a barrier à la San Quentin? Probably money.)

Which, from what I've heard, was in fact a means of suicide used more than once. "Swan diving" was what they called it. Can only imagine the sound of a human body ^{smacking} base let alone witnessing it. I did drop a ^{pop} bottle from ~~fourth~~ one day, on accident, as I was trying to stuff it into my coat pocket when it came out, took one bounce off the tier and shot out into thin air. As I watched, there was a guard ~~on~~ making rounds on Second that saw the pop bottle coming down and thought it was being thrown at him—so he put his arms up to cover when it went sailing past and exploded into spray on base.

"Oh shit," I said. Dropping down to low-crawl away from the scene. Finding a crowd

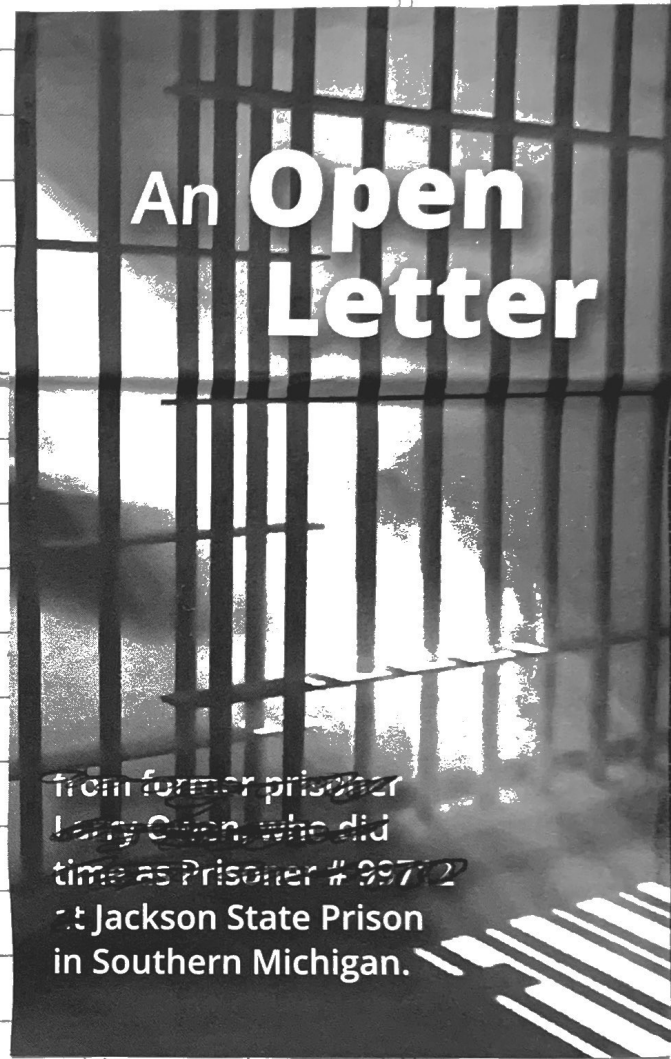
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to get lost in immediately thereafter. That was a close one.

My point being that these relatively modern correctional facilities, with their smaller housing units and two-man rooms, are way better than those old-style prisons. Large, over-crowded, needing stairways with blind-corners and narrow tiers, filled with violent socio-paths—was all the ingredients for an extremely dangerous environment. (Just wait until I tell you about my time in Four-Block. The notorious 4-Block. Oh boy!)

So in that regard, probably at this juncture the only positive thing I have to say about prison is that at least most of Central Complex (SMT) is closed. Although North-Side, Blocks 1, 2, and 3 are still operational with Reception and Guidance Center (RG&C), a.k.a Quarantine, the Powers that Be are using the core of the place as a junkyard. Spare prison parts parked all around.

Until my next,
-Jack.



An Open Letter

from former prisoner
Larry Green, who did
time as Prisoner # 99712
at Jackson State Prison
in Southern Michigan.