

Some time on the ranch can do a man some good

It was 1982 and I was sentenced a couple years at Folsom Prison Ranch, a minimum security prison.

Upon arrival, everyone had to be processed, which consisted of physicals, tests and background checks to make sure you were worthy of the ranch. This was a three-week purgatory in the prison proper, behind the wall, before getting shipped to the ranch.

Right as I stepped off the bus, I witnessed a fellow getting stabbed in the chest. I whispered to my friend who was doing a couple years with me, "Paco, I don't think I'm going to like

this place at all."

He laughed a nervous laugh and said it's just for a couple weeks.

The three weeks we spent there did go fairly fast. But I must tell you, ol' friend, I sure would hate to be there for any length of time.

I was on the third tier in a two-man cell with a kid of 18, who was doing 25-to-life. I didn't ask for what because I was only passing through — prison etiquette.

He did ask me how long I had (time) and when I said just two years, the look he gave me was neither hate nor was it that of a friend. Once again I was thankful I would be leaving soon.

It was summer time at Folsom and that, my friend, means it's hotter than hell outside, let alone on the third tier.

It was so hot that some of the prisoners would tie socks in knots and wet them so they would be heavier as they threw them at the tiny windows to break the glass and let some air in. The guards who would walk along the catwalk would laugh at them and say, "Sure, break them all, so when winter comes you will all get rained on." They would laugh some more, but it was not a nice laugh. Those M-16 rifles they carried with them didn't look nice either.

Nights behind the wall seemed to be the worst. Mainly because that was when most of the bad shit happened, like someone screaming because he was being raped, beaten or just screaming because he couldn't take the long boring hours in a cell. Not everyone could afford a TV.

During the quiet hours of the night I would sometimes hear someone sobbing like a baby. I would mention that to my cellmate who would just laugh and say he'll probably kill himself, the damn punk. This

from an 18-year-old.

A couple days before I was going to the ranch, a guard walking the catwalk stopped in front of my cell and asked me how much time I was doing. I said I was waiting to go to the ranch.

He then changed his attitude and spoke nicer, it seemed. He said, "Well, you will be there real soon, it's just that you have to go to a little hell before you get to heaven, just like life, son."

I always remembered that, how he seemed to change after he found out I was not a murderer or violent criminal who had to be kept behind the wall.

Let me tell you, ol' friend, I've met some really decent people behind the wall at various times in my prison life but that's another story.

Well I finally made it to the ranch. My friend Paco and I were both getting off the bus and going into our dorms where we would be living for the next 18 months or so. Well now, Paco made it inside but right when I started to go through the doors I was stopped by this woman's voice who said, "You there." (meaning me of course) "Come here!" Well, I walked backed to this female correctional officer who looked right into my eyes without batting hers and accused me of being loaded on weed. She informed me I reeked of marijuana. I tried informing her that I just got off the bus, but she would have none of that. She said she was writing me up and I was going to be sent back behind the wall.

Well now, let me tell you ol' friend I had no intention of being sent back, but what was I to do?

The next thing I knew this crazy officer had me in handcuffs and I was on my way to the captain's office. While I was sitting in the lobby waiting to be drilled by the captain, I was wondering how in the hell did I get myself into this mess and where was Paco? Probably watching TV or walking around outside where there weren't any fences. I mean, anyone could just walk off if you were a mind to. But who would? I had such great stories about this place, that is why I had requested to be sent here. Now, I was not so sure.

"Garcia!" A voice rang out and brought me back to reality. "Garcia get in here." Well, I sprang from my seat and hastened into the captain's office, handcuffs and all. The female officer was there when I walked in but took my cuffs off and departed out the door.

The captain looked at me, asked me a couple of questions, and then said, "Garcia, sorry about the inconvenience, I know you haven't been smoking weed or are loaded at

this time. It's just that Miss Jones was attacked by a group of Latinos and hung up in the day room. They weren't trying to kill her or she would have been dead. We found her about fifteen minutes later when another guard was making his rounds. She was pretty shaken up as you can imagine, and that is why she hates all Latinos. Bear with us Garcia. Just try to keep away from her and everything will be fine."

Fine, my ass. Everytime something went wrong one of us Latinos was to blame, according to Miss Jones.

Was it a wonder that we had to get drunk at night!

As I said, there were no fences around

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the ranch, so it made it fairly easy to run down the hill behind the dorm along the riverbed or up to the road where you had someone waiting in a car. Either way, the liquor store was just a couple miles away. It gave a person ample time in between prison counts, which were every two hours.

Well everything was great for a few weeks. We would take turns putting on our street clothes, which were meant for visits, and hustle down to the store and back. Everything went great, that is, until Jerry (there is one in every group) got so drunk he couldn't hold his mug. He started getting sick, yelling like an idiot, right during one of institutional body counts.

Needless to say that was the end of our trips to the store.

It didn't mean we quit drinking, we just quit going to the store ourselves. We just ran out back where someone from the streets had already gone to the store and left the booze, usually a bottle of whiskey. Prior arrangements had been made regarding payment and what to buy.

Movies, softball, basketball, weightlifting and steak once a week.

Who would be crazy enough to leave?

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