ANGOLA — Death Row at Louisiana State Penitentiary had been without a warden for two weeks when four prisoners engineered an unprecedented escape last month.

The lapse in leadership occurred after Penitentiary Warden Burt Cain on Oct. 21 reassigned the assistant warden in charge of Death Row.

The replacement was still not on the job by Nov. 3 when the four condemned men, two with previous escape experience, slipped away from the building and eluded chase teams for three hours.

Cain blamed the breakdown on the inattentiveness to security by lower-level personnel.

He insisted his management transfers, a frequent occurrence at the Angola complex, were not a factor.

"I move 'em a lot because I want them to stay fresh."

Under the noses of security officers, the four prisoners—futuristically fashioned ropes from bed sheets, knotted them into blue jeans, and a raft from plastic milk dispensers—using smuggled hacksaw blades, they cut through steel frames holding the cell doors and through a barred window. The inmates also obtained paramilitary training books, a map and $1,000.

Just before midnight they slipped unnoticed from Death Row and were running through portions of the 18,000-acre prison grounds before security officers realized what happened.

The escape culminated on the prison grounds with the four escapees snared between a lake and a bloodhound.

In the aftermath, one officer was fired, two others resigned, and three were demoted.

Cain later beefed up security by installing case-hardened steel bars at the 1,001-bed unit and $8,000 worth of video equipment.

He also cracked down on other Death Row inmates, ending contact visits, confiscating art supplies, and limiting when the inmates could call their attorneys.

Those moves prompted 11 prisoners to file a lawsuit on Nov. 18 in U.S. District Court at Baton Rouge seeking relief from the restrictions.

The prisoners branned the crackdown a retaliatory measure for an escape that "was totally due to the lack of vigilance and assistance" of the prison personnel.

Cain, who said he had not seen the lawsuit, commented, "I won't ever believe they didn't know what was going on."

The four escapees, meanwhile, are now in a punishment camp at Angola.

Dale Dwayne Craig, 25, originally of Baton Rouge, who abducted and killed LSU freshman Kipp Gulliet, was awaiting trial for the notorious carjacking in 1993 when he and two other prisoners tried to escape from the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison.

Waving a knife made from a razor blade, Craig threatened a sheriff's deputy during that escape attempt.

Lawson Eugene Strickland, 29, originally of Leesville, committed the 1992 murder that put him on Death Row less than a week after he and another inmate escaped from the Vernon Parish Prison.

Seven years later, Strickland and Craig tried it again, this time from Death Row and with Tracy Lee, 39, originally from Catskill, N.Y., and Leslie Dale Martin, 32, originally from DeQuincy.

Cain said the men planned to split up once they escaped. Craig and Martin were to hide in the woods. Lee and Strickland planned to head north.

"They (Lee and Strickland) didn't want to be around Craig because they thought he was so infamous in Baton Rouge they'd be shot on sight," Cain said.

After the capture, officers discovered 10 hacksaw blades, six of them used, that had been smuggled into the tier, hidden inside three books.

Officers also confiscated a letter indicating a cache of survival items, such as fishing gear, would be hidden in the woods across the Mississippi River.

Investigators never found the cache.

Cain said security officers never properly searched the inmates' cells during routine shake downs, which are searches made by guards looking for items illegal for inmates to possess. That's why the officers never detected the ropes, blades and raft.

The officers overlooked denim knapsacks filled with clothes, tennis shoes, hairbrushes, toothbrushes, toothpaste and cash.

They failed to notice metal shavings, a tip-off that blades were going through metal.

Finally, they failed to hear the men kicking down their cell doors.

An officer making a routine midnight check discovered the escape after noticing the cell doors were ajar.

"I told Kelone, 'If you were still there, I'd fire you,'" Cain said.

Cain reassigned Kelone two weeks earlier to fill a slot left vacant when another assistant warden was detailed to head a juvenile detention center in Tallulah.

Cain tapped Donnie Barr, who headed Death Row before Kelone, to again take the job. Kelone couldn't immediately assume those duties because of other ongoing transfers.

Col. David Jones, in charge of security on Death Row between the tenures of Kelone and Barr, was demoted to lieutenant colonel after the escape. Jones has been a state corrections officer since Aug. 9, 1982.

Capt. Julius Anderson, who supervised four Shift lieutenant, was demoted to lieutenant. Anderson has been a corrections officer since Aug. 23, 1982.

Lt. Troy Freeman, who was on duty the night of the escape, resigned Nov. 10 to avoid being fired. He's been a corrections officer since Aug. 2, 1995.

Matthew Huffman, on of two sergeants on duty in the tier that night, resigned Nov. 15. He had been a corrections officer since Dec. 1, 1997.

Danyell Turner, the other sergeant, was fired Nov. 19 for failure to maintain security. He had been a corrections officer since Nov. 12, 1996.

Cain said he suspects Turner delivered to the tier three books in which the hacksaw blades were hidden, a paperback Navy SEAL book found in Craig's cell and hardback and wirebound books on paramilitary tactics found in the cells of other inmates who did not attempt an escape that night.

"I don't think he put the blades in there, but I still want to know who brought Turner the books," Cain said.

Turner is refusing to cooperate, Cain said. The Advocate was unable to locate Turner for comment.

The inmates learned the layout of the building from a map the state fire marshal requires to be posted, Cain said.

Once out, their plans went awry.

Death Row is housed in a wing of the administrative building, also known at the Reception Center, near the penitentiary's front gate.

They were expecting to cross two levees near Camp C, which is west, Cain said. Instead, they veered southwest and crossed the main levee near a pumping station.

At that point, they breached the two levees of security. The third levee, the bloodhounds and chase teams, ended the escape attempt a few hours later.