OUTMODED CELL BLOCKS SERVE AS STAGE FOR ANTI-RIOT TRAINING

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ANGOLA — Roof-top snipers aim their rifles as red smoke billows from grenades, emergency vehicles stand waiting and a column of Darrius Vader-looking creatures advance on a mock prison yard with chains in hand.

Is this an inmate riot at Louisiana State Penitentiary?

Not this time.

Officials at five Louisiana prisons planned the activities at Angola's Camp H last week to prepare for the day they hope never comes — the day they might have to assemble the "tactical teams" to put down a prison riot.

Once a target for the wrecking ball because of fire code deficiencies, Camp H got a reprieve when Angola administrators convinced the state fire marshal to allow its limited use to train canine chase teams and riot squads.

The cell blocks, dormitories and guard towers offer a realistic setting for the exercises, said Assistant Warden Dwayne McFatter.

The isolated camp also affords an opportunity for training without the distractions that day-to-day prison activities would impose, McFatter said.

"You don't have to play like you're in prison," added Angola team leader Maj. Jimmy Johnson. "We've never had a cell block to train in until this.

Angola, Hunt, Correctional Center and Dixon Correctional Institute's tactical teams have trained together for several years, and McFatter hopes to see more joint exercises.

"We're trying to get every institution in the state working together," said John Chase, DEC's team leader.

Personnel from Washington Correctional Institute in Angie and Work Training Facility South in Plaquemines also participated Thursday.

The Angola team had the most complicated scenario of the three drills: 15 unruly inmates locked to a cell, with prisoner stabbed in the chest and a mattress fire thrown in for good measure.

Aggrieved playing the role of inmates set up a dogfight by blinking on their cell doors, Angola Warden John Whitley joked, "I'm just glad I've never heard something like this in a long time.

The tactical squad responded by lobbing smoke canisters outside the tier to mask its movements. A "flash-bang" grenade followed, its concussion deafening those inside and shattering the fluorescent lamps they pulled from fixtures to use as weapons.

Guards armed with weapons similar to military grenade launchers then fired tear gas and rubber bullet rounds from opposite ends of the tier.

The noise suddenly ceased, and a tight column of men moved from cell to cell, removing the "inmates" one by one. Paramedics removed the stabbing victim, and the fire department extinguished the mattress fire.

The actors later said the tear gas stopped them cold.

"You can't breathe, you can't see and the more you sweat the worse it gets," said Paul Blondin.

Johnson said the scenario called for Angola's squad to project a level of force sufficient to quickly halt the riot and eliminate resistance during face-to-face contact with the rebels.

"We have various levels of force available. You only use the force you need to handle the situation," he said.

During Hunt and Dixon's drills, the situation called for less force and the squads moved methodically down the line, using a pepper-based gas only when the actors put up a fight.

"The tactics would have been different if you had inmates together," Hunt team leader Capt. Darren LaBarthe said.

Johnson said tactical team members are all volunteers who must be in good physical condition and able to work in a team.

They seldom receive extra pay for training.

Although riot squads are necessary, the first step in controlling prison riots is to prevent them, Whitley said.

Prevention involves communicating with inmates about their complaints and "handling them as they come up rather than letting them build up," he said.

"The troublemakers in prison are a minority," Whitley said. "The rest are doing their time and trying to work through the system to get out of prison."