

# Captain Lawrence Rockwood in Haiti: The Sequel

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After dark on the evening of September 30, Captain Rockwood put on his battle dress utilities, flak jacket and helmet, took his rifle, full ammunition pouch, two canteens, and a first-aid kit, and set out to inspect the National Penitentiary on his own. On his pallet he left a note that said he was doing "what is legal to stop something that is plainly illegal. Action required: All means necessary to implement the intent of the U.N. and U.S. president, intent on human rights." He pinned a small American flag patch to his note and wrote above it: "Take this flag. It is soiled with unnecessary blood. You cowards can court-martial my dead body."<sup>1</sup>

He jumped the wall of the barracks compound in order to avoid having to pass the guards at the gate. Standing orders required troops to travel in convoys of at least two vehicles with at least two soldiers in each vehicle.<sup>2</sup> Although as a counterintelligence officer Rockwood enjoyed unusual freedom of movement, he would have had to lie to the guards to exit through the gate.

Rockwood paid a Haitian truck driver forty dollars to take him to the penitentiary. It took him just over an hour to find the prison, but at its gate he simply knocked and was admitted. At one point he blocked the door with his foot- later he put a round in his rifle. The night warden, Haitian Major Serge Justafor, happened to be a graduate of The School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia and spoke good English. He does not appear to have resisted Rockwood's single-handed "inspection," but told him the main cell block was locked up until morning.

Rockwood made his own way out of Justafor's office and into the infirmary. In the infirmary Rockwood found twenty-six people. Most lay on the concrete floor and "appeared to be suffering from various wasting diseases: tuberculosis, AIDS, acute dysentery, etc. Many were near death."<sup>3</sup> A trench along the wall was full of feces, urine, and flies.

Rockwood demanded to see a list of the prisoners and to inspect the rest of the premises. Told that there could be no entry until morning, he pulled up a chair in the courtyard and sat down to wait. He also requested that the warden inform U.S. authorities of his presence there. He was convinced at this point that his mission had been a success since now the Joint Task Force would have to take responsibility for the prison.

At Rockwood's suggestion, the warden called the embassy. Rockwood was in the prison for several hours when Major Spencer Lane, USA, the U.S. military liaison in Port-au-Prince, arrived. Lane persuaded Rockwood to unchamber the round in his rifle and to accompany him back to the barracks compound. There Rockwood was given two psychiatric evaluations and found mentally sound. On October 2nd he was on a plane back to Fort Drum, New York.

In his brief inspection of the prison Rockwood saw only the infirmary. He did not get to look into the main cell block where about four hundred gravely emaciated prisoners were crammed in one unspeakably filthy cell.

Two days after Rockwood's visit, Colonel Michael Sullivan, commander of the 16t, Military Police Brigade, visited the National Penitentiary. He found what he called "appalling conditions [that] render this facility unsuitable for human habitation and this must be a priority."<sup>4</sup>

The penitentiary would not be visited again by Joint Task Force officials until almost three months had passed. On December 19, 1994, American forces entered the prison and undertook to improve conditions there by providing water and carrying away filth. Reports about violations of human rights in Haitian prisons had ceased as soon as Captain Rockwood was relieved.<sup>5</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Rockwood's statement is quoted in Bob Gorman, "The Media and Captain Rockwood," *Watertown Daily Times*, 3 December 1995 at F6-F7.
2. See Mark S. Martins, "'War Crimes' During Operations Other than War: Military Doctrine and Law Fifty Years After Nuremberg—And Beyond," *Military Law Review*, Summer 1995, note #153.
3. Interview with the author, February 18, 1999.
4. See transcript of U.S. v. Rockwood, no. 261-29-6597 at 19-20. International Police Monitors, a group sponsored by the United Nations, also visited the National Penitentiary, though not until February 1995. They described the penitentiary as "the worst prison we have ever seen." One cell, they reported, contained 412 prisoners, with only one square meter per prisoner. "Conditions were inhuman. . . . The smell is unbelievable. Some prisoners had not been out of their cell for 15 days." (Quoted from Transcript of U.S. v. Rockwood, no. 261-29-6597 at 20.)
5. Anna Husarska, "Court Martial for Trying to Stop Abuses in Haiti," *The Guardian*, February 23, 1995, page 24.