

PRISON WEAPONS

DIY weapons such as these zip guns and shanks were confiscated from various Canadian prisons.



MAKESHIFT MUNITIONS A SERIOUS THREAT

Craig Silverman

When Barry Holigroski looks at a pair of ice skates or an oven rack, he sees weapons. When he sits on a couch, looks at a fish tank or reads a bulletin board, he can't help thinking about dismantling them to look for the hidden weapons inside. In Holigroski's world, something as mundane as a pencil reminds him of a full-out gang brawl when inmates at the Edmonton Institution, a maximum-security prison where he works, went to war with an arsenal of deadly sharpened No. 2s.

In prison, everything is a potential weapon. At the Edmonton Institution, Holigroski is the correctional officer who sniffs them out. Over the course of nearly four years, he found 515 weapons while working full-time at locating them. His colleagues admire him for it; the inmates, however, would like a clean shot at him for taking away their means of destruction. "I have like a sixth sense for finding weapons," he says, recalling the first time he was sent out with other officers to search for weapons back in the early eighties. At the time, Holigroski was close to completing his training to be a correctional officer. He and a group of recruits were paired with senior officers and sent into the Kingston Penitentiary to look for weapons and other contraband. "By the

end of the day, I had recovered more weapons than any other staff member," he says. "I found 11 or 12. I've always had an eye or a sense for finding weapons." Over the next 20 years, Holigroski continued to pile up more discoveries.

His unique talent eventually led a warden at the Edmonton Institution to offer him the unique job of finding weapons full-time in 2002. "When the new warden came in, everything was starting to come to a boil," he says. "Native gangs were running the general population, and we had a situation where we were shipped a whole bunch of Red Alert gang members and the Indian Posse wouldn't let them [into the general population]."

The officers and warden knew the gangs had been stockpiling weapons in preparation for a fight. The only way to integrate the population was to find and remove the weapons. Holigroski got the job. "In two weeks, I found 25 or 30 weapons," he says. "And the warden said, 'as long as I'm warden, you'll have this position.'" He continued to scour every nook, cranny and cell at the prison. Every time the inmates saw him coming, they knew that somebody—likely a few people—was about to lose their shiv or ice pick. The images on these pages are a sampling of the

TOOTHBRUSH? WEAPON. TOILET BRUSH? WEAPON.

weapons that correctional officers encounter on a regular basis. Some are crude implements, sharpened just enough to pierce the skin and continue on; others are shockingly advanced, from tiny handguns to carefully crafted knives.

There exists a tense and unacknowledged mutual admiration between the officers who prove adept at finding contraband and the inmates who are expert at fashioning and hiding them. Perhaps admiration is a bit strong. There's a grudging respect, though each party sincerely wishes the other would cut it out. That's not going to happen, so the game of one-upmanship continues. Inmates make more weapons; officers try to find them. In the process, some correctional officers stand out as the super sleuths of weaponry. At the head is Holigroski. Following closely behind is Jay McGinn, a correctional officer for 19 years who works at the Atlantic Institution near Miramichi, New Brunswick. He can't remember the first weapon he found, but he remembers the last. "It was last Tuesday night," he says, "hidden under the tip of a shelf in the common area. They had taken one of the metal bars out of a closet and broken it in half. They had sharpened one piece, but hadn't got to the other yet." He continues, "The inmates are pretty ingenious when it comes to hiding things and using different materials. Basically, you're talking about a population of 15,000 inmates across the country, and when they find a hiding place, they pass it along. We do the same thing."

Holigroski also calls the inmates "ingenious." "I remember doing a search and seeing inmates sitting on the couch in the secure TV room smiling at us like they had just won the lottery," he says. "I couldn't figure out why, so one day I took the furniture apart. It was metal and must have weighed 2,000 pounds. I reached in and found 13 weapons in the first chair alone."

At Holigroski's institution the inmates were once given bulletin boards for their cells. Within days, they had stripped off all the metal to make knives and ice picks. The filing cabinets in the office provided to some prisoners were soon nothing more than a metal shell, as every interior piece of scrap had been harvested, sharpened to a deadly point and hidden. The fish tanks in the communal areas, meant to soothe inmates, soon became a watery burial ground for all manner of weapons.

"They had a recreational skating rink in the prison," Holigroski says. "No one had a clue of how many skates came into the prison but we kept finding boots minus blades. Two years after the skates were all removed I was still finding skate blades... We had a scale in the gymnasium. One day, the inmates were complaining and saying they wanted to use the scale in [the hospital] because it didn't work. It turns out they had taken the balance beam out to make a weapon."

Toothbrush? Weapon. Toilet brush? Weapon. And don't even ask Holigroski about the implements that came out of the prison metal shop. "The weaponry was coming out of there faster than you could shake a stick at it," he says. The variety and lethal quality of weapons continue to surprise both officers. "Some of them are so well made, it's amazing," McGinn says. "I found nunchakus last week. I examined one zip gun that had

been found and normally a zip is just a steal tube to fire a .22 calibre bullet. The one I saw worked on batteries, and in the end it had a .38 calibre bullet. That's a big chunk of lead."

Almost a year ago, correctional officers held news conferences in five cities to highlight what they say are the dangerous conditions they face every day. The COs stood before reporters and cameras to display the bounty of mind-boggling weapons that they had seized from hiding places within the institutions they work. There were shivs fashioned out of once-dull scraps of metal from furniture or kitchen appliances; ice picks that could gouge more than six inches inside a victim; bolt cutters for a quick escape; and even handguns or zip guns that can shoot just about anything shoved down the barrel.

The media barrage was, of course, not just meant to inform the public. The 5,700 members of the Union of Canadian Correctional Officers have been without a contract since June 1, 2002. They want stabproof vests and other measures they say will help make their jobs safer, and they want a new contract. And so the weapons, once carefully hidden, were put in the limelight. Weapons that could have harmed a correctional officer were now being used to help them. "A weapon is a weapon—it has no conscience," says McGinn. "They could use it for self-protection one minute, then change their mind and stab another inmate or an officer."

The weapons have become more deadly over the years, according to the officers, who also say that inmates are also more skilled—meaning deadly—at using them. "In the last three years, inmates have started to go right for the heart and the lungs," McGinn says. "No more fooling around—when they get you, it's not to hurt, but to kill. These weapons range in length from six to 16 inches. You only need three to four inches in order to hit a vital organ. Basically, they're all aiming for money shots—vital organs."

Andre Courtemanche, Correctional Service Canada's regional administrator of security for Quebec institutions and a former deputy warden, says the type and use of weapons has remained the same and the overall level of security in institutions is high. "I don't see a very big difference between 10 or 15 years ago and now," he says. "It's always the same kind of weapons—a shiv or brass knuckles, for example."

He says that different institutions search for weapons at different frequencies—some every week, some every month—and that they hold a full inquiry any time there is an instance of violence. "We try to find out the source of the problem and what we can do to avoid the same kind of event in the future," he says.

One of the biggest complaints that the officers have is the weak punishment meted out to prisoners found making or holding weapons. They cite instances where prisoners who stab and sometimes kill other inmates get off in court and return to commit more violent acts. Courtemanche says any inmate caught with a weapon is sent to a special disciplinary court inside the prison. "It could be a fine or several days in segregation," he says. "If they do it again, we do a reassessment, and the punishment is heavier and the opportunity for the inmate to get paroled is reduced. We can also transfer the inmate to a higher-security prison."

Documents obtained by *CTV News* give an idea of the kind of fines that weapon-wielding inmates can expect. With the maximum wage a prisoner can earn in prison at \$6.90 per day, the fine for possessing a weapon is \$20, which is higher than the \$15 penalty for "a serious assault on a prison guard." "There's not much punishment," McGinn says. "They get five days in segregation and nothing after that [for having weapons]."