Warden working to normalize Angola

By JAMES MINTON
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ANGOLA — In December 1988, an assistant warden at the Louisiana State Penitentiary told a reporter that the 18,000-acre prison farm was “quiet — too quiet.”

Whether Roger Thomas had a premonition of a calm before the storm at Louisiana’s largest prison is uncertain, but the clouds were apparently gathering.

Within six months a spate of escapes, suicides and inmate-on-inmate violence angered U.S. District Judge Frank Polozola, who declared a “state of emergency” at Angola.

The June 21, 1989 court order and subsequent court-ordered inspections, state police investigations, grand jury sessions and media reports focused a harsh spotlight on Angola and its warden, Hilton Butler.

The glare also revealed fundamental weaknesses in the state’s entire corrections system — including many attributable to monumental state budget problems and Louisiana’s distinction of having more prisoners per capita than any state but sparsely-populated Nevada.

“I don’t have any quarrel with Hilton Butler, and I don’t believe he has one with me,” Butler’s successor, Warden John Whitley, said in an interview shortly after Polozola canceled the emergency declaration on Feb. 21.

“Regardless of Hilton Butler, Angola was in a state of emergency” in June 1989, the warden said.

In 1989, after he had retired as warden of Hunt Correctional Center in St. Gabriel, Whitley headed a privately-managed prison in Bridgeport, Texas. He said his impression is that Angola “was short-staffed, the lack of equipment was causing a..."
Angola

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problem and there was a number of basic security problems being followed.

Court-appointed expert Bruce Rand has found that normal conditions led to Balins's restrictions during the year-end demonstration. The state Civil Service Commission recently filed a suit against Balins's appeal, listing his reinvestigation costs.

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Advocate staff photos by Gay Reynolds

A guard searches an inmate with a "body frisker", one of the recent security improvements at the state prison in Angola.

Angola Wardens John Whitby says as increased number of security officers have been hired, but more needed.

Guard Bubber Whaley walks a drug-sniffing dog past a vehicle entering the front gate at the state penitentiary.

Whitby said the public hears about guards and other employees who are.....