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Author Peter Earley was given unlimited access to Leavenworth's maximum security prison for his book "The Hot House." He discusses his experience there in this fascinating and disturbing piece on inmate psychology.

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Transcript
The Hot House: Inside Leavenworth Penitentiary
BRYANT GUMBEL, co-host:
For nearly 90 years, the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, has been in business as a maximum-security facility. Its inmates often refer to it as the hot house, because it's like an oven in the dog days of summer. "The Hot House" is also the title of a new and unusual book about the lives of the men who live at Leavenworth, guards and inmates. It's a raw, violent book by investigative reporter Peter Earley. Mr. Earley, good morning.
PETER EARLEY: Good morning.
GUMBEL: First of all, before we start, you said the guys are watching right now at Leavenworth?
EARLEY: Yes. I sent them notices and--and--both sides, the guard force and the convict side.
GUMBEL: OK, you were given unprecedented permission to come and go as you please at Leavenworth and talk to whoever for however long you wanted. Why did Leavenworth give you that access, unprecedented?
EARLEY: Because I approached the director, who was a new director, with what he thought was a novel idea. Most reporters only go to a prison when there's some calamity or a riot or, you know, some kind of uprising. And I said I think we can learn more by watching these guys in their everyday life. What happens when you take 1,200 predators and put them all in one pool together? I wanted to see all their day-to-day activity.
So I said, ‘I want to spend at least a year there.’ And he said, ‘If you're that serious, we'll let you in.’
GUMBEL: But the deal was, you have unlimited access, but they give you no protection?
EARLEY: Right. And--and you have to understand, in Leavenworth, none of the guards carry any weapons, it's too dangerous. The inmates would take the weapons away and turn them on them; so the only thing you have is a body alarm which you can set off and all the other guards will come and--to your aid and rescue you. And I was afraid if I wore that, then everyone would assume that I was a guard, and
this is such a paranoid world. The convicts thought I was an FBI agent when I first went in and the guards all thought I was a plant from the Bureau of Prisons to watch them. So it was a very cold reception.

GUMBEL: Was your life ever in jeopardy?

EARLEY: No, I don't think it was. There were several scary moments, and I saw knife fights and had urine and feces thrown at me, which is one of the frustrating things that happens there. But the--the scariest moments came from actually talking to these guys, and perhaps the scariest moment, to me, was--I was talking to a guy who was a bank robber, and he said 'You know, when you're in prison after awhile, you forget what it's like to be on the outside, and even in your dreams, you start dreaming you're in prison.' He said, 'When I first came into prison, I dreamed about having sex with my wife.' He says, 'Now I dream about grabbing one of these guards, and pulling him over and jerking down his pants and raping him. And this dream is in black and white and suddenly, I have a knife and I'm stabbing him, and it goes to Technicolor.' And then, he looked at me and said, 'I wonder what I'll be dreaming a couple of years when I get out?'

And then I realized, you know, these guys do get out. They come out, and that's the scary thing.

GUMBEL: Let's take a look at Leavenworth. Peter was allowed unlimited access for two years, but our camera was allowed in the prison for just two hours. And we were prevented from talking to any of the 1,600 prisoners, on camera or off. And while it may be a hot house during the Kansas summer, a March rain was falling cold and hard when we shot this tape last week.

This is the view from the prison graveyard. They call it Mount Hope, concrete markers for those who did life without parole. Leavenworth was the first federal prison ever built. Convicts sentenced to hard labor took eight years to complete the job. The gates slammed shut on the first inmates in the winter of 1906. The brick walls are 35 feet high. To discourage tunneling, they also run 35 feet deep.

The first thing a visitor notices about Leavenworth, is how clean the place is. The cells, at least the ones that we were allowed to see, looked like military quarters at a boot camp. During our brief morning visit, some 600 inmates were working in prison industries. Leavenworth's rumbling factory cranks out mail bags, and also furniture for the government. Hanging on an assembly line that we were able to catch were thousands of in and out-boxes for federal bureaucrats. Though it's doubtful that the job experience will help any inmates on the outside, there is some good news. The job experience can help them gain some seniority in the event they ever get convicted again and thrown back into the pen.

While officials hustled us through Leavenworth, the inmates appeared docile and polite. But in this case, appearances are deceiving. As one convict told Peter, an important lesson for doing hard time in the hot house is to feed off the hate. It gives a convict a thirst for revenge, and a will to survive.

Just how violent is Leavenworth?

EARLEY: Well, the violence has been brought down considerably since I first went in, partly because of improved security. The problem is that 20 percent of the inmates there try to do exactly what they did on the street in the prison, which is prey on other people. And, when you're preying on square johns, those are us who are not involved in crime, that's one thing. But when you're preying on other predators it gets violent very quickly.

GUMBEL: You--what--what makes this book enormously fascinating is--is the way you personalize it.
We've got some of the people that--that you talk about. Give me just 10-second character sketches of some of the people, if you would.

EARLEY: OK.

GUMBEL: Carl Bowles?

EARLEY: Carl Bowles has been in 23 years straight. And he said to me, in one of the more dramatic moments, ‘Do you know what it's like not to be able to touch another human being for 23 years?’ He's a triple murderer, cop killer, and if you met Carl Bowles, within 10 seconds you would know that this guy, as the convicts say, would kill you in a heartbeat.

GUMBEL: What about William Post?

EARLEY: William Post is know as the Cat Man, because he takes care of some cats in the penitentiary. He does that to keep his own humanity. He is unusual because he came from a very middle-class, normal family and psychiatrists can't figure out why he was so fascinated with crime and became a criminal.

GUMBEL: What about Dallas Scott?

EARLEY: Dallas Scott is an alleged member of the Aryan Brotherhood, one of the toughest white prison gangs; and again, he's only been convicted of two minor convictions but has been in prison almost all of his life because of his affiliation with the gang.

GUMBEL: How about Thomas Silverstein?

EARLEY: Silverstein is the most incredible inmate I've met. When I met him he was kept in a cell in the basement of Leavenworth, right out of Hannibal Lecter’s "Silence of the Lambs.” The lights have been on 24 hours a day in this guy's cell since 1983 when he killed a guard. He came in on bank robbery, his father and uncle took him to this bank to rob; he didn't have any bodies, he hadn't killed anybody until he got into Leavenworth. Now he has four, the last one was a guard.

GUMBEL: Do--do these inmates live by a code of conduct, however warped you or I may think it is?

EARLEY: Exactly. And that's one thing that I was shocked to dis—to discover. What they learn early on--eight, nine, 10 years old is when some of these guys first entered the juvenile system--is that society says, ‘You're a loser.’ And they have a choice: They can say, ‘Well, I'm a loser’ or ‘I'll live by my own rules.’ And what they find works for them is violence, because that's not accepted in society; but among them, they can deal with that. That's their power.

GUMBEL: Drugs, sex, how rampant?

EARLEY: Sex much more often than drugs. Drugs is kept down because they give random urinalysis, but sex is one of the first things that a—a convict has to deal with. That's how you're preyed upon. Any weakness, Bryant.

GUMBEL: Is everyone violated across the board?

EARLEY: No--no. If you're willing to make it clear that you will hurt someone if they try to prey on you, then they'll back up. But you have to be able to make that step when you get to an institution like Leavenworth.

GUMBEL: But, rape is common?

EARLEY: Rape is common; not for sex, it's power. It's the feeling, I talked to a guy who had been raped and then turned around and raped a 17-year-old. And then he said, ‘When I was doing it, I felt terrible; I
remembered what it was like. But it's that power of just being like a god, having a piece of meat I can do anything I want with.’

GUMBEL: Two quick questions, what about the guards? Since they are themselves, temporary inmates, are they very much like the people they watch over?

EARLEY: Eighty percent of them are just fine, upstanding citizens, and they don't get dragged into it. But 20 percent get caught in this macho game and they are, you know, just one switch of the dial over from the people they guard.

GUMBEL: And--and what about Peter Earley? I would that imagine coming and going inside that place for two years would--would change you and your family a lot?

EARLEY: It did. I've been married 20 years; it did not help my marriage. One of the things that you learn in prison is that, and this isn't formally taught, but it is that, you know, if an inmate comes up to you, and is polite, you're polite; but if he gets in your face, you get in his face even louder. And that may work in prison, but it doesn't work in a marriage.


EARLEY: Thank you very much.