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## New tactical team patrolling prison raises concerns

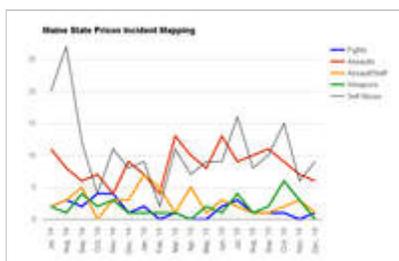
*Officers use dogs, shotguns while guarding inmates*

By Jordan Bailey | Jan 27, 2016



The Special Operations Group stands at attention outside the prison in this October 2015 photo.

Source: Maine State Prison



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**WARREN** — While Maine State Prison officials see only benefits to SWAT-style armed officers guarding prisoners in the general population, prisoners and prisoner rights advocates are concerned a military presence could increase tensions.

The officers are part of the Special Operations Group, or SOG, which includes about 20 corrections officers and supervisors statewide. The unit, established in 2013, has the highest level of corrections emergency response training in the Northeast, according to prison officials. MSP Warden Randall Liberty said its officers, dressed in tactical gear, accompanied by trained dogs, and carrying Keltek KSG shotguns loaded with less-than-lethal rounds, provide enhanced security to all the correctional facilities in Maine.

“It allows us to provide a methodic, well-rehearsed, well-trained response to any incidents that may arise,” he said.

Since November, two SOG officers have been patrolling inside the prison. Officials say their presence on a daily basis is a useful tool to deter violent incidents and to quickly respond to any that arise.

Others, however, are concerned about what they see as an unwarranted ramping up of security and the effects a military-style presence could have on inmates with post traumatic stress disorder or mental illness. In addition, the group uses an 80-bed unit for its training, while inmates in the crowded prison double-bunk. Some also argue these officers increase danger by bringing weapons inside.

One SOG officer has been assigned to the maximum security Close-C pod, also known as “Charlie Pod,” where the most troublesome inmates who are not in segregation are housed, Liberty said. Another roves around the facility to back up correctional officers dealing with situations they cannot get under control, and to maintain a presence during mass movements, at recreation and at chow.

Correctional Officer Matt Estes, who works as a rover in the maximum security unit, said, “I love the idea of having SOG here; I'm one of the believers. The inmates have seen SOG training here, they get the idea that they're very serious about what they're doing. So now if an inmate decides to act up they'll know they're going to have this guy, too. Sometimes we just don't have the bodies to respond, so it's nice to have that one extra body that's dedicated to our unit.”

Correctional Officer Joseph Henry, who works in Charlie Pod, said, “I think visually as a deterrent it's been very effective. The whole idea of the SOG group is to keep everybody safe – *everybody* safe. More than one inmate have revealed to me that they're very happy to see the SOG officers patrolling.”

### **Increased threat?**

Henry added that he heard a caseworker put it well: “When the inmates raise the threat level, we have to raise the security level, is just the natural course of things. And when that threat level is reduced, then the security level can reduce as well.”

In the past five years, there have been three inmate-on-inmate homicides, and in 2008 a prisoner took the librarian and another prisoner hostage.

Henry said that when he began working at Maine State Prison nearly 20 years ago, in the former Thomaston prison, the population was generally older and calmer than it is now.

“Now we have young men who are 18, 19 years old coming in,” Henry said. “They're a much more rowdy and rambunctious crowd. The general level of respect is quite a bit lower, as far as regard for authority.”

But more recent data, over the past 18 months, show a slight decrease in violent incidents occurring at the prison and no homicides or hostage situations. And in the past year, assaults on staff have gone down 6 percent, which Estes attributes to better training for correctional officers.

Using the public database of inmates at the prison, we found that on Jan. 8, 182 of the 913 prisoners were between the ages of 20 and 30, while 154 were over age 55.

Joseph Jackson, former state prison inmate and president of Maine Prison Advocacy Coalition, said that if there is an increase in violence, he believes it is correlated with the increased emphasis on security. That increases the tension level at the prison which, he said, leads to more violent incidents.

Some believe the claims of increased threat of violence are unfounded. Jeffrey LaGasse, an inmate working on developing a re-entry program for inmates, said in a phone interview the SOG officers are not needed because the level of violence at the prison is “nothing like they make it out to be.

"There's is no disorderly [conduct] in here, and when there is, they have the staff to deal with it," he said. "I could see if it was 2002, there was a lot of violence then, but not now.”

Henry said, “I've worked in every prison in the state of New Hampshire. For many reasons, you can't compare MSP to other prisons. The further south you go, the further west you go, the more violent the prisons become.”

However, Assistant Commissioner of Corrections Jody Breton said the SOG team was not brought in because of an increased threat level. Rather, it is a shift to a more efficient and effective type of emergency response.

Replacing a large, dedicated Corrections Emergency Response Team, or CERT, commonly employed by corrections departments, the SOG is an all-volunteer team of corrections officers and supervisors from several facilities who are trained to respond in micro-units of one or two, rather than as a whole team.

“They are employees of ours who don't get additional pay for what they do," she said. "These people are excited about doing this job, it is a passion for them.”

Because an SOG officer is likely to be on duty when an incident occurs, response time is reduced.

"This saves money and time," Breton said. "In those situations, time is of the essence."

According to an estimate from U.S. Corrections Special Operations Group (US C-SOG), the private company that trains Maine's unit and most SOG units in the United States, a 2016 training session for up to 25 officers would cost \$42,000, with certification good for one year.

US C-SOG trainer Joseph Garcia wrote in a blog post that whereas CERTs are manpower-intensive and use brute force, SOGs "use technology that is specifically designed for a correctional facility, [and] are much more effective at getting the job done quickly, without incident, and without legal ramification."

The administration hopes to see a decrease in violent incidents, but because the SOG has been operating at the prison for only a couple of months, it is too early to establish a trend. "If the incidents do not go down, we'll reassess," Breton said.



*Images available for download at the US C-SOG website show SOG officers in a variety of prison settings.*

US C-SOG has a decidedly military feel. In some of the many videos available on its website and Facebook page, Garcia slips into using the terms "enemy" and "combat," when talking about situations a prison SOG would respond to. But Garcia argues elsewhere that the training is corrections-specific, not military or police training.

### **Prisoners speak out**

Some prisoners have said in letters that they find SOG's military-style presence and its training exercises disturbing and a waste of money. Travis Murphy wrote that SOG officers "act tougher, attitudes come out." James Manley wrote that SOG officers intimidate prisoners by clicking the safety of their weapons on and off while talking to them, making them lie on the ground with their hands behind their heads while the officers walk past and searching their cells.

“They stand around holding their shotguns and watch us eat, play basketball, watch TV and all manner of other mundane duties which have traditionally been conducted by regular guards armed only with pepper spray,” Manley wrote.

LaGasse said, “It's weird when you're walking around your pod and there are SOG officers squatting down and pointing their guns at you and everyone else.”

Horace Salley wrote that the SOG officers incorporate their attack dogs into day-to-day guarding. “It is an uncanny and hard feeling to describe seeing this dog at full run at you and other prisoners, and only at the last minute does the handler down the dog.”

He also said that when an inmate asked an officer, “Do you believe these weapons are needed?” the officer responded, “This weapon will save a correctional officer's life at the expense of an inmate some day soon.”

### **Veterans in prison**

MPAC President Jackson said the SOG training exercises at the facility are problematic because they use concussion grenades. “Concussion grenades are not good for the veterans there, many of whom have PTSD and a large population have mental disorders. To expose them to a militarized environment is not good for them. We have prisoners of war here in Maine.” He added that “guarding all inmates at gunpoint” takes away incentive to be good, because “you're subjected to the same level scrutiny regardless of whether or not you punch your cellmate in the face.”

Zach Heiden of the ACLU of Maine said Maine State Prison has done a better job in recent years of paying attention to the mental health needs of the population.

“Many prisoners have PTSD before they arrive at prison and the experience of being in prison gives more people PTSD,” he said. “So we hope and expect that the administration will continue to pay attention to those mental health needs and not do things that are harmful.”

In response to those concerns, Breton said severely mentally ill inmates are housed in the mental health unit, and SOG officers do not operate in that unit.

### **Prison crowding**

Manley filed grievances with the prison about SOG officers carrying weapons among the general population, and about their use of a vacant unit for training exercises while the rest of the prison is overcrowded. (The prison capacity is 916 and the population on Jan. 8 was 913, so the only way for there to be an empty 80-bed unit available is if inmates are “double-bunked.”) Both of these were dismissed as non-grievable issues.

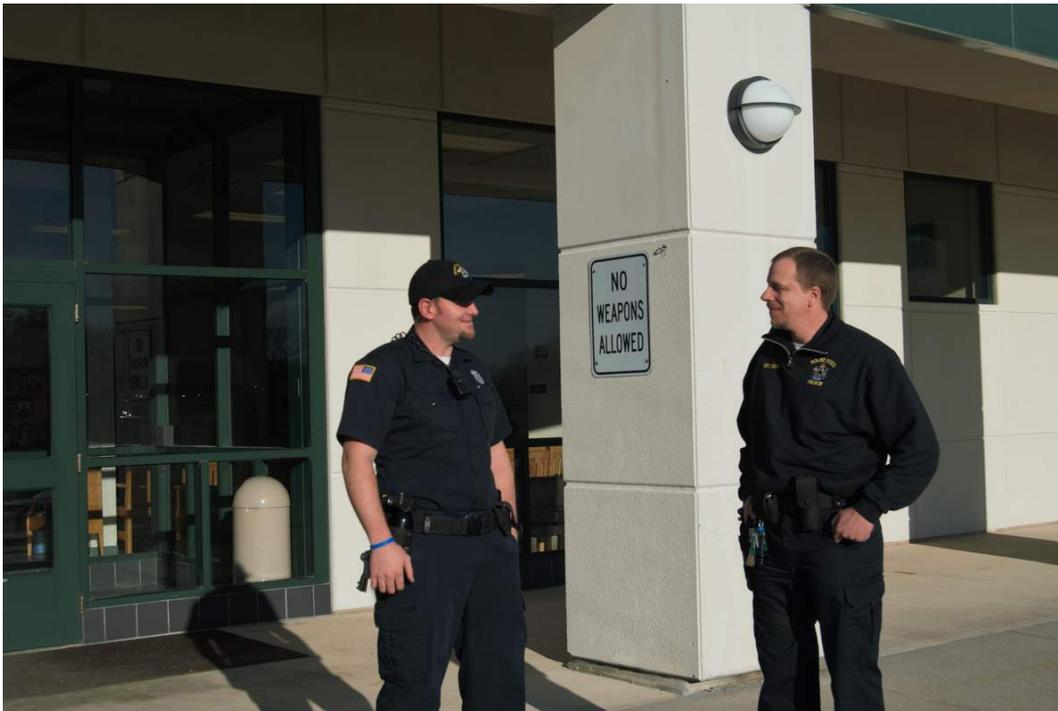
“I live in fear that an inmate who did not get his psych medication one day might get his hands on a shotgun and go on a rampage,” Manley said.

Correctional officers are not allowed to carry firearms among the general population for just that reason.

“It would be a lot more dangerous for us to carry firearms,” Estes said. “There have never been firearms allowed in this facility, or anywhere that I know of in the state of Maine.”

Though the weapons carried by SOG officers are loaded with rubber bullets or beanbag rounds, they can still inflict a lot of damage. One prisoner described cinder blocks with three-inch craters left in them after being shot with rubber bullets and others destroyed completely.

Regarding Manley's grievance about the use of and damage to the vacant unit, Breton said it is a staffing shortage that keeps that unit closed. However, she said she anticipates, with new officers coming out of the academy, they will have enough staff to open the unit soon. And she said the damage is kept to a minimum, because, for example, when officers practice breaching doors, they use an old door over and over again and only have to replace the hinges.



*Correctional officers Matt Estes, left, and Joseph Henry chat during a break outside the prison Jan. 4.*

### **No "us and them"**

The use of SOG officers at Maine State Prison comes at a time when the department has been shifting toward a more rehabilitative and less adversarial guarding style. Henry said in the last two years, the prison has started implementing targeted programming that takes into account the particular situation of each prisoner.

"Now that corrections has turned towards programming and evidence-based practice, you're really looking at being very involved, as an officer or caseworker; whatever your role is at the prison, everything you do is aimed at making the offenders better neighbors and viable people in the workforce," he said. "It's a great turn in corrections."

He said officers are trained to interact with and establish a rapport with prisoners, and that the line between caseworker and corrections officer is somewhat blurred. Guarding like a military overseer, he said, "does not work."

A department recruitment video emphasizes the need for communication and in it a corrections officer advises potential employees not to draw a line between "us and them."

Heiden of the ACLU said a very positive development in the management philosophy of the Department of Corrections and the prison has been the move away from adversarial staff-inmate relations over recent years.

"This example of the [SOG] team being suited up all the time and being present for meals and things," he said, "I'm concerned that this would cut against that general development."

[Maine Department of Corrections SOG recruitment video](#)

[Maine Department of Corrections CO recruitment video](#)

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## Comments (6)

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POSTED BY: JEAN HOYT | Jan 28, 2016 11:18

I guess Ron Huber has never worked in corrections....but if he did then I believe he would appreciate the SOG team having his back. The corrections officers are there to keep the inmates from hurting each other as well as keeping fellow staff safe. I worked there and was assaulted by an inmate and I am pleased to see the graph showing that assaults on prison staff has been reduced. Inmates are always going to complain about being in prison.

POSTED BY: NINA REED | Jan 28, 2016 03:52

"And when that threat level is reduced, then the security level can reduce as well." This is actually a thing? Like, I could walk into the prison when the "threat level" is reduced and I'd be ok to just roam around? No thanks. And for all of you that are so concerned about inmates' civil liberties being infringed upon-they are the ones putting prison security staff in business. I would challenge any one of you freedom spouters to go work inside the prison walls for just a day. Not listening to the plight of the inmate-working with the staff and seeing what they go through every single day. The turnover rate is so high at the prison-in part because of the stress brought on by an ever increasingly violent prison population. Maine's prison population is by no means comparable to that of other states, in that there is far less organized crime within the walls, less gang activity, etc. But to say that there is ever a "reduced threat level" is like saying that They didn't really do anything so bad that they have to be locked up or that "Boys will be boys." ~Melanie

POSTED BY: JO-ANN COOK | Jan 27, 2016 20:03

Reminds me of the prison lockdown in 1980!

POSTED BY: MARY KATE MOODY | Jan 27, 2016 15:17

Warden Liberty knows better than most about the issues with PTSD, as he served tours in the Middle East. The prison is blessed to have a man of this caliber at it's helm.

Chris Moody, CPT, Retired

POSTED BY: PATRICIA PENDLETON | Jan 27, 2016 14:22

I, too, support the DOC. Whatever it takes to keep order in the prison. Inmates need to be reminded they're not in there for vacation.

POSTED BY: MARY A MCKEEVER | Jan 27, 2016 13:17

I think this is a very good idea. Trained to control and inhibit inmates from violent acts. What is wrong with that? There will always be a public which thinks non-violent and I agree with it in the common everyday streets but not with drug riddled inmates. It is a sad generation of youth who desire and become addicted to drugs on the street and this incarceration should rehab them if they only will let it. I support the DOC.

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