

HM Prison Pentridge's H Division: My Experience

On Sunday 9th August 1987 I was arrested in Melbourne following my commission of a mass shooting which has become known as the "Hoddle Street Massacre". I was 19-years-old.

Following questioning by Homicide Squad detectives for around 14 hours I was transferred from the St Kilda Road Police Complex to the old Melbourne City Watch House. At this time Detective Senior Constable (now Superintendent) Graham Kent sent a memorandum (dated 10th August 1987) to the Officer-In-Charge of the City Watch House and to the prison authorities, informing them that it was quite apparent that I was suicidal and that, due to the nature of the offences that I had committed, it was highly likely that I would be at risk from other prisoners.

At around 2pm on Tuesday 11th August 1987 I was finally transferred from the City Watch House to the F Division Reception Centre in the Metropolitan Reception Prison (the southern half of the Coburg Prisons Complex: the northern half being occupied by Her Majesty's Prison Pentridge). As part of my reception I was interviewed by a prison doctor, who also recorded that I was suicidal. At this time Governor Grade 1 R. Donovan, from the Metropolitan Security Group, recorded that I was contemplating suicide and that his office had received information from numerous sources that I would be in serious danger should I enter the mainstream prison population. This information was communicated to the Supervisor of Classification, Mr Mike Ryan, who authorized my immediate transfer to H Division, an A1 maximum security punishment and "management" division in Pentridge Prison. Ryan's decision was communicated verbally to the Officer-In-Charge of H Division, Chief Prison Officer Cooper, and to the Governor of Pentridge Prison, Governor Grade 3 Peter Hannay.

Having only been discharged from the Australian Army 16 days previously (after 6 months as an officer cadet at the Royal Military College, Duntroon) and having never been in Pentridge or any other prison, I had no idea that H Division was known as "Hell Division" and the "Bash Factory". Since 1958 it had been the Victorian prison system's main punishment facility and the mistreatment of prisoners there had already resulted in one Board of Inquiry (Kenneth Jenkinson QC, "*Report of the Board of Inquiry into Allegations of Brutality and Ill-Treatment at HM Prison Pentridge*", Victorian Government Printer, Melbourne, 1973). Even the months of "bastardization" that I had endured at Duntroon were not to prepare me for what was to come.

At around 2.45pm I was handcuffed by two prison officers and walked from the F Division Reception Centre to H Division.

About 5 minutes later we arrived at the entrance to H Division. I was standing on the sloping pathway leading into the division, facing the entrance. The two prison officers stood behind and on either side of me. An aggressive looking prison officer suddenly appeared in the entrance behind a heavy wrought iron gate and said, "Face the wall, you

little cunt!" I turned to my left to face the high bluestone wall that bordered the adjoining A Division's exercise yard. I was standing about a pace away from it so the officer bellowed, "Right up against the wall!" I immediately took a pace forward so that my face was about two inches from the surface of the wall. Moments later the same officer unlocked the large padlock on the gate, swung it open and yelled at me, "Get in here!"

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As I walked through the entrance I turned slightly to my left and noticed an office, which I later learnt was the "Chief's" office, and an open area in front of it. This was the division's reception area and there was a red line painted across the middle of the polished bluestone floor. Standing in a small group in the middle of the reception area was the "reception committee" of about five prison officers. At this point the officer who had let me into the division but who was now standing behind me shoved me in the centre of the back and said, "Stand on the red line."

The moment I stopped on the red line I stood to attention facing the office. The officers immediately encircled me: one officer stood facing me; an officer stood on my right side; two officers stood behind me; and two officers stood on my left side. There was also one officer standing in the left-hand doorway of the "Chief's" office. My two escort officers were standing near the entrance to the division.

The officer facing me ordered me to raise my hands in front of me to waist height, and to drop each hand by my side as he unlocked the handcuffs. He unlocked the right-hand handcuff and I automatically let my right hand drop by my side. As I did so the officer on my right hit my wrist in a downward motion with his right hand clenched into a fist. The left-hand handcuff was then unlocked and I let my hand drop by my side.

The officer facing me then ordered me to remove the dark green jumper I was wearing and hand it to the officer on my right. I was then ordered to do the same with the tee-shirt I was wearing. Following this I was ordered to remove the black leather shoes I was wearing and hand them up one at a time. I bent forward and took off my right shoe. As I was rising up the officer on my right hit my wrist knocking the shoe out of my hand. "By the toe!" I picked up the shoe and handed it up to the officer in front of me. The left shoe followed in the same manner.

The officer facing me then ordered me to remove the blue jeans I was wearing and hand them to the officer on my right, who then searched them and threw them onto the pile of my other clothes on the floor. Following this I was ordered to remove my socks and turn them inside out before shaking them below my knees. When I began to shake them one of the officers behind me grabbed me by the back of the neck, forced me violently down and said, "Below your knees!" The officer facing me then told me to do the same with my underwear. This left me standing naked on the red line.

The officer facing me then ordered me to tilt my head back and open my mouth. Then to raise my tongue. I was then ordered to lean forward and pull my ears down from the side of my head. As I began to lean forward one of the officers behind me grabbed me forcibly

by the back of the neck, pushed me down hard and said, "Right down!" The next command was to run my fingers vigorously through my hair. Following this I was told to rise up and put my arms out at shoulder height, then turn my open hands over then back again. I was then ordered to raise my right foot sole up behind me and to wiggle my toes. I then repeated the process with my left foot. To conclude this procedure – which I later learnt was a "strip search" – I was told to lean forward, grab both buttocks then pull them apart to expose my anus.

I was handed a pair of cotton pyjama trousers to put on, followed by a pyjama shirt. I was then handed a white pillow case containing prison-issue shoes and clothes and toiletries, and told to carry it in my left hand. This had a similar tone to what I had experienced in the army. What followed, however, did not. The next command was, "Right turn." As I turned the officer facing me struck me across the right side of my head.

At this point I was looking through a short passageway into the main area of the division. I was instructed to quick march through the passageway into the "wing" of the division, and stop in front of the officer who was standing facing me in front of a large wooden desk at the near end of the wing. When the order "Quick march!" came I stepped off in the manner that is common in the military. I soon learnt that the order "Quick march!" in H Division was somewhat different. I was instantly grabbed from behind by two officers and pushed at running speed through the passageway all the way to the officer in front of the desk in the wing. I was wrenched to a halt in front of the officer, then pushed and shoved on the spot for a few moments.

The other officers had also moved through the passageway and were now standing around me. The officer in front of the desk then told me my next instructions in rapid succession: I had to quick march down the left-hand side of the wing, across the far end of the wing, then down the right-hand side of the wing, all whilst avoiding stepping on the large white areas painted on the floor in the centre of the wing. "Left turn!" "Quick march!"

When I again began to step off in a military fashion two officers behind me grabbed the back of my pyjama trousers and my pyjama shirt, lifted me off my feet by wrenching the trousers upwards, and then propelled me at running speed down the left-hand side of the wing. At the end of the wing they threw me head first into the heavy wrought iron floor to ceiling cage that covered the access door leading into the adjoining A Division.

After rebounding off the wrought iron cage I began to run at full pace down the right-hand side of the wing. By now I realized that "Quick march!" really meant "run like Hell!" As I turned the corner I noticed a couple of officers positioned at intervals down the centre of the wing. I had only run about five metres when one of these officers ran straight at me, and used his right hip and shoulder to ram me into the wall. I rebounded off the wall and kept running. A few metres further on another officer rammed me into the wall using the same method. I again rebounded and kept running. At this point I noticed an officer standing facing me with his arms folded at the end of the wing, outside what I later learnt was the No 17 "observation" cell. It was obvious he had been chosen for this role because he was the largest of the officers there. As I neared this officer I tried to come to a halt but two officers grabbed me from behind and ran me into the officer. He hardly flinched. One officer said, "Did you see that?" Another officer replied, "Yeah, he assaulted an officer!" A third officer added, "The little cunt!", as I was set upon by about five officers who proceeded to punch, knee and kick me in the head and body. I was crouched over and pressed against the wall.

Following this attack I was pulled up with my back to the open doorway of the “observation” cell. It was about 7ft x 9ft in size and was divided into two sections separated by vertical wrought iron bars with a gate. Apart from a seat less stainless steel toilet, the only items in this bare cell were two thick canvas “suicide” blankets.

The pillow case I had been carrying was taken from me and I was stripped naked again. This time I wasn’t given anything to wear. I was then told, “About turn.” I was then told – again in rapid succession – where the cell’s light switch was high up on the wall outside the cell and that if I wanted it on, I would have to turn it on before stepping into the cell. An instant later I was given the order, “Step in.” Before I could move I was pushed into the cell up to the far wall. I was told to face the wall and an officer stood behind me and said, “Don’t fuckin’ ask for anything ‘cause you won’t fuckin’ get it.” I was left standing facing the wall as I was locked in the first section of the cell and the officers left the cell, locking the outer door behind them.

This was my introduction to the prison system. I had been in Pentridge Prison for all of 20 minutes when I was transferred to H Division. Being a “first timer” I had no idea what H Division was or of its reputation. I thought the whole prison was run along the lines of H Division; that was the daily routine: you woke up, got strip-searched and bashed, and put back in a bare cell with no furniture.

Later that day I was transferred to a bare psychiatric observation ward at the prison hospital. A week later I had a remand hearing at the Melbourne Magistrates Court and when I returned I was again sent to H Division, and was subjected to the same treatment as on my first visit there. It was only months later that I found out what H Division was.

The only other prisoner I know who was sent immediately to H Division upon reception at the prison and who copped the “reception bash”, was Levon Demirian, who had been charged over the 1986 bombing of the Turkish Consulate in Melbourne.

After 29 years the “reception bash” finally ended as a routine procedure after the Jika Jika fire on 29 October 1987, when the surviving occupants of that division were transferred to H Division. That is not to say that it ceased to happen; it just didn’t happen to everyone. The beatings I received were mild in comparison to some of the “punishment” bashings I heard being handed out during 1987-89, and which usually involved the use of short, heavy rubber batons – the “black Panadol”. The worst experience I have had in 24 years of maximum security imprisonment was hearing a friend of mine being bashed into unconsciousness in H Division. I spent three years in H Division – 1987-89 & 1993 – and I certainly didn’t mourn its closure in 1994.

