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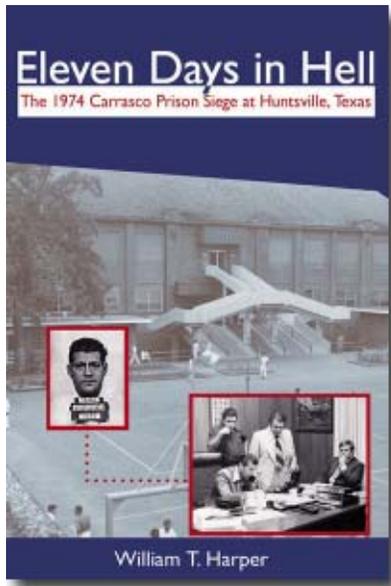
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Eleven Days in Hell

The 1974 Carrasco Prison Siege at Huntsville, Texas

William T. Harper

Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, July 2004. 9.3 x 6.4 x 1 inches. ISBN-10: 1574411802, ISBN-13: 978-1574411805.

Review by Captain Kirby W. Dendy
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Throughout the fall semester of 1973, Lt. Dave Flores of the San Antonio Police Homicide Department kept the total attention of his criminal investigation class at Southwest Texas State University with tales of his pursuit of South Texas dope dealer and murderer Federico (Fred) Gomez Carrasco. Lt. Flores painted a picture of a violent yet intelligent individual who was credited by many with over a hundred murders in Mexico as well as many in Texas. Carrasco's successful drug operation and his ability to stay one step in front of the law were attributed in large part to his ruthless application of violence, which made him both respected and feared. On numerous occasions, Carrasco had escaped just minutes prior to the arrival of Flores and a squad of officers, who were intent on arresting him. Flores speculated to his class on the possibility of a leak within his own department.

Since I was a twenty-year-old criminal justice student, Lt. Flores's war stories, especially those relating to Carrasco, were much more entertaining and exciting to me than any fiction in the library or any show on television. Attendance in Flores's class was virtually always 100% because, like a good action/drama series with a continuing story line, the students felt compelled to show up just to see what happened next. Being young and impressionable, I believed that Dave Flores represented everything good and honorable about law enforcement.

Federico Gomez Carrasco was at the absolute opposite end of the spectrum.

The eleven-day siege at the Walls Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections in Huntsville was orchestrated by Carrasco and occurred barely one month after my graduation from the Texas DPS Highway Patrol Academy. Even though my sergeant area was several hundred miles away in West Texas, rumors circulated almost daily that we might be sent to relieve the Troopers in Huntsville



Book Reviews

to do perimeter duty. As a result, we paid close attention to what was going on in anticipation of possibly becoming involved.

Eleven Days in Hell is a very well researched and documented book. It illustrates to me how accurate some of the information we were receiving actually was and how wrong the rest of it turned out to be.

William T. Harper obviously spent a tremendous amount of time and effort researching a wide variety of sources for the information presented in his book. This includes official reports, numerous personal interviews with participants, transcripts of court proceedings, audio tapes of the actual negotiations, and many more. The author has done an excellent job in weaving all the information together from these varied places to present a very thorough, clear picture of the entire ordeal. The story is covered primarily from the perspectives of the hostages and their families, the prison administration/law enforcement, and the hostage-taking convicts.

Also depicted is the impact upon the local community. The inability to interview the perpetrators (two were killed at the scene and the other was executed in 1991) made it impossible for Mr. Harper to definitively answer many questions:

- ★ What was going through their minds at various stages of the siege?
- ★ What was their ultimate goal beyond the immediate escape?
- ★ Did Carrasco believe someone abandoned him after he initiated the siege? and, if so, who?

Because of his exhaustive research, however, Harper provides the reader with the ability to make presumably accurate suppositions to these issues.

The action begins with the blast of a .357 Magnum on the first page and ends within moments of the final shot being fired on the last page. There is very little background material covering events or participants prior to or after the actual siege.

A very refreshing aspect of the book is the fact that Mr. Harper allows the reader to form opinions of the characters and behaviors of the principal participants. He does not succumb to the tendency of many authors to editorialize or manufacture heroes and villains, and there are many of both in this story that are quite evident. Character flaws and strengths of others are less obvious, allowing the reader to fill in the blanks and coming to their own conclusions. Without providing opinion or comment, the author documents numerous examples of strength and weakness displayed by the hostages in their interaction with the convicts and TDC officials. He also provides similar insight into the immeasurable pressure and drama generated in the command post established in the Director of the Texas Department of Corrections Office.

For those not familiar with this incident, the details of the ending will not be revealed here. Suffice it to say that it concluded on the eleventh day with deaths and injuries inflicted upon hostages and hostage takers. I share the author's surprise that this siege has not previously been documented in detail in the media, print, or movies. The impacts of this event upon corrections and law enforcement are tremendous and are still being felt today. The heroes, who are dedicated employees of the State of Texas, deserve to have their stories told. Fortunately for them, William T. Harper has done an excellent job relating this event.