



Atwater Federal Prison Camp: A Description

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On 3 October 2011 I transferred from the Federal Prison Camp in Taft, California to the Federal Prison Camp in Atwater, California. This article describes my initial observations of the camp environment and the daily routine.

Atwater camp is the fourth federal prison camp where I've been confined since my long journey through the federal prison system began. In previous articles and books I've written descriptions of the prisons where I've been held. One of those [articles](#) compared the federal prison camps at Florence, Lompoc, and Taft. As I think I wrote then, I always appreciated the advantages of the prisons where I was serving my sentence. With each transfer, however, I found that I preferred the living conditions of my new prison better. This transfer to Atwater is no different, confirming the theory that prison is what a man makes of it.

One of the more unusual aspects of my transfer to Atwater was the manner in which I traveled. Rather than leaving Taft camp under guard escort, with my wrists and ankles in chains, I transferred via a furlough. That means a guard drove me from Taft to the Greyhound station in Bakersfield. Then I purchased a ticket, boarded the bus, and enjoyed the scenery as the bus drove north on Highway 99 past Fresno and into Merced. I stepped off the bus around 5:00 in the afternoon and made a phone call to the prison. A lieutenant from the Atwater penitentiary dispatched a driver to pick me up from the bus station.

Since I arrived after normal business hours, I spent the night in an isolated cell at the adjacent high-security penitentiary. The night in solitary didn't surprise me. Fortunately, the guards who admitted me allowed me to wear my traveling clothes, a pair of standard grey sweats. The cell was barren but somewhat spacious. I had a mat that I laid on the floor and a white blanket. The air was still, but normal room temperature rather than cold or hot. I passed through the night doing a little exercise, running in place and some strength training (as I have always done whenever I've been placed in solitary confinement). The hours I spent in the Atwater lockup were easier, however, because I had my sneakers, sweats, and my watch.

In the morning the processing began. Guards snapped my mug shot, interviewed me, and completed the standard paperwork that precedes every prison admission. At approximately three in the afternoon, a guard unlocked my cell for the final time to identify me. Considering the length of sentence that I'm serving, the guard seemed perplexed that I was being transferred to the Atwater camp rather than remaining inside the walls of the high-security penitentiary. He sought confirmation from a superior that all of the paperwork was in order, then escorted me out. He drove me outside of the gated penitentiary entrance and over to the open camp.

The Atwater camp is much smaller than the previous camps where I was held. The Florence and Taft camps each held more than 500 prisoners. The camp at Lompoc held about 350 people. Here in Atwater, I share space with fewer than 130 other prisoners. At this stage of my confinement, I find that I prefer the lower population level.



Housing Conditions at Atwater Camp

The housing conditions are an open dormitory, a prefabricated metal building with bare concrete floors. The industrial type ceilings are unfinished, just exposed metal trusses with hanging light fixtures and exposed conduit. An abundance of space between the floor and high ceiling absorbs the noise. It's like being in a large hall, or gymnasium.

We sleep on military style metal bunk beds. They are bolted to concrete floors, side by side with approximately four feet of space between each bed. Two metal lockers, side by side, are placed between the racks. The lockers, too, are small, about waist high. We're allowed to supplement our storage space with fiberglass boxes that we store beneath the steel racks. I am at a stage of my confinement where I am traveling light, so the limited storage space does not bother me.

The building is shaped like a short rectangle, with bunks positioned around the inner shell in a horseshoe pattern. In the center of the horseshoe, numerous round Formica-topped tables are available for table games, eating, or conversation. Three remote-control operated television monitors are fastened high upon steel I-beams that support the ceiling, and prisoners may listen to audio broadcasts through headphones and their personal radio sets.

We have two additional television rooms in the housing unit where approximately 15 people may sit. Another room has a television monitor, but it's an exercise room, with two primitive treadmills, one Stairmaster, two elliptical machines, and a stationary bicycle. I've used that Stairmaster while watching television shows. The crowded room also has an assortment of medicine balls and light exercise equipment.

A large laundry room is available with four washers and four dryers, so doing laundry rarely requires a wait. That brightly lit room offers a good place to study during late hours or the early morning when sleep doesn't come so easily. The bathroom is large, with perhaps 15 shower stalls, a sufficient number of sinks, toilets, and urinals. The urinals are of a modern variety that I did not understand at first because they rely upon some type of sensor to flush automatically.

In the front of the housing unit, offices are available for the case manager, counselor, and one officer who is rarely present to preside over the prisoners confined in Atwater camp. For the most part, prison staff expect prisoners to behave in accordance with an honor system. Not all prisoners comply.

Food Service at Atwater Camp

Adjacent to the prefabricated metal building where the prisoners live, is a second prefabricated building. It includes a chow hall that is large enough to accommodate the entire Atwater prison population. During my final year at Taft camp I had boycotted the chow hall because I could not stand what I perceived as the indignity and dehumanization of eating in the Taft's chow hall. Instead, I purchased food from the commissary and I prepared my own meals at Taft.

In Atwater, on the other hand, I do not mind eating in the chow hall at all. With such a small population, it's convenient. I've not seen a single man cut in line. The food is much better than what one would expect for prison. We seem to be on a cycle, but that cycle always includes chicken on Tuesdays and Thursdays for lunch, hamburgers with French fries on Wednesdays for lunch. The other meals are predictable for prison, with an assortment of hot dogs, meat loaf, tuna dishes, and so forth. For most lunch and dinner meals, a bar includes self-service pans of rice and beans. Breakfast meals frequently consist of oatmeal, grits, or farina. Sometimes we eat in the chow hall, other times we receive the meals in Styrofoam "to go" containers that we carry out



with us. It's fast and convenient, and the portions feel generous. Atwater provides the best culinary experience I've had in prison.

Recreation at Atwater Camp

I am a runner, so the track is very important to me. With the small population, the track is much smaller than at any other prison where I've been held. To give some perspective, I used to average about three and a half minutes to make a lap around the track in Taft. Here in Atwater, I run laps in 90 seconds. That was disconcerting to me at first. But I've become used to it now, frequently running in excess of two hours around the small track.

We have a few dip bars, and an excellent Roman chair for abdominal work. A small soccer field is in the center of the small track, and to the right we have a softball diamond. As in every prison, we have a basketball court though no tennis. That about completes the main outdoor recreational facilities, but we also have a supplemental recreational area behind the housing unit.

A tall gate that guards keep locked between six in the morning and nine in the evening encloses the housing unit. But the doors to the housing unit remain unlocked all night. Prisoners may exit the housing unit and walk around the interior of the enclosed gate whenever they are not required to be in their racks for count. The enclosed gated area includes a sand volleyball pit and two horseshoe pits. Prisoners use one wall for a handball court. I also saw some light exercise equipment adjacent to the housing unit. Several outside tables provide seating for prisoners.

Educational Programs at Atwater Camp

We have a large multipurpose area where prisoners may come to study in self-directed programs. I really appreciate access to the Trulincs email system. Four computer terminals are available to send email messages to family and friends. This useful tool enables us to stay connected with the world, though we pay five cents for each minute of access to the email service. I burn through a considerable amount of money using the email service at Atwater camp. With the amount of time that I spend on the machines, I expect to burn through between \$300 and \$400 each month on email. I deem the service worth the cost, as it prepares me for the challenges I must overcome upon release, and enables me to send regular messages to my wife so that she can publish content on my website.

Besides the room with computer terminals, two additional rooms are available for study. Another room is available for musical instruments. And a multi-purpose chapel is available for religious services. The building includes a few rooms where medical staff evaluate or treat prisoners, and a small visiting room, which I'll report more on below.

Another feature of the education department is that it offers portable word processors that prisoners may check out. The word processors have a memory. Prisoners may use the machine to develop typing skills, to compose manuscripts or letters. If they want to print, they may carry the small machines to the education department, hook them up to a printer, and print. They seem like useful tools.

The camp does not make a full time educational staff member available. That's fine by me. I have always found self-directed educational programs to serve me best and other prisoners may do the same. Soon I will request permission to teach a course on a voluntary basis.



Visiting at Atwater Camp

The visiting room at Atwater Camp is quite small and barren, but it's perfect for Carole and me. Although it's small, it seems sufficient to accommodate the population here. I have visited with Carole on every possible day since I've been here and I haven't perceived space to be a problem. That was not the case at Taft or Florence, each of which had to terminate visits on occasion. We have access to a few vending machines that offer the same type of cuisine you might expect in a bus terminal, but I've munched on that food for 25 years and so I'm used to it. More than anything, I appreciate the privilege of sitting beside my beautiful wife every visiting day between the hours of 8:30 and 3:00 in the afternoon. We discuss our marriage and the plans we're making to build our life together. Visiting days are Saturdays, Sundays, and federal holidays—without a points restriction. Children may become bored in the sterile environment; a monitor exists for them to watch children's DVDs, but there isn't an outside area for them to play.

Census Count Times at Atwater Camp

As in all prisons, we have several count times at Atwater Camp. The count times differ from what I have come to expect in other prisons. On weekdays we must stand for census counts at 10:30 am; 3:30 pm; and 9:30 pm. We may lie asleep on our racks for additional census counts at 12:00 am; 3:00 am; and 5:00 am. On weekends and holidays the counts are the same except for the 10:00 am stand-up census count takes place in place of the 10:30 census on weekdays.

In summary, the Atwater camp compares favorably to any other prison where I've been held. I now rate Atwater as the best prison where I've served time. I have found the staff members competent, friendly, and helpful. The prisoners seem relaxed, eager to advance through their sentences with the least amount of tension possible. It makes for a good spot at this late stage of my confinement. Should readers have any questions that I did not answer about Atwater camp, or any other, they should feel free to write me and I will do my best to respond.