

Foreword

By
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Salinas Valley State prison was opened in 1996 by the California Department of Corrections as a state-of-the-art maximum security prison, designed to house 4,400 inmates. Having spent close to a quarter billion dollars on the design and construction of this new prison, the executive management of the department unfortunately paid little attention to ensuring that there was a proper and functioning management team in place to operate the new prison. The management team assembled was dysfunctional and more interested in power struggles and turf wars among themselves than to pay attention to the inmates and the officers, sergeants and lieutenants who dealt with the population twenty-four hours a day.

Without proper guidance and support from the management team, the officers felt that they were on their own. It became an “us against the inmates” mentality. Respect for the rule of law and the oath the correctional officers had taken to uphold and enforce the law had gone by the wayside. The disturbing mindset of the line staff is captured by a phrase commonly used at that time: “What goes on in the yard space stays on the yard.” A Code of Silence was active among the staff and tolerated by the management. Senior departmental management turned a blind eye to the dysfunctional management team at Salinas Valley even as the level of violence in the prison continued to rise at a disturbing rate. Attacks against correctional officers have become commonplace. The officers, many of whom had just graduated the academy, were ill-prepared to deal with the maximum security inmates they were charged with supervising.

Without guidance and support it became commonplace for the officers to take matters into their own hands and began to abuse inmates. That only fostered further violence. On Thursday, November 26, 1998, Thanksgiving Day, a dysfunctional prison unraveled and became a prime example of the decline of ethics among correctional officers. On this Thanksgiving Day, the *Green Wall* emerged.

Correctional Officer D. J. Vodicka was on duty that day, a member of the Investigative Services Unit—an elite, hand selected group of peace officers who were experienced investigators and handled major crime scenes for the prison. Officer Vodicka handled the crime scene of the Thanksgiving Day riot after approximately twenty-eight Hispanic inmates attacked staff on D Facility at Salinas Valley State Prison in Soledad, California. Eighteen correctional staff were injured, with fourteen treated at community hospitals.

As a sign of solidarity following this major riot, officers began wearing enameled turkey pins on their uniforms, signifying that they had survived the Thanksgiving Day riot. Later, other staff took to wearing the turkey pins as a sign of solidarity with their fellow officers. Some of the officers began to refer to themselves as the Green Wall—in recognition of the green uniforms worn by peace officer staff. The Green Wall members began engaging in serious and sterling misconduct, carving the numbers “7/23”—

standing for the seventh and twenty-third letter of the alphabet, *G* and *W*—or the initials “GW” on walls, furniture, lockers, and other state property. Vandalism then morphed into physical and mental intimidation of inmates. Staff did not support the unprofessional conduct they were observing.

Incidents of inmate abuse grew and eventually came to the attention of Officer Vodicka. Vodicka could not tolerate the unprofessional and illegal conduct that he was observing and he reported the misconduct through the chain of command. His report however, was not met with an appropriate response by the department’s management. Officer Vodicka was transferred to another prison while investigations were conducted. The newly appointed warden at Salinas Valley State Prison considered Vodicka “disloyal” and a “rat” for having filed complaints about the conduct of his fellow officers.

The department's Office of Internal Affairs investigated the complaints and concluded that there was no misconduct and no Green Wall. The independent Office of the Inspector General (OIG) however, conducted their own investigation and found that not only was there a group of staff known as the Green Wall, but several of its members had committed both administrative and criminal misconduct that included providing perjured testimony in court and planting weapons on inmates as evidence. The OIG submitted its report to the department and to the recently appointed warden at Salinas Valley for appropriate disciplinary and criminal prosecution of the involved staff. The department's management and the warden took no action.

D. J. Vodicka was labeled a rat among staff, was subjected to a constant barrage of harassment both on and off duty, and labeled disloyal by the management. Labeling him disloyal was quite inaccurate. He was loyal to the people of the State of California and to the law—that he took an oath to uphold. State law and department policy mandated that whistleblowers shall not be subjected to reprisals for filing complaints; however, department management—by their actions—showed that they could care less about law and policy by the way they treated D. J. Vodicka. The department management’s unspoken, but clearly communicated message, was that loyalty to the department and to the people you work with—even if that means lying to conceal their misconduct—is valued over doing what is legally right and ethical.

In January 2004, when D. J. Vodicka and his attorney testified before a California State Senate committee about the Green Wall and the abuse he had suffered, the department could no longer hide. The warden suddenly went on “sick leave” and orders were given by top management to clean up the mess at Salinas Valley.

D. J. Vodicka paid an enormous price for coming forward and reporting misconduct—it ended his career. When he later sued the department, only in depositions given for the case did the truth begin to emerge about the abuse he suffered for reporting misconduct. The department, represented by the Office of the Attorney General—likely out of fear of public disclosure of the deep-rooted misconduct D. J. had revealed—settled the case. But even with the settlement D. J. was permanently injured and justice was not served.

D. J. Vodicka is a model of what happens to be an honest cop confronted with a dishonest agency. He gave the best years of his life living up to the high values and standards of professional conduct expected of him. His agency, the California

Department of Corrections, let him down and in doing so, the California Department of Corrections let the people and the state of California down as well as the Constitution.

It is only by bringing D. J. Vodicka's experiences to light that the public can know what goes on behind the walls of our prisons, remembering that the Department of Corrections carries out its mission on behalf of and in the name of the people of the state of California. The public expects that its laws will be enforced professionally and humanely by the correctional officers it employs. Hopefully, D. J.'s experiences will bring about long-term change and one day restore a positive image to the profession D. J. served so well as a peace officer.