

THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN THE BLUE MAGAZINE SEPTEMBER 2015

The Top 5 Most Historic American Prison Riots

By Eddie Molina *About the writer: Eddie Molina focuses on leadership and voluntarily writes articles for the law enforcement, first responder and military community. He also supports a law enforcement podcast End of Watch with Bootsy and Sal, link available on www.eddiemolina.com*

Ask any correction officer what is the most dangerous situation in a prison and you will hear this each and every time- riots.

Prison riots are the pinnacle of emergency situations for any jail or prison. It often includes hostages, fires, floods, injury and most notably- loss of life. Riots occur when inmates, prisoners or detainees take control of a certain area, section or wing within the prison walls. They often take hostages as a bargaining tool but may also assault them even if they have no direct involvement.



Prison riots come in all shapes, sizes, forms and for many different reasons. So I put together some of the most notable, historic prison riots in American history. Each riot has its own story to tell and left a legacy that we hope to never see again.

Montana State Prison Riot: April 16, 1959

By the time the Montana State Prison Riot occurred, the building was in very poor condition and maintenance efforts continually failed. Poor leadership communication, low morale and general living conditions all played a role in the decision for several inmates to instigate a riot. Three inmates in particular, Jerry Myles, his 19-year-old lover Lee Smart and fellow inmate George Alton devised a plan to take a hostage. The trio doused a guard in gasoline and threatened to light him on fire until the Officer surrendered his keys and rifle. They continued to capture additional hostages and free other inmates as well. Inmates made their way to Deputy Warden Ted Rothe's office, where he was killed with a single shotgun blast. Inmate Myles then attempted to negotiate a plan just to buy time while other inmates tried to dig an escape tunnel. All efforts to escape ultimately failed and on April 18th, Montana National Guard soldiers stormed the prison and seized control. Most inmates surrendered peacefully and all hostages were then rescued. Rather than surrender, inmate Myles killed his lover Lee Smart, then killed himself.

Southern Ohio Correctional Facility- Lucasville, Ohio: April 11, 1993

Overcrowding and facility mismanagement played a role in this riot taking place. However, one of the main reasons for the riot was linked to the Muslim population being told they had to undergo tuberculosis vaccinations, despite their religious beliefs. On April 11, 1993, Easter Sunday, over 400 inmates took control of the prison and rioted for 11 days taking hostages along the way. In that time, inmates from rival gangs settled disputes leading to nine inmates being beaten to death. One Officer, Robert Vallandingham, was killed allegedly because some inmates involved with the negotiation process believed their demands

were not being taken seriously. Following the end of the 11-day riot, all hostages were rescued and were treated for injuries.

Attica Correctional Facility- Attica, New York: September 9, 1971

Attica Prison Riot is known as one of the most famous prison riots in American history. On the morning of September 9, 1971, several inmates were disgruntled over a situation that led to another inmate being confined to his cell for the day. Normal recreation was cancelled thus adding to the tension that already existed. Flared by misunderstandings and rumors of mistreatment, 1000 inmates rioted, seized control of the prison and took 42 officers and staff hostage. During the next several days of negotiations, state authorities agreed to 28 of the demands but the rioters still refused to surrender. Governor Rockefeller, who refused to visit the prison, ordered the State Police and the New York National Guard to seize control of the prison. During the retaking effort, it is believed that many of the hostage deaths occurred. By the time the prison was under control, 43 people were killed, including 10 civilian and officer deaths and 33 inmates.



Atlanta Prison Riots: November 1987

Two Federal Penitentiaries simultaneously dealt with prison riots: US Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta and Federal Detention Center in Oakdale, Louisiana in November 1987. Earlier that month the US State Department announced that 2500 Cuban Nationals that were in the US illegally would be repatriated back to Cuba. Shortly after the announcement, 1000 detainees in Oakdale attempted a mass escape but when that failed they seized the prison and took 28 hostages. The word spread and 2 days later detainees seized control of the Atlanta prison and took 75 hostages. Negotiations lasted 11 days and the federal authorities ensured every Cuban detainee would get a fair hearing. All detainees surrendered and every hostage was accounted for. During the crisis, one detainee was shot and killed.

New Mexico State Penitentiary Riot: February 2, 1980

Overcrowding, poor quality food and living conditions and a decline in educational and recreational activities all played a role in the riot that took place February 2, 1980. In the early morning hours of February 2nd, an officer conducting a tour of one of the dormitories walked in on several inmates drinking homemade alcohol. The inmates overpowered the officer and within minutes, subdued several more officers, along with the keys. Inmates then continued to let other inmates out of their cells, including maximum unit inmates. Violence erupted and hostages were taken. A majority of the inmate violence occurred in the Protective Custody Unit, where specific inmates were targeted and killed using any means available, including torches. After the chaos ended, 33 inmates lost their lives. Hostages were returned and treated for injuries caused by beatings and rapes.

Anyone working in a prison or jail understand that any situation can go from bad to terrible in split seconds. Officers must remain vigilant in an environment clouded with complacency.

Riots are among the worst scenarios that can occur in a prison and those behind the walls must never forget that. And although many people believe prison riots are a thing of the past, the fact remains, it can happen anywhere, anytime.



About the writer: Eddie Molina focuses on leadership and voluntarily writes articles for the law enforcement, first responder and military community. He also supports a law enforcement podcast End of Watch with Bootsy and Sal, link available on www.eddiemolina.com