

NOTES ON Improvised Prison Weapons

Heading to the place where a prison's homicide evidence is kept, you might expect to see a few sharpened objects—maybe a bludgeon or two. You would be underprepared.

Officer Eric Patao works in the Investigative Services Unit, where all these weapons currently reside. He investigates the gangs that are constantly stirring up trouble in San Quentin; he does his best to keep them unarmed, but the weapons he showed us—a small samples of the ones he's confiscated—look like objects out of a horror movie.

"We discover these items on a weekly basis, especially after a large-scale incident," says Officer Patao. After a riot or an attempt on somebody's life, they find a lot of these. Inmates throw them down the cellblock's tiers to try to distance themselves from the weapon so they can't be tied to it.

Toothbrush weapons are the most common, because the stock is so readily available—everybody's got one, and you can make a toothbrush shiv in under a minute. "Inmates get word in the canteen the night before that something's going to happen," Patao says. "They can break the brush head off and sharpen the shaft in seconds." Some do it just to protect themselves in case they are attacked; some use them as weapons to assault others.

All of the weapons were scary, but there was something especially unnerving about the sharpened ruler and the deadly ladles. I suppose it was seeing something that was a harmless, commonplace object being turned into something so incredibly menacing. After that, it was the spears that I found to be the most frightening. There isn't any wood in them at all. The long handles are just tightly rolled newspapers or magazines bound with a little bit of cloth. Lifting them, they were incredibly strong and rigid. It was easy to see that they could inflict some serious damage.

In 1985, a group of inmates planned the murder of a San Quentin correctional officer. For weeks, they would count the number of steps it took officers to walk down the hallway, in this way they would know exactly when he would be walking by their cell. On June 8th, 1985, Sgt. H.D. Burchfield was unfortunate enough to be taking that walk. Inmates counted his steps down the hall and thrust their spear through the bars just as he was passing by. Sgt. Burchfield was killed in the attack.

In July of last year, an inmate armed with a blade cut from a bunk—similar to those used in the spears—stabbed another inmate in the neck, killing him. That inmate is currently facing charges and may receive the death penalty. If you're like me, you're wondering how the hell they managed to cut those blades out of solid steel sheets. According Officer Patao, what they used to see most often was that an inmate would take a black binder clip and break it, which would give them an incredibly hard and sharp edge. They would then slowly score the bunk, over and over, gradually etching out the shape of a blade. These binder clips have since been banned, but prisoners will always find ways. He says they actually use dental floss to slowly saw away at the metal, adding tooth powder to increase the friction. This takes an incredibly long time, but men serving life sentences have just that.

The most surprising weapon was the double-barrel shotgun. At first glance, I thought it was some kind of crude club, but no, it's a shotgun. Not a single-barrel shotgun, mind you, a freakin' *double-barrel shotgun*. Between that and the zip gun, San Quentin was starting to look like an episode of the A-Team.

The day we visted, officers were talking about an incident that had occurred just that morning: a heavy water-bag had been dropped from the fifth tier of the cellblock down onto another inmate. The victim was taken away in an ambulance with serious injuries and was lucky to be alive. Going back into North Block after all of this, I found myself constantly looking up and constantly looking over my shoulder.

Looking at these objects has to be one of the best incentives to stay out of prison there is.