

# PRISONERS

## WHO VOLUNTEER, BLOOD, FLESH — AND THEIR LIVES

*By Don Wharton*

ON A RAW DAY in February, 1953, sixty-two gray-clad inmates lined up in the prison hospital of New York's Sing Sing. Each stripped to the waist and held out an arm to a doctor holding a syringe. The doctor slipped his needle into each arm, pushed the plunger and injected the man with syphilis germs.

The 62 men had volunteered to contract syphilis and undergo months of tedious medical examinations, then repeated blood-sampling and penicillin treatments.

Fifty-four of the volunteers had had syphilis at one time or another. After the injections, half of these 54 developed syphilis again. The other eight volunteers had never had syphilis. They were the key to the entire study. The scientists were trying to find out whether the body can develop immunity to this disease. If so, then a vaccine might one day be perfected. But there was little value in getting data on what the injections did to men who had had syphilis without corresponding data on what the injections did to

men who had never had it. The names of the eight volunteers, today kept secret, may one day appear on some roll of honor. For every one of them got syphilis from the injections — and thus science acquired an accurate yardstick for measuring the development of immunity to it among the men who had had it. What did the volunteers get out of it? A carton of cigarettes brought in by the doctors at Christmas time, a brief note on their records, and the good feeling which comes from having done something to help others.

This was not the first medical study made possible by Sing Sing volunteers. During World War II, for example, scores of inmates took atabrine daily for weeks to help the Army find whether soldiers taking the drug could carry full work loads. Later, 700 inmates volunteered to take an influenza vaccine, and four years ago 13 prisoners donated small pieces of muscle tissue and blood samples for a New York University arthritis study.

Sing Sing is not the only prison whose inmates are volunteering as human guinea pigs. At the Illinois State Penitentiary last summer I talked with three volunteers whose temperatures that week had reached 107 degrees. One was serving a term for robbery, another for auto thefts, and the third was doing 30 years for murder. Each had voluntarily contracted malaria in order to "feed" mosquitoes used in laboratory experiments. That means the prisoner endures the chills, sweats, pains and aches without help from suppressive drugs, then day after day lets a wire cage of 200 hungry mosquitoes feed on his arm for half an hour. You could see the mosquitoes biting away, raising hundreds of welts, infecting themselves so they could be used to transmit malaria to more volunteers.

Two days earlier I had been at the Federal Penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, talking with three bank robbers who had volunteered for hepatitis studies. One of them had become so ill that specialists were brought in from Baltimore and Washington to save his life. He was in a coma for days. He received transfusions and oxygen, was fed through the veins, developed pneumonia, and his weight dropped from 210 to 145 pounds.

Altogether, inmates in 12 state prisons and 9 Federal prisons have helped medical studies by giving their blood, flesh — and, in four known cases, their lives.

THE FIRST known example of American medical research leaning on prison volunteers was in 1915. Joseph Goldberger, a noted figure in research, was trying to find out what caused pellagra. He had cured it by substituting a good diet for a poor one. This suggested that an unsuitable diet caused the disease. To prove it he would have to put human beings on an unsuitable diet and observe them for months. But who would volunteer to risk getting this serious illness? Goldberger thought of the men on Mississippi's huge prison farm, which was pellagra-free. He talked with the governor, who weighed the risk, then cut all red tape and offered pardons to prison volunteers.

In 1915, a dozen prisoners — murderers, robbers and forgers — moved into a camp in the center of the 3200-acre farm. For two months they ate a normal diet and showed no signs of pellagra. Then in April they were put on a diet familiar to many poor Southerners — mainly biscuits, corn bread, grits, rice, sweet potatoes, fried mush, and black coffee. The volunteers ate as much as they wanted, but in a few weeks headaches, backaches, stomach pains and dizziness began to appear. By late summer, the men were haggard, weak, unable to work. Five developed a telltale rash. Goldberger brought in expert diagnosticians, who agreed it was pellagra. The volunteers were freed.

There are hundreds of men and

women in our prisons today who have risked and endured similar ordeals in return for a certificate, a few dollars, or 30 days off their sentences. Many inmates volunteer for research service when no reward at all is promised. Last July, 46 men in Louisiana's Angola prison farm began receiving inoculations as part of a search for a better, less painful rabies serum. They volunteered without any reward in sight. "They just wanted to be of some service," the warden reported, "and had courage enough to do it, however dangerous."

ONE of the most hazardous investigations for which prisoners ever volunteered carried no promise of reward. In the summer of 1942, the inmates of the State Prison Colony at Norfolk, Massachusetts, were assembled in the main auditorium. On the platform with the warden were a Navy Medical Corps admiral, the state commissioner of correction, and Dr. Edwin J. Cohn, Harvard's distinguished biological chemist. The war had created a shortage of blood plasma and the Navy wanted to test a substitute derived from the blood of beef cattle.

The inmates were told that a volunteer would receive an injection of nearly an ounce of the material into his blood stream, that his health might be impaired, that death was possible — in which event the government would defray funeral

expenses. One inmate spoke against it, saying he owed nothing to a society that had put him in jail, but he was shushed by the others. Out of 750 inmates, 222 volunteered. And of these, 7 out of 10 would have been eligible for parole in two years or less!

In September, the investigators injected 64 volunteers with a purified fraction of beef blood. Before the month was out, 20 men were reacting badly, eight were seriously ill with high fever, rashes and joint pains, and one was dead. The experiment was stopped, but some volunteers who hadn't received their injections urged it be continued. "We're not afraid," they said. "Let's not leave this half done." One doctor present throughout it all stated later, "In prisons you find the same kind of idealism as you do anywhere else."

In the past two years, three volunteers have died in helping medical men learn more about serum hepatitis. They were among 533 inmates of the three Federal prisons, Lewisburg, McNeil Island, and Ashland, who let Public Health Service physicians inject them with blood substances contaminated with the hepatitis virus. The doctors warned them they might get the disease, there was no specific treatment for it, and it could be fatal. The wardens told them the only reward would be \$9 a month and a 30-day reduction of sentence. Still they volunteered, and 130 contracted hepatitis. At

McNeil Island, three went into comas, two died. But the volunteering continued.

The hepatitis studies were launched because so many civilians and servicemen were getting the disease after they had received a blood plasma transfusion — one in 200 ordinarily, and many more when the plasma was pooled. The doctors wanted to find out how effective were various methods of safeguarding and sterilizing blood and blood products. No known animals were susceptible to serum hepatitis and no laboratory tests would suffice. Through prison volunteers the doctors proved that blood plasma exposed to ultra-violet rays or heat for sterilization was not safe, but that gamma globulin and serum albumin, processed from blood plasma, were, even when such blood fractions were processed from contaminated plasma.

FOR TEN YEARS, inmates of the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta and the Illinois State Penitentiary have been voluntarily baring their arms to malaria-infected mosquitoes, contracting the disease, then undergoing test treatment with new drugs. Some 3,000 men have taken part in these investigations. Our entire new arsenal of anti-malarial weapons was developed speedily because of these volunteers.

The first great accomplishment came in World War II when our main supply of quinine was cut off by the Japanese. Our troops were

fighting in many malaria-infested regions, and numerous new anti-malarial agents were being investigated by giving them to birds and monkeys. To test them on man, a Public Health Service team headed by Dr. G. Robert Coatney went to the Atlanta Penitentiary, called for help, and the first day got 300 volunteers.

"All I can promise you," Dr. Coatney said, "is a chance to get sick. You'll get so sick you'll hate me."

Each man was bitten by ten infected mosquitoes. When he sickened, he was put to bed, permitted no drugs until his attack was full-blown, and then was given the drug called for by the number he'd drawn. Sometimes there were more than 30 volunteers in the Atlanta malaria ward, on double-decker bunks, some with raging fever as high as 106 degrees. From these tests and the others in Illinois came proof that test drug SN-7618, later called chloroquine, was a suppressive and therapeutic far superior to quinine. By 1945, it was being rushed to soldiers around the world.

Each volunteer at Atlanta received a certificate, \$100, and the right to wear on his shirt an emblem saying, "Malaria Project." One volunteer, on being offered his certificate, put his hands behind his back and said, "I don't want to touch it — this was the only decent thing I ever did."

Inmates of the Illinois prison helped scientists in studies of indus-

trial radioactivity. They have eaten food treated with an organism that causes diarrhea, taken injections which brought on dysentery, and enlisted in three-month tests involving wearing clothing impregnated with an insect repellent suspected of causing skin disorders.

WHY DO prisoners volunteer? There's no single answer. One long-term, ill with malaria, told me, "I just need that \$25." Another, three beds away, said, "Frankly, I'm bucking for a parole." One hepatitis volunteer, a woman serving a life-sentence for murder, said she "had relatives fighting in Korea."

An experienced prison psychologist warned against too much weight being attached to the reasons given for volunteering. "The inmate who says he did it for money may actually be doing it to help others."

Dr. Austin MacCormick, a leading prison authority, says, "Prisoners volunteer chiefly because of a social conscience which many of them do not realize they have. Selfish motives play a secondary role. They welcome a chance to do some good to balance part of the harm they have done. Such projects boost the individual's morale enormously, and give the entire institution a lift."

Doctors who have worked closely with volunteers report that many inmates get so interested in the experiments that they volunteer for

laboratory work, or seek to become nurse's aides, prison nurses or hospital technicians. At New Jersey's Clinton Farms one girl serving 7 years for embezzlement worked so well on hepatitis experiments that she was paroled to become a technician at a university hospital. At Illinois State Penitentiary, one malaria volunteer in 1944 was Charles Ickes, serving a life sentence for armed robbery. After he recovered he asked for work as a nurse and began training as a technician. Three years ago he took examinations and became a medical technologist. Also working in the prison laboratory today is Kenneth Rucker, a commercial fisherman serving 99 years for murder. He has become an expert parasitologist.

After weeks of visiting prisons and health authorities, talking with wardens, doctors, scientists, and volunteers in bed and out, there keeps coming back to me one unforgettable scene in the hospital at the Illinois penitentiary. The 99-year-man who is now a parasitologist was sitting next to me at a desk explaining his work with malaria slides. Into the room came a volunteer who is serving a life sentence for murder; he lay down on a couch, rolled up a sleeve and received a test inoculation administered by Ickes, the medical technologist who's also in for life. As Warden Joseph Ragen of that penitentiary says, "Men are not entirely lost if they are willing to help other people."



## HEARD ON THE PARTY LINE

By Howard Rushmore



A SPECTER is sweeping the Communist Party — the specter of patriotism. Not since the gay days of 1936-39 when the comrades proclaimed "Communism is the Americanism of the twentieth century" has the local Moscow contingent been so interested in the Red, White and Blue.

Oddly enough, the standard publications such as the *Daily Worker*, *Masses and Mainstream* and the *March of Labor* reflect only vague glimpses of this rediscovered pride of country. It remained for *Party Voice*, the handbook of the Communist hierarchy, to roll back the semantic curtain.

It was done by a belligerent comrade who calls himself Andrew Montgomery. Five will get you ten that this isn't Andy's real moniker. Writing in a recent issue of *Party Voice* under the title "Our National Pride," Andy proclaims "Let 'Em Drink Coke."

It is done with a straight face and you can bet that neither Andy nor the comrade editors have a sense of humor about the matter.

"Take the question of Coca Cola," writes Andrew. "It is one thing for the French people to wage a struggle against this drink which symbolized the role of Wall Street in their country. But it is an entirely different thing within the United States.

Coca Cola is an accepted and popular drink here, and does not symbolize the policy of the government. Those comrades, then, who stop drinking it for political reasons demonstrate nothing but their own inability to understand that it is impossible to substitute internationalism for national pride at this stage of the struggle."

No mention is made of Pepsi, Tapa and the other "colas"; but the old-fashioned Coke has been approved and from now on will presumably be the standard refreshment around cell meetings.

Then there was the matter of Moscow athletes. "During the recent chess matches and certainly in the Olympics," writes Andy, "many comrades expressed their sympathy for the Soviet teams and their achievements." This, says Tovarish Montgomery, is not the right attitude.

So, comes the resolution — to be patriotic. Few Americans will be fooled by it and fewer comrades. But it does prove that Communists can be funny, particularly when they don't intend to be.

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*The MERCURY will continue to analyze Communist publications and official Red literature in order that its readers can be kept informed on what the local Moscow mob is thinking and trying to do.*