

The California National Guard at the Folsom Prison Riot 1927

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National guard of California

OUTLINE HISTORY
CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD
MILITIA AND VOLUNTEERS
1846 - 1941
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
WASHINGTON, D. C.

ACTIVITIES OF THE COMPANIES
OF THE
CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD
DURING THE
FOLSOM PRISON RIOT, 1927

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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THE CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD

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OUTLINE HISTORY
 OF THE
CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD
MILITIA AND VOLUNTEER FORCES
 1849 - 1941

Prepared in
 THE OFFICE OF THE ADJUTANT GENERAL
 SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA
 C. D. O'SULLIVAN
 Brigadier General
 The Adjutant General

STATIONS AND LOCATION OF THE COMPANIES

OF THE

CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD

DURING THE

FOLSOM PRISON RIOT, 1927

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Report of Adjutant General
William Burrows, Washington, D. C., December 9, 1927, Adjutant
General's Office.

Report of Adjutant General
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THE CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD

AND THE

FOLSOM PRISON RIOT, 1927

On Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1927, at Folsom Prison, the usual holiday program was being observed. One of the features for the occasion, a motion picture, was in progress at the prison schoolhouse, and a large number of convicts were gathered there to view the attraction.

About 11:00 A.M. a group of prisoners attacked the guards stationed in the cellhouse and in the melee which followed one guard and a convict were killed. Luckily, a change in the system and the method of handling the keys of the institution had been inaugurated only two days previously and the convicts unable to locate the keys failed in their immediate efforts to escape. The small body of rioters then proceeded to the school building where the motion picture was being shown and incited about twelve hundred convicts there to join in the revolt.*

The convicts seized five prison guards in the cell block, one of whom was severely beaten, and held them as hostages in the school building. The prisoners controlled the interior of all the buildings in the prison with the exception of one cell block, the kitchen, the mess hall and administration building. Warden Court Smith was virtually a prisoner in his own office.

The convicts remained in possession of most of the prison buildings during the afternoon and night of November twenty-fourth, refusing to surrender. On the morning of the twenty-fifth when they saw about four hundred National Guardsmen with machine guns and automatic rifles surrounding the buildings, they decided that the fight was lost. The convicts released the five guards whom they were holding as hostages and surrendered to the authorities. They turned over one automatic pistol, a hatchet and several knives which they had in their possession. Several hundred knives were later located, indicating that a wholesale break had been planned.**

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*Report of Adjutant General R. E. Mittelstaedt to the chief of Militia Bureau, Washington D. C., December 6, 1927, Adjutant General's Office.

**Report of Adjutant General R. E. Mittelstaedt to the chief of Militia Bureau, Washington D. C., December 6, 1927, Adjutant General's Office.

As soon as Warden Court Smith learned of the situation at the prison, he realized that with the rioters in possession of several of the prison buildings, and holding five of the prison guards as hostages, it would be difficult with the available force at his command, to subdue the rioters and prevent an outbreak without the loss of life.

Communication with the outside by telephone was still possible and the Warden promptly took advantage of that fact. He telephoned to Governor C. C. Young at Sacramento for aid and the Governor immediately directed Colonel Wallace A. Mason and Major Charles B. Blood of the 184th Infantry, California National Guard, to order out the companies stationed at Sacramento and proceed to Folsom Prison at once to aid the civil authorities there in quelling the riot. Colonel Mason notified his company commanders immediately and they in turn communicated the order to every enlisted man who could be reached. Announcement of the call was also made at the various theaters and over the radio.

Colonel Mason arrived at the prison about 12:45 P.M. November twenty-fourth and the officers and men followed in trucks and automobiles as soon as possible. Many of the men who first reported were given arms and sent away without waiting for uniforms.

Adjutant General R. E. Mittelstaedt was in San Francisco that day enjoying Thanksgiving dinner with his family. At about 1:45 P.M. he received a telephone call from Governor Young informing the General of the attempted prison break at Folsom and instructing him to secure machine guns and to call out the several units of the National Guard stationed in nearby communities outside of Sacramento. The Adjutant General was at the same time advised by Governor Young that Colonel Mason was already at Folsom with the Sacramento units of the Guard.

Following his conversation with the Governor over the telephone, General Mittelstaedt telephoned to Yuba City, Marysville, Stockton, Woodland and Lodi, directing the companies stationed at those places to immediately assemble at their armories and thence to proceed to Folsom via motor buses. These companies were particularly impressed with the necessity for the immediate forwarding to Folsom of machine guns with detachments of men to handle the same.

General Mittelstaedt also telephoned to Los Angeles and ordered two airplanes equipped with machine guns and radio to proceed to Mather Field, Sacramento, and then to hold themselves in readiness for action. It was thought that if the prisoners should succeed in breaking out, these airplanes would be valuable for the purpose of rounding them up.

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Having completed these arrangements, General Mittelstaedt secured a Regular Army airplane from Crissey Field, San Francisco to transport him to Folsom where he arrived shortly after 4:00 P.M.

Upon his arrival at Folsom prison, General Mittelstaedt found that about two hundred and fifty National Guardsmen had already reported. In addition to these, there were the prison guards, State police, motor police, sheriffs, deputy sheriffs and a large number of civilians.

The National Guard troops at Folsom continued under the command of Colonel Mason, but did not take over complete control as the situation did not warrant such action. The troops did, however, take over the weak and important points in the defense and were in readiness to assume control of the entire situation, should the convicts attempt a break for liberty. For the time being at least, the National Guardsmen simply cooperated to the fullest extent with the prison authorities.*

At about 3:30 P.M. there was a movement of prison guards and peace officers toward the cellhouse where the mutinous prisoners had established themselves. In the skirmish which followed, about two hundred shots were exchanged. The Warden's secretary was shot, but not fatally injured. Ten convicts were killed and several others were wounded.** The troops of the National Guard, did not, according to the Adjutant General's report, participate in the firing. To refrain from so doing was a splendid test of discipline, and the Guardsmen met it squarely.

In the organization and arrangement of the National Guardsmen at the prison, two machine guns were mounted on tripods to command a sweep of the entrance to the cellhouse in the event a break was made. Another machine gun was mounted on a truck so as to permit rapid change of position in an emergency. A fourth machine gun was lashed to a window frame in the power house to prevent any attack on the prison power plant.

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*Report of Adjutant General Mittelstaedt to Governor C. C. Young, November 29, 1927, Adjutant General's Office.

**Sacramento Bee, November 25, 1927, page 1, column 3.

From time to time Warden Smith telephoned to the guards outside the walls, cautioning them against making any further assault on the cellhouse or the auditorium for the time being. His orders were to wait until the prisoners made an offensive movement. In the meantime, there were brought to the prison from the State arsenal, five hundred gas masks, three hundred tear gas hand grenades and three hundred candles. Blankets and overcoats were also provided for the men.

As the afternoon drew to a close, arrangements were made to secure an auxiliary flood lighting system to be used in event the prison lighting system was put out of commission. Automobiles were placed with their headlights pointed toward the doors and windows of the prison. Lights were secured from theaters, the Electric Company and from other sources. These were installed and in operation about midnight. Several additional telephones were installed to handle the rush of messages. A camp kitchen was established and food furnished to all who desired it.

National Guardsmen were placed on guard and patrol duty about the grounds and on the prison walls. These men were arranged in reliefs so that all could secure some sleep during the night and be ready for whatever might transpire the following day. The night was chilly and men shivered and stamped their feet. Along the top of the wall, National Guardsmen could be seen at intervals of ten feet, kicking their heels against the wall while watching the prison buildings. Others walked back and forth on their narrow ledge thirty feet above the ground.

About 8:00 P.M. November twenty-fourth the civil authorities expressed a desire for several light tanks. General Mittelstaedt immediately telephoned to Salinas and requested the commanding officer of the Fourtieth Division Tank Company to load two army tanks on trucks and send them to the prison. It was soon discovered however, that at the rate of progress the trucks were traveling, they would not reach their destination until the afternoon of the twenty-fifth. Therefore, in order to expediate the delivery of the tanks, they were transferred at San Jose to a special train which brought them to Folsom. The tanks arrived at the prison about 8:00 A.M. November twenty-fifth. It was the intention of the authorities to use these tanks if necessary, to batter down the doors and walls of the buildings in which the mutinous prisoners had established themselves. During the evening of the twenty-fourth and throughout that night National Guard troops

continued to arrive and by 8:00 A.M. November twenty-fifth there were five hundred thirty-two officers and men of the National Guard at the prison.

The military leaders of the siege headed by Adjutant General Mittelstaedt and Colonel Mason, together with Warden Smith, the State Director of Public Works, and personal representatives of Governor Young planned to deliver an ultimatum to the revolting prisoners early on the morning of November twenty-fifth. The prisoners were to be requested to surrender peacefully or suffer the consequences of an attack by the besieging forces.*

At about 6:30 A.M. Company B of the 184th Infantry advanced within the prison enclosure. This was the first military unit to enter the yard proper and the men were directly exposed to the fire of the prisoners in the recreation hall. With bayonets fixed, the company was strung out in skirmish line, prepared for any emergency, while negotiations between Warden Court Smith and the leaders of the revolt were in progress.**

Shortly after 8:00 A.M. it was announced that peace negotiations had been concluded. The prisoners had agreed to surrender and to release the five guards who they had captured the previous day and had held as hostages for twenty-one hours.

The surrender of the prisoners marked the end of one of the most desperate attempted prison breaks in the penal history of the United States. In the number of convicts engaged in the revolt, in the number of National Guardsmen, posse men and volunteer civilians who participated in the task of guarding the prison walls from the expected assault by the prisoners, the outbreak that ended November twenty-fifth, 1927, eclipsed all previous records for California.***

Upon request of the Board of Prison Directors and the Warden,

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*Stockton Record, November 25, 1927, page 1, column 1.

**Woodland Democrat, November 25, 1927, page 1, column 5.

***Stockton Record, November 25, 1927, page 1, column 1.

the National Guardsmen were held at the prison after the surrender, until all the convicts were locked up and counted. When the Warden advised that the check was completed and all prisoners accounted for, the members of the National Guard units were called to the prison gate. Inspection was held and the troops were thanked for their services and commended for their efficiency by Adjutant General Mittelstaedt on behalf of Governor Young. These ceremonies concluded, the troops were dismissed and by 11:00 A.M. all had departed for their home stations*

The total number of persons killed in the attempted outbreak was two prison guards and eleven convicts and the total number wounded was four guards and eleven convicts.**

In the verdicts returned by a coroner's jury on November thirtieth, six leaders in the attempted prison break were accused of the murder of one guard and one convict. The inquest was held in the library building of the prison, where the six convicts accused as leaders of the revolt were brought before the coroner's jury, but each of these refused in turn to testify.***

Three verdicts were returned by the jury. The six ringleaders of the attempted prison break were jointly charged with the murder of one of the guards and were held for trial. The death of one convict was charged to the leader of the revolt. The deaths of ten other convicts was attributed to peace officers who assisted in quelling the riot.

A few commendable and noteworthy features of the Folsom prison riot were:

First- The quick, energetic action taken by Governor C. C. Young to quell the riot before it could gain any considerable headway.

Second- The splendid cooperation between the military and civil authorities and the assistance rendered by all persons and organizations when requested.

Third- The rapid mobilization of the National Guard and the assembling of so much modern equipment in so short a time.

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*Report of Adjutant General to Governor C. C. Young November 29, 1927, Adjutant General's Office.

**Report of Adjutant General Mittelstaedt to Chief of Militia Bureau, Washington D. C. December 6, 1927, Adjutant General's Office.

***Sacramento Bee, November 30, 1927, page 1, column 3.

The Governor's quick and decisive action in calling out the State troops, when he was informed concerning the situation at the prison, contributed largely toward preventing a break of major proportions and aided materially in ending the revolt. The spirit of cooperation between the forces of the National Guard and the prison authorities and peace officers who hurried to assist them was most gratifying, indicating as it did, an urgent wish to be helpful.

The quick response of the National Guard units called upon, and the assembling of the required equipment in such a short space of time reflected great credit on the rank and file of the National Guard of California. These officers and men, most of whom were quietly enjoying their Thanksgiving dinner when the call for duty came, hesitated not at all. Many of them left their homes without having tasted the Thanksgiving delicacies, not knowing when or where they would have another opportunity to appease their hunger, nor whether they would ever return to their homes.

Another circumstance worthy of mention, was the exceptionally large number of Guardsmen who responded to the call of the Governor and Adjutant General that Thanksgiving day. Under the circumstances, it would not have been surprising if not more than fifty percent of the enrolled members of the companies called for duty responded. It was most gratifying therefore when it was found that eighty-five percent had answered the call.

The fact that the troops were not called upon to take an active part in the conflict at Folsom was a fortunate circumstance. They had no desire for conflict, but their almost unanimous response left no doubt that the California National Guardsmen were ready to obey orders and perform their duty under all circumstances or conditions.

STATIONS AND LOCATIONS OF STATE STAFF, HEADQUARTERS, HEADQUARTERS COMPANY,
HOWITZER COMPANY, SERVICE COMPANY AND COMPANIES E, F, H AND I, 184TH INFANTRY

NATIONAL GUARD OF CALIFORNIA

DURING THE FOLSOM PRISON RIOT, NOVEMBER 24, 1927

Colonel Wallace A. Mason, 184th Infantry, commanding

Company	Called for active duty	Stations and Locations	Commanding Officers	Relieved from active duty
State Staff	November 24, 1927	The State Staff, numbering 23 men, were ordered by Governor C. C. Young to arm and proceed to Folsom Prison. Arrived at prison about 1:00 P.M. Nov. 24th. Camped near the prison that night and returned to Sacramento about 11:00 A.M. the following day.	Brig. Gen. R.E. Mittelstaedt	Nov. 25, 1927
Hdq. 184th Inf.	November 24, 1927	Headquarters Staff, 7 men, Headquarters Co., 53 men, Howitzer Co., 56 Men, Service Co., 71 men, were ordered by Col. Wallace A. Mason to proceed at once to Folsom Prison where they arrived between 1:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M. Nov. 24th.	Wallace A. Mason Col. 184th. Inf.	Nov. 25, 1927
Hdq. Co. 184th Inf.	November 24, 1927	Troops encamped near the prison that night. Took no active part in the shooting that occurred.	Roy A. Green Captain	Nov. 25, 1927
Howitzer Co. 184th Inf.	November 24, 1927	When the convicts surrendered on the morning of Nov. 25th the troops were dismissed and left for their home stations about 11:00 A.M.	Robert E. Beauchamp Captain	Nov. 25, 1927
Service Co. 184th Inf.	November 24, 1927		John E. Maloney Captain	Nov. 25, 1927

STATIONS AND LOCATIONS OF STATE STAFF, HEADQUARTERS, HEADQUARTERS COMPANY,
HOWITZER COMPANY, SERVICE COMPANY AND COMPANIES E, F, H AND I, 184TH INFANTRY

NATIONAL GUARD OF CALIFORNIA

Company	Called for active duty	Stations and Locations (Continued)	Commanding Officers	Relieved from active duty
E 184th Inf.	Nov. 24, 1927	Company E, Woodland, Company F, Marysville, Company H, Yuba City and Company I of Stockton aggregating 176 men were notified by Adjutant General Mittelstaedt at about 2:00 P.M. Nov. 24th to proceed at once under arms to Folsom Prison. The troops arrived at the prison between 6:50 P.M. and 10:35 P.M. Nov. 24th. Took no part in the firing. Encamped near the prison that night. The prisoners surrendered the morning of Nov. 25 and the troops were dismissed. Troops left the prison grounds for their home stations about 11:00 A. M. November 25th.	Arthur C. Huston, Jr. Captain	Nov. 25, 1927
F 184th Inf.	Nov. 24, 1927		Wesley C. Owen Captain	Nov. 25, 1927
H 184th Inf.	Nov. 24, 1927		Irwin E. Farrington Captain	Nov. 25, 1927
I 184th Inf.	Nov. 24, 1927		George M. Bisbee Captain	Nov. 25, 1927

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STATIONS AND LOCATIONS OF BATTERIES D AND F, 143RD FIELD ARTILLERY

CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD

DURING THE FOLSOM PRISON RIOT, NOVEMBER 24, 1927

Lieutenant Colonel Otto E. Sandman, 143rd Field Artillery, N.G.C. commanding

Battery	Called for active duty	Stations and locations	Commanding Officers	Relieved from active duty
D	Nov. 24, 1927	Battery D of Sacramento, numbering 44 men was directed by Governor Young to proceed immediately to Folsom Prison and there to report to Col. Mason. The battery arrived at the prison shortly after 1:00 P.M. Nov. 24, 1927.	William H. Morgan Captain	Nov. 25, 1927
F	Nov. 24, 1927	Battery F of Lodi 35 men, and a detachment of 50 men of the 143rd Field Artillery at Stockton were at about 2:00 P.M. Nov. 24th, 1927, directed by Adjutant General Mittelstaedt to proceed to Folsom Prison where they were to report for duty to Colonel Mason. These troops reached the prison at 2:00 A.M. Nov. 25th and finding everything quiet, encamped for the remainder of the night. No further disturbance occurred. The prisoners surrendered on the morning of the 25th and the troops were dismissed. They left the prison for their home stations about 11:00 A.M. Nov. 25th.	Arthur B. Tindell Captain	Nov. 25, 1927
C Detachment	Nov. 24, 1927		James L. Kelly First Lieut.	Nov. 25, 1927

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STATIONS AND LOCATIONS OF 40TH DIVISION AIR SERVICE AND 40TH DIVISION TANK COMPANY

NATIONAL GUARD OF CALIFORNIA

DURING THE FOLSOM PRISON RIOT, NOVEMBER 24, 1927

Colonel Wallace A. Mason, 184th Infantry, N.G.C. Commanding

<u>Company</u>	<u>Called for active duty</u>	<u>Stations and Locations</u>	<u>Commanding-Officers</u>	<u>Relieved from active duty</u>
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Air Service

Nov. 24,
1927

At about 2:30 P.M. November 24, 1927, Adjutant General R. E. Mittelstaedt ordered two air-planes, equipped with machine guns and radio to proceed to Mather Field, Sacramento to be held there in readiness for duty at any moment. The two planes with seven men, proceeded from Los Angeles to Mather Field as directed. Their presence not being required at Folsom Prison, the planes returned to their home stations at Los Angeles, November 25th.

Clinton A. Burrows
First Lieut.

Nov. 25,
1927

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STATIONS AND LOCATIONS OF 40TH DIVISION AIR SERVICE AND 40TH DIVISION TANK COMPANY

NATIONAL GUARD OF CALIFORNIA

Company	Called for active duty	Stations and Locations (Continued)	Commanding Officers	Relieved from active duty
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Tank Co.	Nov. 24, 1927	<p>About 8:00 P.M. November 24th at the suggestion of some of the civil authorities of the State, Adjutant General Mittelstaedt ordered two army tanks from Salinas where the 40th Tank Company Co. was stationed. The two tanks with ten men arrived at Folsom Prison about 8:00 A.M. Nov. 25, having been moved by trucks and railroad train which took all the previous night. The tanks were not needed however, as the prisoners surrendered at about 10:00 A.M. November 25th when the men were dismissed from active service and the tanks were shipped back to Salinas.</p>	Francis E. Heple Captain	Nov. 25, 1927
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