

Carl Harp found Dead

Prison Activist Murdered in Cell

Fifth Estate Collective

1981

"If they didn't physically slash him and tie the cord around his neck, the years of sensory deprivation, beatings, setups, transfers, hole time, mind and law games, and the psycho-torture which this place is famous for had the same effect. I know that anyone can be gotten to, regardless of how strong they are."

— A Walla Walla Prisoner

On the evening of Saturday, September 5, 1981, Carl Harp was murdered in his prison cell at the Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla. His body was found hanging from a TV cable tied to a clothes hook with his wrists slashed and was officially labeled a suicide.

The prison's version of Carl's death rests on a "suicide note" which guards contend they found in his cell and which says, "I did myself, so blame no one else for any reason at all" and it was signed Carl Lowell Harp (an uncharacteristic signature for him).

The "suicide note" is an obvious forgery with some of the letters written in flowing handwriting when it is well known that Carl always printed. Further, this "suicide" story originally claimed that Carl's wrists were slashed by "unknown means," meaning the weapon to cut him was removed from his cell before the guard officially "discovered" Carl's body at 6:35 p.m.

Those who knew Carl well insist he was murdered. The State claimed suicide and an inquest was held on October 14, 1981. Two prisoners testified under oath. Willy Butler, a prisoner in a cell beside Carl's said the tier was so noisy that if anyone entered Carl's cell and beat him up, he wouldn't have been able to hear. John Bosch, a close comrade of Carl, insisted that Carl was murdered by the State for his political activity. He also talked about a hit squad from the guards, and his last communications with Carl which indicated anything but suicide.

The pathologist at the inquest appeared senile, couldn't identify Carl from the photographs, and said the only wounds he found were injuries to his wrists and ' throat. He didn't produce toxicology reports to determine if Carl was drugged, because "We haven't received them yet." (Five weeks after being sent...?)

It took two days to find the razor blades that slashed Carl's wrists, hidden under the mattress and in the garbage of his cell. Though obviously a farce, the inquest declared Harp a suicide.

Carl Harp was an obvious target for guards to kill. During imprisonment at Walla Walla, Harp became an extremely persistent visible and vocal critic of prisons. He became an outspoken resister to authority and helped establish a prison newsletter (the Anarchist Black Dragon) and a men's anti-sexist group.

He also participated in a class-action lawsuit which was won, finding the state prison unconstitutional by virtue of being "cruel and unusual punishment." In 1979 Harp and two others took prison officials hostage for 12 hours to publicize the disgusting conditions at Walla Walla. Two months later a prison uprising occurred and, in its aftermath, guards raped Harp with a nightstick.

Since then Harp was a marked man. Guards tried to portray him to other prisoners as a “snitch” to neutralize his activity and in hope that inmates might kill him. He was a constant target of guard abuses and received many threats to his life. Most recently Harp was told by an inmate “gang” that guards had offered them a “contract” to kill him. They refused and warned him instead.

The timing of Harp’s death, if at the direction of guards, could not have been better. It happened during a “lockdown” and during a labor-day holiday weekend. Access to the prison by friends, prisoner support groups and media people was impossible. Further, a prison priest, sympathetic to prisoners who would have had access to prisoners during the lock-down was conveniently “on vacation.”

Carl Harp was a man with all the human characteristics, both positive and negative. We should not make him a hero or create a myth of him larger than life. We do not need to ignore the real human being, complete with mistakes, errors, wrongs and foolishness, to give just due to their attributes and their courage. Nor vice-versa. To do less is patently dishonest and finally counter-productive.

What is important is to recognize not only the special circumstances of Harp’s situation, but also to understand and link these to the generalized conditions of abuse and terror that all prisoners are ultimately subjected to—and to actively oppose them.

Where others have fallen in despair, cynicism, or become inactive—even going so far as advocating the abandonment of prisoners to “their” fate—we cannot. Our fate is bound with those who are behind bars in a very real, a very personal way.

Most immediately what we can do is pressure officials for a complete, thorough and public investigation of the conditions surrounding Harp’s death and to refuse to accept anything that smacks of a whitewash, anything less than an honest and forthright presentation of the facts.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the very conditions which led to Harp’s death. What is really needed is for yet more people to take up the concerns of prisoners, individually and collectively, and their just needs. Whatever the exact level of support we can provide, such an involvement is the best, most meaningful response to Carl’s death. It is the only chance for those behind bars to escape the fate of Carl Harp or to ever do anything other than “dead-time.”

Expressions of concern about Harp’s death, the ensuing investigation and the conditions at Walla Walla State prison can be directed to the following:

Amos Reed, Director
Washington State Department of Corrections
Capital Center Building
Olympia, WA 98504

For further information regarding Harp, or other prisoner support work, you can contact:

WACAP (Wash. Coalition against Prisons)
PO Box 22272
Seattle, WA 98122

Carl Harp’s Last Letter

If any piece of “evidence” was necessary to convince us that Carl Harp did not die by his own hand, the letter printed below will more than suffice. Written the very day he was found dead in his cell, it seems impossible to us that some one who spoke only of the future—of wanting to see photos of comrades, of writing replies to attacks, of considering strategy for parole—could within hours so completely reverse his stance of resistance and take his own life. This letter was penned by a courageous man who expected to continue his struggle into another day; it could only have been hateful prison guards or their stooges who stopped him.

This letter was originally mailed to a West Coast friend of the *Fifth Estate*, who sent it along to us; names have been abbreviated for the sake of privacy. The reply to charges against him and the prison support

movement, mentioned by Carl in the letter, was never received by us and we have been unable to find out whether it was received by the others he intended it for. We will print it next issue if we can locate a copy of it.

September 5, 1981

Dear J:

Thank you for your letter and the photographs of J and S. They look healthy and happy and hope they had a good bike trip up to Seattle. Nice looking bikes they got. J does look heavy, more like with child, smile. Sure do like S, brother. Trippyist person I ever met and you two are an odd pair, but good for each other. When you gonna send a photograph of yourself? Afraid you'll break the camera?

No, haven't seen latest issue of N.A.A./Strike! As for the reply, have you it now. Is frustrating as hell! Will write S tonight. Last Friday I saw her and R and she said she mailed you and the Fifth Estate a copy. R has some for Montreal and Toronto plus Left Bank Books. When you get it, please edit out my emotionalism. I did use the word asshole a lot. Tell the Fifth Estate they may do the same. R criticized me only there. This "critique" depresses me, brother. If they were just attacking me maybe my depression wouldn't be so bad, but at the worst of all times and so badly they attack us all. The damage will not be heavy, but there will be damage. Would be nice to know who put it out and appreciate your checking. So far they have no support, and I trust N.A.A./Strike! will print my reply.

Released back into General Population Sept. 3rd. We had a riot here on the 2nd which did over a million in damage to the kitchen and chow halls. Only a handful involved. State says bikers kicked it off, but they deny it and assume via all I can gather treatment finally got to a few people and they went off.

Locked down on modified program until further notice. A little yard Saturday, visits next week etc., etc. Eating cold cereal for breakfast and TV dinners for lunch and dinner. Got a CARE package so not hurting there. Think I have a problem with a few people, but not sure and don't know why, so all about wait and see and if right hope to survive it well. Pressure is too high indeed, but make it or bust. If I don't make it love you and thank you for your support all these years (especially last 2). Nothing I can do except wait and see. Powerless in the final analysis.

Around letters to Parole Board thank you for all there and yes, I guess a press campaign is a little pre-mature especially while under attack from the whoevers.

Kind of tired brother so will close for now. Appreciate you. Hope you have that reply by now. Will be on it again.

Love & Rage,

Carl



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Fifth Estate #307, November 19, 1981

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