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HONOR AMONG CRIMINALS?

JEROME G. SACKS¹

No wall isolates the 1,608 criminals at Lorton from the outer world! Nor do the men in this prison (whose terms range from one year and a day to life imprisonment) live in cells or behind bars.

When men are first received at the District of Columbia Reformatory at Lorton, Virginia, they are isolated in quarantine cells for twenty days. But with the exception of this group, the prisoners live and sleep together in dormitories housing from 60 to 100 men each. The principle on which the system at Lorton operates is not entirely a new one. In the United States and foreign countries there are other reformatories with no walls. These, however, are for young offenders, minor felons, and "chosen" men.

But men convicted of murder in the first and second degree, rape, arson, violation of the narcotic laws, armed robbery, burglary, automobile stealing, housebreaking and grand larceny, pandering, tampering with the United States mails, forgery, and other crimes, are all housed in this "penitentiary without walls" and treated alike, regardless of the seriousness of the social infraction. Also, since this prison is under the jurisdiction of the Federal Government and the District of Columbia, and receives its appropriations through the Congress of the United States, it stands out from any other of its kind in the country.

The men at Lorton work about the prison shops during the day and are absolutely free to speak to one another at all times. They are supervised in their labors and guarded from 8 A. M. to 4 P. M. by 43 custodial officers who are unarmed. The two shifts following (4 P. M.—12 midnight, and midnight to 8 A. M.) consist of 23 and 25 officers respectively who are also unarmed. The only *obvious* efforts made to deter the Lortonites from escaping are 10 guard towers (not all in operation at the same time) at various points about the reservation. These towers are manned by officers of the regular guard who work in two-hour shifts and alternate with men on the ground and in other towers.

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"But!" you say, "no wonder these men don't try to escape. They're afraid of getting shot."

If one or even two men decided to escape in the day time or even at night, they would stand a fair chance of getting by the rifle towers without being hit. But if 50, or 100, or 200 men, or all 1,608 convicts decided to make a break at almost any time during the day or night, more than 95% of them could get by! There are 64 convicts to every one guard for 16 of the 24 hours of the day. And what's more, they all know it.

"Well, why don't they take advantage of their situation and make this break?" you further ask. "Are these men so honourable, so high-principled, so punctilious, so scrupulous, so supra-mundane, that the very thought of ill-gotten liberty is to them nauseous and unsavoury?"

If you know these men intimately, the answer is clear:

(1) Fair Play: The credit for the humane treatment which is prevalent at this prison in all dealings between officials and men, goes entirely to the administrative heads of the institution. No convict is bullied by a guard. If an inmate violates a rule, his case is heard and tried before the superintendent. If he is proved guilty of his charge, he is punished accordingly. If he states he is not guilty of this charge, a sincere effort is made to find the man responsible. This attitude of fair play which the officials use in handling the law breakers, make them have a certain responsibility to do the right thing, and dissuades a great number from wanting to escape.

(2) Freedom: A great majority of men will not try to escape because they are not strictly confined. It is true that they must stay within the limits of a certain area, but since they are not locked in cells, nor placed behind bars, the glamour of the enterprise of getting beyond the bars and walls fades away.

(3) Honor: There is always one group of men in every prison, the members of which come from respectable homes and have fine families. A stroke of ill-fortune perhaps caused them to commit some anti-social act which is responsible for their present incarceration. The fact that these men were found guilty of a certain crime does not change their entire physical and emotional make-up. They are, perhaps, still as loyal and honest as they were before, and still love their families. These men are only waiting for the termination of their sentences so they may return to their families. They would never join any plans to escape, because even if they

would be successful, their expectations of returning to their loved ones would never be realized.

(4) Hope: There is another group from whom no trouble is expected at Lorton. This group is eligible (or almost eligible) for parole. If a prisoner's conduct while imprisoned has been satisfactory, he is eligible for consideration to be freed. The inmates of this class are like children, free from imperfection, approaching the ideal. In case of trouble, these men would, in most cases, aid the officials.

(5) Fear: Fear of pursuit after leaving prison discourages many of the inmates from wanting to break. The police system of this day is so well organized that an escaped convict is hounded like a hunted animal. Only in rare instances is a fugitive from justice able to go to a new locale and begin a normal life without being discovered. Besides the police, the escaped man has to fear recognition by a former fellow-prisoner who will, in many cases, turn the escaped man in for the standard reward. This possibility is borne out by a case at Lorton:

In 1921, Robert X was sentenced to Lorton on the charge of assault with intent to commit robbery. He was given four years. He escaped in August, 1923, after having served two years of his term. In November, 1935—after having been on the streets for twelve years—he gave himself up in order to finish the remainder of his sentence. He stated that he did not enjoy one day of his liberty. It was impossible for him to undertake any enterprise without fear of discovery.

(6) Treatment: Many men have living conditions within the confines of the prison that surpass, by far, those they would have on the outside. In fact, to some, prison fare and lodging is luxurious. There is no incentive for these men to attempt escape. At Lorton, the prisoners are given a clean bed in a warm dormitory, medical and dental care, clean clothes, movies once each week, and three hot meals a day. Also, they are supplied with one package of smoking tobacco and one of chewing tobacco each week, in addition to what they are permitted to purchase from their earnings. On holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, the day is observed by a special dinner, movies, and vaudeville, (with inmate talent) at night.

The menu at Lorton on Thanksgiving Day was as follows:

Turkey Soup
Roast Turkey

Sage Dressing
 Giblet Gravy
 Candied Sweet Potatoes
 Green Peas
 Cranberry Sauce
 Celery, Sweet Mixed Pickles, Olives
 Hot biscuits with butter
 Coffee
 Pumpkin Puffs

Three regular meals picked at random from the week's menu are as follows:

Breakfast

Grapefruit
 Corn Flakes
 Sugar, Milk
 Raisin Bread with Sugar and Milk
 Syrup

Lunch

Vegetable Soup
 Boiled Frankfurters
 String Beans
 Boiled Potatoes
 Wheat Bread
 Syrup

Supper

Beef Pot Pie prepared with Fresh Hindquarters
 of Beef, and Vegetables
 Buttered Noodles
 Hot Tea with Sugar
 Wheat Bread
 Syrup

(7) *Esprit de corps*: In the final analysis, there is only one small group left to plan escape. This group consists of the "bad men" and the so-called "big shots" in crime. In prison they become little shots because they have no organization. Any attempt to organize by these men would be met with strong opposition by the six aforementioned groups, and the inevitable result would be the discovery of the plot by the prison official. The plotters might then be transferred to Alcatraz Island—an unpleasant thought to all felons—and have several years tacked on to their sentences.

So they don't do anything about it!