

ALCATRAZ OF THE ROCKIES

The world's most notorious terrorists — the Unabomber, the shoe bomber, soon to be joined by the underwear bomber — live side by side in America's toughest prison. Yet they never meet. **Alex Hannaford** investigates life at Colorado's supermaximum security jail

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANA ROMANOFF

Otis Medley squints at the winter sun, still bright but low in the sky, before throwing open the double doors on the worship room of his little church. It's a Wednesday and soon 15 of his regular parishioners will turn into the driveway for their weekly Bible study. Medley, a small, round man with a gravelly laugh, red face and even redder braces, embodies the spirit of the wooden sign that greets them: "You are welcome here," it says.

Medley and his wife, Selinda, bought this 10-acre plot in Colorado for \$20,000 and turned it into a church just over a decade ago. In the valley, just across the two-lane highway from the Medleys' church, sits ADX Florence, the most notorious prison in America.

The United States Penitentiary Administrative Maximum Facility, to give it its full title, is the only federal "supermax" prison in America. Dubbed the Alcatraz of the Rockies, it houses the *crème de la crème* of international terrorists, mafia dons, serial escape artists, spies and rapists.

The British "shoe bomber", Richard Reid, is languishing in the prison's "control unit" — the highest security section of the highest security prison in the nation: "Unabomber" Theodore Kaczynski is serving a life sentence there, as is 9/11 plotter Zacarias Moussaoui; Terry Nichols, an accomplice in the Oklahoma bombing that killed 168 people in 1995, also calls it home: he was joined there by co-conspirator Timothy McVeigh, until McVeigh's execution in 2001. The latest celebrity inmate, expected to arrive soon, is the "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk



saviour, he says, even they can be forgiven.

ADX, though, isn't really in the forgiveness business — one former warden described it as "a cleaner version of Hell". This may explain why it is so media-shy. My request to tour the facility, which shares space with three other prisons in what's known as the Florence Federal Correctional Complex (FCC), was turned down, with the prison citing "security" as its reason. This contrasted with my

bric-a-brac. Lonnie Lasha runs Mantiqes, an Aladdin's cave of guns, scopes, magazines, grips, pepper sprays and deer-skin rugs. A picture of John Wayne is propped on the top shelf of a tall cupboard full of bullets of varying calibres. Lasha says business is picking up. It apparently always does in an election year. "Everyone's worried that in the next four years they're going to do away with guns," he tells me when I visit one afternoon in early spring.

THE SHOE BOMBER WENT ON HUNGER STRIKE AND WAS FORCE-FED

Abdulmutallab, sentenced last month to four concurrent life terms plus 50 years for attempting to detonate plastic explosives on a Detroit-bound flight from Amsterdam.

Medley has looked after the spiritual needs of several off-duty correctional officers ("guards" is seen as pejorative), and mentioned some of the jail's most notorious inmates in his sermons. If they accept the Lord Jesus as their

experience at Guantanamo Bay, where I spent three days touring the detention camps and saw detainees in their communal areas praying, eating and chatting. If I wanted to find out what life was like inside ADX, I'd have to head to the tiny town of Florence, Colorado.

Downtown Florence consists of a pretty main street where most of the buildings, dating from the late 1800s, seem to sell antiques and

In the Two Sisters cafe, old-timers wedge themselves into 1950s-style booths and lean over the backs of their chairs to gossip with friends. Bill Calmette is 72 and was born here, moved away several decades ago, but returned in the mid-1980s to look after his elderly mother. When they were building the prison, Calmette worked for the town's concrete company and hauled cement to a



Clockwise from far left: Florence gun-dealer Lonnie Lasha; Richard Reid with his modified boots; 'Unabomber' Theodore Kaczynski and his cabin. Below: most of ADX is below ground



TOP LEFT AND BELOW: DANA ROMANOFF; RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: AP; AP; RICK WILKING/REUTERS; APF

warehouse where the cells for ADX were being constructed. "They built them two at a time," he says. "Everything in the cell was formed from cement, including the bed."

Another man, who doesn't want to be identified but who is very familiar with ADX, tells me each cell has a two-door automatic airlock, almost impossible to penetrate. He says ADX is highly automated, with cameras and microphones in every cell. "Timothy McVeigh had a camera on him 24/7 when he was there, and the warden asked to have that broadcast directly to his office. There was no low-level lighting available at the time, so they had to rig the lights to stop McVeigh turning them off. He was like a 10-year-old. He loved watching cartoons on the television in his cell. He was always polite, but very immature."

Although ADX sits in its own compound surrounded by tall razor wire and guard towers, the low fence around the entire FCC complex has small posts a few feet apart, containing electric "eyes". Seen from the front,

it could be a hotel development — a low-rise, red-brick complex — and doesn't seem particularly secure. But this is the minimum security unit. Take the dirt road that loops around the back and rises into the hills beyond and you can see the razor wire encircling ADX and USP Florence, another maximum-security prison, glistening in the sun.

My request to interview correctional officers at ADX was turned down by the prison, so instead I contacted the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the union that a large number of the officers here belong to, and they put me in touch with three men willing to talk.

Jeff Johnson, Mike Schnobrich and Bob Snelson are all senior officer specialists and keen to explain the challenges they face looking after ADX's prisoners, even though they're forbidden from discussing individual inmates. Before we begin, Schnobrich shows me pictures of various "shanks" — weapons

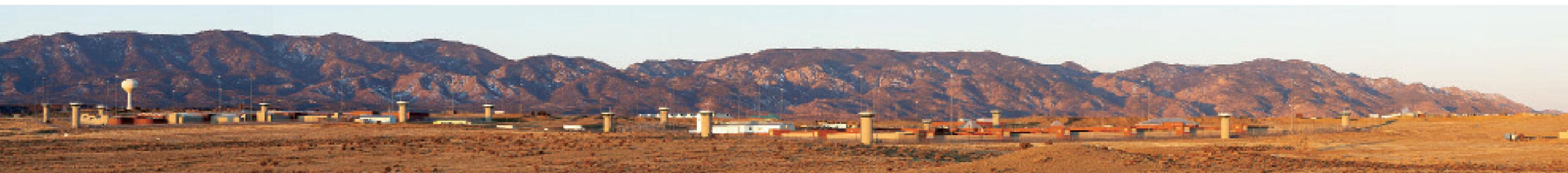
that prisoners have fashioned out of everyday objects. He says these are the types of weapons corrections officers deal with on a regular basis. Snelson says they've seen spears made from tightly rolled magazines and knives made from cling film, melted down, cooled until it hardens, then sharpened on the concrete of the cell. "It can get very dangerous in there if you're not careful," he says.

Johnson says inmates in the control unit are served breakfast in their cells around 6am. Afterwards, they are escorted by three guards to the recreation area where they exercise alone. Inmates have described this area as like a huge, empty swimming pool with walls 16ft high and steel mesh overhead. Inside is a bar for pull-ups and another for dips; nothing else. After an hour, they're taken back to their cell where they remain for 23 hours each day. There they shower, eat, use the toilet and sleep.

Johnson has worked at ADX for nearly 15 years and says he has some idea which inmates will give him a problem. "In our business one of the most important skills we have is communication. If we don't communicate with these guys on a level they can understand, the job can be extremely difficult."

It's possible to build a rapport even with these inmates, Snelson says. "Over the years I've done a lot of medical escorts, removing an inmate for dental treatment or whatever, and in that case we're taking them where they want to go so we're less likely to get attacked. Established gang members generally don't play up because it takes the focus off them so they can communicate better with their fellow members." It's the younger ones, he says, that cause the most problems.

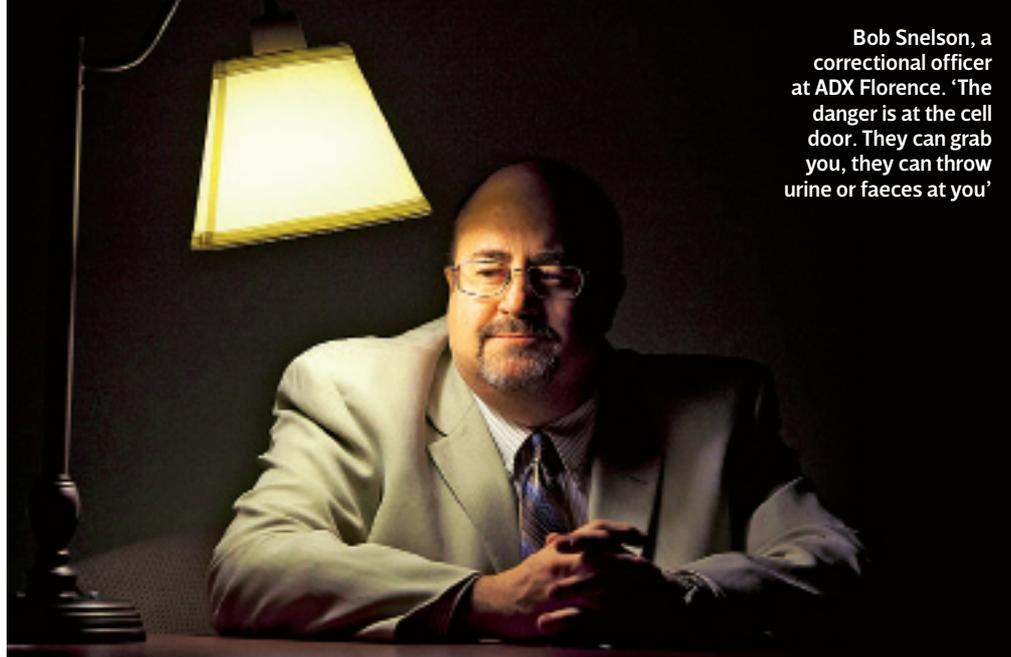
According to Johnson, Schnobrich and Snelson — big men who, it appears, ➤➤➤➤➤



would be able to handle themselves — one of the trickiest moments is when they take inmates their food. “The danger is at the cell door,” Snelson says. “You open a slot and have to physically hand it to them. They can grab you, they can throw urine or faeces at you. And this could happen a couple of times a week; sometimes months go by. But it happens.”

Johnson acknowledges that “big, explosive incidents” seldom occur at ADX. When inmates are in solitary confinement 23 hours a day and don’t ever mix with each other, they’re easier to control. But, he says, the accumulation of smaller incidents that happen daily — many of which the staff never report — can take their toll. “Just the feeling that an inmate wants to do something dangerous; the way they look at you. Imagine that happening eight hours a day, five days a week, for years. There’s no one in their right mind who’s going to say this wouldn’t affect them.”

Caterina Spinaris knows exactly how much this affects correctional officers. A counsellor, she has been treating prison staff at Desert Waters, her Florence outreach centre, for the



Bob Snelson, a correctional officer at ADX Florence. ‘The danger is at the cell door. They can grab you, they can throw urine or faeces at you’

father. A petty criminal, he was in and out of jail cells before he was radicalised by the cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri at the Finsbury Park Mosque and attended a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. On December 22, 2001, Reid attempted to detonate a bomb on an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami. A year later he pleaded guilty to eight counts of terrorism and a federal judge sentenced him to three consecutive life terms.

From 2003, when he arrived at ADX, until 2009, Reid was held under what is known as Special Administrative Measures, or Sams.

here longer, and while I don’t expect them to let me go to another institution any time soon, I’m not looking to give them an excuse for that.”

Interestingly, he claimed to have no idea what has been written or broadcast about him in the media. “I have only read one single article related to my case since my arrest and I didn’t see any of the early TV coverage as I wasn’t allowed access to TV when I was first arrested. I know that it has not been positive, but that’s to be expected given the nature of my case, and in reality I don’t really care what the media or others think about

‘YOU HAVE TO BE VERY STRONG TO SURVIVE HERE... THIS IS HELL’

past decade and has had to pick up the pieces. When big events do occur, they are dramatic. “Being covered in somebody else’s blood, having someone die at your feet, seeing people being gutted in front of you, or finding someone dead in their cell... it changes people,” she says.

Spinaris likens it to a war zone. “But these people are supposed to go home afterwards, act normal and go back to work the next day like nothing happened. It accumulates.”

If the corrections staff at ADX have it tough, what about the men interred there?

Richard Reid was born in Bromley, south London, to an English mother and Jamaican

In 2009, Reid went on a hunger strike and was force-fed by prison officials. Later that year, the Sams restrictions expired. Last November, before the prison denied my request to interview inmates in person, I wrote a letter to Reid, asking whether he would agree to an interview. To my surprise, he wrote back. Prisoners in ADX are allowed to write to journalists, but their letters are monitored. Although he said he had no interest in doing an interview, he elaborated on certain points I’d raised in my letter. He said he didn’t want to comment on his time at ADX, fearing “it will just end up being used as an excuse to keep me

me as long as I know where my head’s at.

“Obviously I’d prefer that the negative images be left alone, but even if the coverage had of [sic] been positive — which was not to be expected — I wouldn’t be interested as that’s not why I undertook the actions that lead to my current situation. So people are going to say whatever they want to say and all that remains is for Allah to judge both myself and them and His judgement and decision is all that matters and everything besides that is petty and of no real import [sic] or relevance.” Reid signed the letter “Respectfully, Abu Esa Abdul-Raheem”, the name by which he now goes.

I also asked to interview some lesser-known prisoners there — men who had already been given release dates — in the hope these, at least, would be granted. When the requests were turned down, one of those men wrote to me. He asked that I withhold his name, so let’s call him John. John told me he was being held in the prison’s control unit, mainly with inmates born overseas, convicted of terrorism. John is an American, convicted of racketeering. He says he has no idea why he is kept in the control unit alongside terrorists. Aside from the brief moment each day when ➤➤➤



Timothy McVeigh (left) and baby Baylee Almon (far left), who was fatally wounded when McVeigh detonated a lorry loaded with explosives outside a federal building in Oklahoma

correctional officers remove him from his cell and put him in the recreation “pod”, John has no human contact. Before he’s taken there, he is handcuffed, a “belly chain” is secured around his waist, his legs are put in shackles, and he is searched. He is then escorted by three officers, one of whom carries a weapon at all times.

“There is very little reason to leave the cell,” John writes. “Almost everything you can think of is in [here]. It is very high tech; for instance to communicate with the officers I have an intercom box. I just hit the button and they will answer. Any notices are posted on a closed-circuit television channel on my TV... It is what it is. Real tough. But I’m a man and I deal with it. I don’t complain.”

John’s second letter to me was 16 pages long and offers a fascinating glimpse inside ADX. He said there are two FBI agents from the Joint Terrorism Task Force stationed at the prison. “They are Arabic-speaking and monitor our outgoing mail and collect intelligence in the unit,” he wrote. “[Our letters] must be in English unless we can prove the recipient does not read English. It is then brought to an intelligence officer to review, then it gets approval from the FBI and then it goes out. The



Left: a poured-concrete cell will be home at ADX for Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (below, with burnt underpants)

separated by glass — and again they are monitored live. Even though you are in a secure room, you spend the entire visit in leg shackles, waist chain and handcuffs.

“Since I have been here I have literally seen people break and go crazy,” John wrote. “They just snap and self-destruct. When it gets bad the medical department comes and gets them and just ships them off to a prison hospital. You know what happened because the guy will just start screaming like he is being murdered. It will go on and on.

“You have to be very strong to survive this. The conditions we are under are just not natural. I keep my mind busy. I read a ton

botched robbery in 1987, and escaped from three previous jails before ending up in ADX Florence. He enclosed a page from the prison’s library list. Books available include *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez; *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row* by Jarvis Jay Masters; and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn — and *Fatherhood* by Bill Cosby.

McNair wrote: “I hate this place with all my heart and I kick myself in the ass for doing anything to get sent here. The problem is the lack of outside stimulation. One phone call a month if you are not on restriction. Only the sky to see of the outside world. No conversation. Everything restricted. Then there’s the noise; some of the knuckleheads scream for hours on end. No one should have to live like this.” Each night, his mail arrives along with his

‘I’VE SEEN PEOPLE GO CRAZY. THEY JUST SNAP AND SELF-DESTRUCT’

process takes two to four weeks.” According to John, letters from certain inmates to attorneys or to “approved” journalists are not inspected. A stamp on the back of the envelopes of both his letters to me confirmed this: “The enclosed letter was processed through special mailing procedures,” it said. “The letter has been neither opened nor inspected.”

His phone calls, which last a maximum of 15 minutes and have to be in English unless approved beforehand (in which case a translator monitors them), are monitored live by an intelligence analyst from the counter-terrorism unit. Visits, he said, are a waste of time. “It’s only immediate family. It’s non-contact — we are in different rooms,

of books, take correspondence courses. I do everything I can to ensure I can leave a better person than when I came here. But this is hell. I can’t say it any clearer than that.”

John said he thought that life at ADX must be stressful for correctional officers as well. Many, he said, were ex-military and this could cause friction between them and inmates convicted of terrorism. “Some of these guys are very young, just come back from Iraq and Afghanistan; seen their buddies get killed. Now they are in a unit with 100 guys who they were told were the enemy.”

Another inmate in the prison’s control unit, Richard McNair, sent me an eight-page letter. McNair murdered someone during a

evening meal. “I subscribe to *Field & Stream*, *Backpacker*, *Esquire*, *Atlantic* and *Men’s Journal*,” he said. “The library is really good. Every two months we receive a list of books available and the list rotates so we get a decent selection.”

McNair also said he had been waiting to see a dentist since May last year. “I made the mistake of writing ‘not an emergency’ on my request for a cracked molar,” he wrote. “And the only person I have to blame is me.”

Life outside the razor wire in this part of Colorado couldn’t represent more of a contrast to the austere atmosphere inside ADX. Patti Dangel, out walking her dog in downtown Florence, says it’s like two different worlds. She decided to raise her own children here because, she says, Florence feels safe. “They can walk to the library or play in the park without it being fenced,” she says.

Just over the road from ADX, Otis Medley inhales the mountain air and walks back inside his little church. Someday soon he plans to start building a house for himself and his wife on the empty land at the back of his acreage. And when they wake up in the morning, the Medleys will look out on to the beautiful Sangre de Cristo mountains. Not the prison ■



TOP: MARK REIS/COLORADO SPRINGS GAZETTE/AP; BOTTOM: REUTERS