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# Inside the brutality of USP Big Sandy: Former prison lieutenant's plea reveals culture of abuse



United States Penitentiary Big Sandy

**BY ROGER SMITH**  
MOUNTAIN CITIZEN

DEBORD — In a case that exposes the violent underbelly of the federal prison in Martin County, a former lieutenant at the United States Penitentiary Big Sandy has pleaded guilty to conspiring to violate inmates' civil rights.

The plea reveals chilling details of systemic abuse and a shadow policy targeting inmates seeking protective custody.

Terry Melvin, who had served as a lieutenant since 2018, admitted Friday to participating in a violent conspiracy at the prison from early 2021 until March 2022.

According to court documents, Melvin and other senior staff carried out coordinated assaults on inmates, often under the guise of fabricated charges. The scheme, outlined in Melvin's plea agreement was a calculated strategy to inflict unconstitutional punishment while covering up the atrocities.

At the heart of the conspiracy was an “unofficial policy” crafted by the prison’s associate warden identified as E.E. and captain identified as M.D. Inmates requesting protective custody faced a grim choice. They could withdraw their requests and return to the general population or face false allegations of assaulting staff. These false allegations provided pretext for brutal retaliatory beatings.

Aggressors were often labeled and transferred to other federal facilities, clearing space in the prison’s overcrowded Special Housing Unit (SHU).

Melvin admitted to witnessing and participating in the assaults, which, according to his plea, were carried out with disturbing regularity.

One day each week, unofficially dubbed “staff assault day,” newly released inmates were targeted for violent beatings. During these attacks, Melvin and his colleagues used stock phrases like “stop resisting” to fabricate a veneer of compliance with prison policy.

One particularly egregious incident occurred in April 2021 when an inmate identified as J.B. requested protective custody and was taken to the lieutenant’s office. There, Melvin, along with other staff—including the captain’s secretary—viciously assaulted him. J.B., who was unresisting, was punched and kicked repeatedly resulting in serious injuries. He required hospitalization following the assault due to facial lacerations, bruising, rib pain and a concussion.

Afterward, staff staged photos of J.B.’s injuries, joking about his battered state and filing falsified reports to obscure their actions.

The plea agreement also exposes the culture of cover-ups ingrained in the prison’s operations. Members of the Special Investigations Section (SIS) tasked with addressing misconduct were instead destroying evidence and intimidating inmates into silence.

Melvin recounted hearing the associate warden instruct SIS officers to “clean this s— up” and “go squash” incidents of excessive force by staff. In one instance, an SIS officer reportedly bragged about distorting video evidence of an assault using a speaker, rendering it useless.

Senior staff rewarded the abuse. According to Melvin, participants in the conspiracy received monetary bonuses and promotions. In October 2021, Melvin and several other lieutenants received bonuses ranging from \$6,000 to \$8,000—compensation that came amid the ongoing brutality.

The plea agreement names Case Management Coordinator Samuel Patrick, Captain’s Secretary Clinton Pauley, Lieutenant Kevin Pearce and Lieutenant Ryan

Elliott. These individuals were convicted and sentenced in 2023 and 2024 but details in their cases lacked the full scope that Melvin's plea brought to light.

Other BOP employees identified in the plea agreement in addition to the associate warden and captain include L.C., C.M., D.B., E.T., P.P., L.M., D.A., S.H. and J.P.—implicating them in the widespread abuse and cover-up effort.