

On June 6, 2015, two convicted killers escaped from New York State's toughest maximum security prison, Dannemora. What followed was an intense 23-day manhunt in New York's Adirondack mountains. This is the story of the State Trooper in charge.

Relentless Pursuit: Inside the Escape from Dannemora - New York State's Largest Manhunt

By Major Charles E. Guess, Incident Commander

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By Incident Commander
Major Charles E. Guess
New York State Police (Ret.)

RELENTLESS PURSUIT

Inside the Escape from Dannemora: New York State's Largest Manhunt



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ISBN: 978-1-64719-106-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2020

Second Edition

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GETTING ESTABLISHED

CHAPTER 1

NOTIFICATIONS

Saturday, June 6, 2015

At 6:06 AM, I was awakened by a phone call. As I groped for the BlackBerry on my nightstand, I immediately thought, *This can't be good. No one calls a troop commander this early on a Saturday morning just to chat.*

Answering the call, I was greeted by one of my subordinate zone commanders. "Major, Brent Gillam here. We have two unaccounted-for inmates at Dannemora."

"Unaccounted for?" I said. "What the hell does that mean?"

The captain continued, "DOCCS (Department of Corrections and Community Supervision) just called and advised that two inmates are missing, as of the 5:30 AM cell check."

"Missing," I repeated. "You mean escaped?"

"DOCCS is saying 'unaccounted for'...", he corrected. They think the inmates may still be hiding out within the prison. A search is ongoing."

To me, this seemed like wishful thinking, at best. By this time, my senses were firing and the captain had my full attention. Expecting the worst, I asked Captain Gillam, "Who are they, and what are they in for?" He didn't yet know. Information was sketchy, and while the prison was engaged in a full lockdown and internal search (aka "frisk"), prison staff seemed to be hoping for the best and attempting to minimize the situation.

I did not share their optimism and knew the clock was ticking. "Well, what are we (State Police) doing at this time?" I probed.

Gillam advised me that he had people "headed that way" and would be en route himself momentarily.

Good first step, I thought. Gillam, a highly competent zone commander, and former Academy classmate, had immediately initiated a response upon

receiving the preliminary notification from his subordinate sergeant. “Brent, I’ve got to notify Field Command. I want a full-scale response. Follow the plan. Notify the Border Patrol and our other LE (law enforcement) partners. Get whatever assets you need rolling. I’ll notify HQ. I’m on my way. Keep me advised,” I said.

With that, Captain Gillam responded, “WILCO,” shorthand for “will comply,” and we ended the call.

Son of a bitch. I thought to myself. *This is the big one.* One of those incidents you plan and train for, but pray never happens on your watch. Significantly, as the State Police major-in-charge of the 8,335-square-mile region of Northern New York known as the North Country, it was all going to rest squarely on my shoulders.

As in most states, the state-level Department of Corrections is solely responsible for inmate welfare, activity, and security while inside the facilities of the state prison system. But, God forbid, should a prisoner escape, the ensuing search then becomes the responsibility of law enforcement. Not that Corrections doesn’t play a role, they do, a significant one. In New York, DOCCS remains fully engaged and invested as partners, not only in the physical search outside the walls, but also integrating with State Police Investigators conducting the overall investigation into the mechanics of an escape and assisting with required interviews of staff members and inmates. However, make no mistake about it, once an escape is confirmed, due to law enforcement’s overarching responsibility for public safety, resources available, jurisdictional protocols, and the corresponding network of criminal investigative assets, Corrections rightly defers to law enforcement as the lead agency. In Northern New York State, an escape just 20 miles south of the Canadian border, in the heart of the Adirondack Mountains, would fall squarely on Troop “B” of the New York State Police, of which I was the Commanding Officer.

After hanging up the phone with Captain Gillam, and before saddling up for the ride north, my next order of business was to notify the Superintendent of the New York State Police (NYSP), Joseph A. D’Amico. Of course, the structure of the State Police (SP), being a paramilitary organization, would require me to make this advisement via the chain of command. While I would speak directly with the

superintendent countless times in the hours, days, and weeks to come, my first phone call was to my immediate supervisor, and future superintendent, Lieutenant Colonel George P. Beach II, the Assistant Deputy Superintendent in charge of the Uniform Force.

Even without much to go on, and knowing this would immediately raise more questions than answers, I knew bad news doesn't get better with age. It was essential that Beach and the superintendent hear from me before getting blindsided by some well-meaning staffer from the Governor's office. News like this would sky rocket to the top, and DOCCS would eventually have to fall on their sword and make "the call," when their internal search efforts were exhausted. The bottom line, no boss wants to get caught out of the loop, and should an escape be confirmed, the State Police would be expected to take the lead immediately.

I rapidly searched my phone's contact list for the colonel's number and pressed the call button. Observing an incoming call from me on his caller ID, a professional colleague and old friend from years in the State Police, Colonel Beach answered with a pleasant, "Good morning, Chuck."

I said, "Colonel, sorry to bother you so early, but Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora is reporting two unaccounted-for inmates."

"Unaccounted for...", he said. "What exactly does that mean?"

"Good question," I responded, filling him in on what little intelligence we had. I added that Captain Gillam was en route, and that I had directed him to initiate a full-scale response, in accordance with our joint, pre-approved plan and provided a quick overview of what that entailed on our end. The conversation was brief. Beach, also a former troop commander (TC), knew I had my hands full and did not want to delay my response playing twenty questions. He told me he would notify his boss, the field commander, and ensure Superintendent D'Amico was advised forthwith. Knowing that this would generate an overwhelming plethora of questions, I assured Beach that I would keep him updated and hung up.

Upon terminating the conversation, I observed I had a missed call and contacted Captain Bob LaFountain, my right-hand man in Troop "B", and supervisor of our Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI). I said, "Sorry, Bob, I was on the phone with Colonel Beach. What have you got?" He didn't

know much more than I did, having just received a call himself from a subordinate investigator, and shared my sinking feeling. I reiterated we were responding according to plan, and I would meet him at the Command Post (CP) in Dannemora. “Bob, we need to get the pedigree (physical description/criminal history) and facts on these two inmates ASAP. I just got off the phone with the colonel, and although he’s good for now, we’re flying blind here.”

Bob said, “I’m already on it,” and that was all I needed to hear.

Captain LaFountain, who had been the BCI Captain in Troop “B” for 10 years, knew the job inside and out, and was a consummate professional. I was confident in his abilities and figured my tactical and operational experience was well-complimented by his investigative acumen. Deep down I knew this mission would require everything we could collectively bring to the table.

By now, my wife, Elinor, beside me in the room where I took the call, was awake and dialed in. She had been by my side for the past 31 years of combined military and law enforcement work and knew intuitively that it was “go time.” She understood that hitting me with a bunch of questions, no matter how well-meaning, would be non-productive. Besides, at this point, based on what she’d overheard, she was as well-briefed as anyone in the State Police. So, recognizing I was faced with one of the biggest challenges of my life, she simply told me she loved me and wished me good luck. With that, I felt secure in the knowledge that her unmitigated support and quiet confidence in me would sustain me in the days to come, as it had so many times before.

The last thing I heard her say, as I descended the steps to the garage was, “Wear your vest!”

Driving north, I ensured I had the necessary communications established to receive and relay updates and orders. Communications consisted of the NYSP radio system, Division cell phone, and an old-school car phone, which often provided extended range and reception. Information would flow through an amalgam of voice, text, e-mail, and NYSPIN (NYSP Information Network) messages. Even with those bases covered, I knew there would be dead zones. Throughout the ensuing mission, despite

the numerous IT workarounds between law enforcement and commercial providers, such as Verizon, coverage and communications challenges would exist within the area of responsibility (AOR) that would complicate and plague operations during the search. But, for now at least, I had what I needed to maintain oversight of command and control remotely.

The fact that we were effective at all, during our initial response, was due to the application of a leadership model employing three specific factors. First, prior planning. The NYSP and DOCCS construct joint Escape and Pursuit plans, which are reviewed annually by key regional leaders to ensure effectiveness. Second, both agencies conduct regular drills, exercising appropriate facets of the response team, from boots on the ground, inclusion of special operations units (such as Aviation and tactical teams) and command and control for leaders and decision makers. Third, and *most importantly*, once these steps have been taken and the plan initiated, troopers, including their respective first-line supervisors are empowered to make fluid and appropriate leadership decisions in accordance with the “commander’s intent” (vision) for the mission. This, in my view, is the true strength of how New York State Troopers respond to evolving incidents. The fact that this leadership model was applied during the manhunt, afforded outstanding young troopers and exceptional non-commissioned officers (NCOs), the flexibility to get the job done, *and* created opportunities for successful outcomes.

Updates known as Situation Reports (SITREPS) came in sporadically. By 7:15 AM, the status of the internal search for the missing inmates was officially confirmed as “escaped,” after a steam pipe, and once-secured manhole cover, was found to have been cut. This occurred when a team of correction officers (C.O.s) and one of my State Police K9 teams completed the track of the escape route, starting within the walls of the facility and ending with the canine exiting the street-level sewer system at the intersection of Bouck and Barker Streets, approximately 400 feet south and outside the walls of the prison. What would later be described as an impossible, improbable, and first-of-a-kind escape, was now a confirmed fact. Two dangerous inmates were on the loose, and, as the troop commander, it was now *my* job to find them.

Just how dangerous are these two individuals? Information was now coming in via Gillam and LaFountain, and much more would be learned

about them going forward. However, at this early point, facts and photographs were coalesced into an APB (All Points Bulletin) and released identifying the two escapees as Richard W. Matt and David P. Sweat. Corresponding pedigree information was immediately broadcast as:

RICHARD W. MATT

Age: 48 (49 when shot)

Race: Caucasian

Height: 6' 0"

Weight: 210 pounds

Physical descriptors: Hazel eyes, receding black hair

Scars, marks, tattoos: "Mexico Forever" tattoo on back and USMC insignia on right shoulder (never a Marine)

Incarcerated for: Murder 2 – for killing his former 76-year-old employer

DAVID P. SWEAT

Age: 34 (35 when captured)

Race: Caucasian

Height: 5' 11"

Weight: 160 pounds

Physical descriptors: Green eyes, receding brown hair

Scars, marks, tattoos: Tattoos on left bicep ("Rebel") and "I," "F," "B" tattooed on three fingers of his right hand

Incarcerated for: Murder 1 – killing a police officer

An accompanying **State Police Advisory** was issued: *"Both inmates are considered to be a danger to the public. If located, do not approach them. Contact 911 or the NYSP immediately."*

"These are dangerous people, and they're nothing to be trifled with," New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo would say later that day, at a hastily arranged press conference on the steps of our Command Post, the Clinton Correctional Facility Training Building in Dannemora. As the public, would soon come to know, no truer words have been spoken.

In short order, we would come to learn the nature and most significant elements of their despicable Criminal Histories as follows:

Richard Matt - had been incarcerated for the kidnapping, robbery, and murder of North Tonawanda, NY, businessman William Rickerson, on December 3, 1997. After kidnapping his former employer, Matt, and an accomplice, drove him around in the trunk of a car for 27 hours, bound with duct tape, intermittently stopping to beat and torture the 76-year-old in attempt to extract money from him. Ultimately unsuccessful, Matt snapped Rickerson's neck with his bare hands and dismembered him with a hacksaw, dumping his body into the Niagara River. Matt then fled to Mexico, where he was later arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for the 1998 stabbing death of another American businessman. In 2007, the U.S. extradited him, to stand trial for Rickerson's death; upon conviction, he was incarcerated at Clinton Correctional Facility (CCF) in July 2008, where he was serving 25 years to life.

David Sweat - killed Broome County Sheriff's Deputy Kevin Tarsia, on July 4, 2002. Sweat and two accomplices had burglarized a gun store and were transferring weapons between vehicles in a nearby park, when they were interrupted by Deputy Tarsia. Tarsia, a 13-year veteran of the department, was shot more than 10 times, and was then run over by Sweat several times, before being shot in the face. Sweat and his accomplices fled after stealing the Deputy's .40-caliber Glock handgun. Sweat was tried and convicted of First Degree Murder and had been incarcerated at Clinton Correctional Facility (CCF) since October 2003, serving life without parole.

The pair was reported to be close prison associates and were last seen prior to lights out, at the 11:00 PM bed check. Given that fact, it became immediately apparent to those of us on the outside with the responsibility of finding them, that they were not only extremely dangerous men, with nothing to lose, but may have had as much as a six-hour head start. And, at that same press conference, I acknowledged the fact that, given the length of their head start, Matt and Sweat "...could literally be anywhere..."

As I weighed the enormity of the task in front of me, my mind briefly considered what led me to this point...

ESTABLISHING COMMAND

Racing north, I realized the odds were quickly stacking up against us, and we faced a truly daunting task. Two desperate men, with nothing to lose, were now on the run in the Adirondacks.

Twenty miles to the north was the U.S.-Canadian border, with New York State, and relative freedom, if they managed to reach it.

Fifteen miles to the east, Lake Champlain, with its various ferries and innumerable small craft ripe for the taking, would lead them to Vermont, where law enforcement would have nowhere near the resources to deal with New York's problem.

Along the southeastern exposure lay miles of interstate highway and active train tracks affording high-speed avenues of egress, if they could reach them. Not to mention, a surge in the vehicle traffic on the highways and waterways due to the increasing summer tourist population, ready to be exploited. These routes were obvious and well-known. All you had to do was look at a map, and you'd recognize that a pathway to civilization by way of Plattsburgh, the state capital in Albany, and eventually...New York City, lay before you. Furthermore, if you'd arranged to be picked up by an associate, hijack or steal a car, or reach the transportation hub of a major city by any means, that would open the rest of the nation and Mexico to the south.

Due south was the heart of the Adirondack Mountains, an area known as the High Peaks. An improbable, and extremely rugged cluster of 46 mountains all rising over 4,000-5,000 feet.

Last, but not least, was the area to the west of the prison. In short order, given a stolen vehicle, ATV, or even on foot, one would only have to travel a very short distance outside the Village of Dannemora before being able to recede into thick wilderness. This westward territory was devoid of most major thoroughfares, but replete with thousands of remote hunting cabins, or "camps," as they are typically referred to in the Adirondacks, well

off the beaten path, or grid. Most, well-stocked and suitably armed for the task, are only visited seasonally. To complicate matters, the proliferation of these camps throughout the region, many owned by correction officers themselves, was well-known by most inmates. While there is no reason, whatsoever, to believe information was intentionally passed, what is known, is that inmates surreptitiously eaves drop on the conversations between C.O.s, for even the smallest bits of information, which can later be exploited in a variety of ways.

So, it was this western quadrant, that while least likely or desirable as a route of travel, worried me the most. For it was here, that a man, or in this case two men, could lose themselves and avoid apprehension, if they played their cards right. I also recognized this region, as they all were to varying degrees, would quickly become a resource vacuum. No matter what numbers we assembled, and how technologically savvy we would become, our assets stood the chance of being quickly swallowed up and rendered ineffective, without efficient deployment and effective supervision.

In addition to the sheer vastness of the region, was the raw environment. For starters, the terrain was mountainous and rugged. Significant swaths of the entire area are dedicated wilderness, in its many forms, laced with swamps, bogs, lakes, ponds, creeks, and rivers. Bear, moose, deer, coyotes, turkey, racoons, beavers, mosquitos, and black flies populate the region in high numbers. Movement, while difficult, would favor two men travelling lightly on foot and tend to confound the hundreds of searchers, who could, at times, see no farther than two feet in front of themselves. Likewise, the thickness of the vegetation would afford the inmates immense overhead concealment, denying the visual observation efforts of our skilled pilots throughout most of the search sector, and routinely thwarting the infrared reconnaissance systems on board our fleet of aircraft. To make the search even more difficult, the summer of June 2015 wrought uncharacteristically inclement weather; it seemed that every other day we experienced torrential rain, wind, and ground fog.

As I made my way off the Adirondack Northway, near Plattsburgh, NY, I was within 15 miles of Clinton Correctional Facility, which is

located within the Village of Dannemora. A village of approximately 5,000, just 20 miles south of the Canadian border, where most folks work, or have friends or relatives that work in, or retired from, the prison. Dannemora's existence coincided with a plan to construct a prison in the wilderness of Northern New York in the mid-1800s. Construction of Dannemora prison, today officially known as Clinton Correctional Facility, commenced in 1845. It is New York State's third oldest prison, behind Auburn and Sing Sing, and was originally conceived as a result of a legislative commission formed to develop the use of New York State's natural resources; specifically, the mining of iron ore by convict labor. In fact, Dannemora took its name from an iron-mining region in Sweden, a reflection of its original charter and purpose.

The landscape is harsh and remote, but included massive ore deposits within Lyon Mountain, just west of the prison. Applied convict labor spurred both mining development and the simultaneous construction of the prison outpost itself. At the onset, the prison was little more than a 25-foot-tall stockade, cut from the wilderness, encompassing an area of about 15 acres, but this morphed over past 170 years into a fortress in the heart of the village, with multiple guard towers overlooking imposing walls that are 30 feet tall, and at least 7 feet thick at the base.

Historically speaking, Dannemora's past is largely defined by the purported conditions within those walls. Numerous governmental commissions, inquests, investigations, and legal challenges on behalf of inmates, depict a facility historically marred by accusations of torture, violence, and brutality. Despite decades of reforms, modifications to the penal code and the outright prohibition of corporal punishment, Dannemora continued its vexing reputation as a "Den of Horrors" into the beginning of the 20th century.

Over the years, vast, sweeping transformational improvements have been made, modernizing the entire prison system. However, as in years past, the correction officers are all that stand between society and the convicted, often violent offenders, who perpetrate heinous crimes. Notably, Clinton Correctional Facility is known to house the "worst of the worst" of those offenders, and managing this population remains a daunting task.

On any given day, C.O.s are subjected to the daily stresses of threats of violence, fights, risk of injury, gang assaults, and the intentional exposure to communicable diseases from thrown urine and feces.

It is precisely within this backdrop that the 1,005-member staff of Clinton Correctional Facility, the clear majority of whom are true professionals, found itself attending to the day-to-day affairs of over 2,700 of New York's most hardened criminals, men like Richard Matt and David Sweat.

The first sign I was getting close was the traffic backup. This was the first of several armed check points I would pass through, manned by shotgun- and automatic rifle-toting troopers and correction officers. Even though I was their troop commander, I was driving my assigned, *unmarked* Chevy Impala, and I didn't want to make their jobs any more difficult with any aggressive maneuvering to expedite my way through the road block. Nerves were on a hair trigger, so I waited my turn in line. The closer I got to the facility, the more activity I observed. Now, in addition to road blocks, every 50 yards, less in some cases depending on sight distance, stood a correction officer or trooper on post, lining the roads.

Entering the village, the walls of the facility along Main Street loomed larger than ever. I saw teams of law enforcement officers and C.O.s going door to door interviewing residents, checking garages and out buildings. The Command Post (CP) was located at the Clinton Correctional Facility Training Building, on the campus of the prison, just outside the fence on the south side of the facility, and it was humming with activity. I exited my vehicle and approached the entrance, which was guarded by two C.O.s, to maintain security. I was pleased to see that, according to protocol, they demanded ID. While force protection is a concern at any mass gathering of law enforcement, in this instance, it was more a matter of denying access to unauthorized personnel: the media, well-meaning civilians, and the occasional bounty hunter. Over time, abundant sensitive material, and numerous confidential briefings would occur here, which would best be safeguarded and presented to those in law enforcement with a "need to know."

I entered the building and was immediately greeted by a Corrections Emergency Response Team (CERT) member, who was going about the

business of briefing his people, handing out maps, updating a white board and issuing firearms. This encouraged me, because there was some semblance of order, but I did not see any of my people, or any member of outside law enforcement. “Is this the CP?” I asked.

“No, Sir,” the officer replied. “Down at the end of the hall.”

I walked to the last open door at the end of the hall and found three more DOCCS staff members, just sitting there, in what looked like stunned disbelief at the situation; still I saw no troopers. “CP?” I said.

“Uh, no,” came the reply. “End of the hall.”

As it was, the Command Post was apparently located at the other end of the building. Nothing had been placarded yet, and some folks just seemed to be doing their own thing. I quickly reversed course, walking past where I’d come in, in the middle of the building’s first floor, and set my sights on the opposite end of the hall. Arriving momentarily, I immediately saw the local Zone Commander, Captain Brent Gillam, the officer who had called me earlier that morning, plus a handful of troopers, deputies, police officers, and NYS Forest Rangers huddled around a chalkboard. Although there was no one from DOCCS (Corrections), I knew I was in the right place.

“Brent,” I called out. “What do we have so far?” To say Gillam was relieved to see me, would be an understatement, and who could blame him. He looked like he was up to his ass in alligators and could use the help.

“Major,” he exhaled, “...we have ALL of the check points established, most of the major roads staffed with Corrections personnel, our roving troop cars are mobile, and we’re starting to check houses. Oh, and Aviation is up!”

“What about the border?” I asked. He assured me, once again, that U.S. Customs and Border Protection (USCBP) had been notified once the escape was confirmed and that they were on high-alert.

“Good,” I replied. Captain Gillam had, in fact, initiated the entire response plan, as directed. [There were numerous other elements that shall remain confidential.] He was attempting to lock down the village and had boots on the ground searching aggressively, in an effort to prevent their escape from the village. Things were getting done...important things, but

judging by the lack of maps, photos, communications, staff deployment numbers, post assignment sectors, and agency representation in the Command Post, we had a long way to go. Basically, other than a handful of uniformed personnel at the CP, mostly troopers, there was no infrastructure, just a chalkboard, a couple of folding chairs and tables. Not even mug shots of our two escapees.

“Where’s the DOCCS rep?” I asked.

“They’ve been in and out,” came the response.

“That’s UNSAT,” I said. “They need to have someone in here at all times to affect coordination.”

For that matter, “Where’s the BCI (NYSP Bureau of Criminal Investigation)?!” I asked, although I did not care for the response.

“They’ve set up shop off site,” someone said. Adding, “They needed Internet access, and there’s none here.”

WTF? I thought. *How do you run an investigation without investigators on hand?* This was *not* Gillam’s problem, but it *was* mine. “That’s got to change,” I said. “How do I get there?”

An officer replied, “Not sure, I think you go down two blocks, make a right, go up the hill and...” *blah, blah, blah.*

“Are you kidding me?” I said, noting the separation and convoluted directions.

By this time, my entire staff, ten Troop “B” Commissioned Officers, had been alerted. An exceptional bunch, they were either coming in, or now planning to come in, for the night shift; a couple of them automatically postponing vacation plans. Additionally, we were standing up a Troop-wide response, in addition to that which had already been supplied by Zone One, Gillam’s zone. Clearly, the two escapees could be anywhere by this time. And while we had already put out a statewide APB, our folks had to be ready, and at the top of their game. At any time, a trooper 100 miles away could stop a speeding car containing our subjects, and...I couldn’t bear to think of the implications.

“Brent, how many people do we have on post here and now?” I asked.

He looked at a lieutenant, who had been assisting him with the deployment. The lieutenant said, “You mean altogether, ‘cause I have no way of knowing. Agencies have been kind of self-deploying.”

“OK,” I said. “How about just troopers? Where are they, and what are they doing?”

At this point, both the captain and the lieutenant looked at a sergeant who stated, “I think we have about...”

“Look,” I said, cutting him off, “...you guys have done a great job. I’m actually pleased with what I saw on the ground coming in, but now it’s up to us to get this thing squared away. I’ll be talking to the superintendent soon, and we must know *exactly* how many troopers we have here. On the operational side, he’s going to ask me what I have deployed and what I’ll need going forward. So, I need you guys to figure out our current numbers *definitively*. Lieutenant Boyea, I’m assigning that responsibility to you. In the meantime, Brent, get DOCCS in here and a representative from each agency that’s assisting. When I come back, I want to see a map depicting the search area, photos and pedigrees of the inmates, a staffing and resource plan on the board, enhanced communications, and an update on computer access,” I directed.

“In other words, turn this office into a Command Post. I’m going to find the BCI. I have plenty of questions for them as well,” I said, eager to get some answers.

“Aye, aye,” Gillam replied.

“Thanks, brother. See you soon,” I said.

Heading out of the building, I still knew little more than the identity of these two men, let alone who their associates are, who saw them last, who they’re talking to on the outside, if there are any stolen vehicles, did they receive assistance from prison staff, etc. All questions for my BCI. I had to find Captain LaFountain, the officer-in-charge (OIC) of Troop “B” BCI, ASAP. I stepped out of the building and called Bob.

“Major,” he answered, “I was just about to call you. The superintendent (warden) of Clinton wants to meet with us in his office, inside the prison. The Commissioner of DOCCS is here too. I’ll meet you at the front entrance.”

“I’m just leaving the CP,” I said. “Be there momentarily.”

As I exited my vehicle, my phone rang. It was my boss, Superintendent D’Amico.

“Chuck, Joe D’Amico. How’s it going up there?” I filled him in with what I had, advising him that my BCI Captain and I were about to head into the facility to meet with the Commissioner of DOCCS, along with the Clinton superintendent and his staff. He said, “Anything you need, let me or Patricia (NYSP Field Commander Colonel Patricia Groeber) know, and you got it.”

I thanked him and advised that we were still wrapping our heads around the number of resources engaging in the search effort, and that I would have a definitive report for him shortly. That assessment, and the situation on the ground, would determine my additional requests.

Over the years, I’d had significant dealings with Superintendent D’Amico, from my time as the detail commander of the Aviation Unit, up to and including granting my request to command at the troop level. A former standout deputy chief from the New York Police Department (NYPD), I knew him to be a straight shooter, level-headed, and true to his word. Solid, a “cop’s cop.” As for Colonel Groeber, I had known her even longer. A consummate professional, who had risen through the ranks of the State Police, serving in virtually every significant assignment along the way, to ultimately command all Uniform and Investigative (BCI) assets for the agency. There was no one better. I was indeed fortunate to have these two at the helm of the NYSP during this hour of need.

“One more thing,” added the superintendent, “the Governor’s on his way.”

Perfect, I thought. “ETA?” I said.

“He’s flying into Plattsburgh and driving from there,” he said. “Probably will be in Dannemora around 1:00 PM to 1:15 PM.”

I said, “Boss, I’ve got to tell you...the right things are happening on the ground right now, but the Command Post is a fucking disaster! I’ve already given instructions to rectify that, but we’re not ready for him yet.”

The superintendent did not get excited, “Well, he’s on his way. Just do your best, Chuck. If there’s anyone we have that can pull this off, it’s you.”

I said, “Thanks, Boss. I’m on it.”

Before meeting LaFountain, and entering the facility, I contacted Gillam back at the CP. “Brent, the Governor’s on his way.”

“You’re shitting me!” he said.

“No, I am not,” I replied. Get that place squared away! Prepare for a briefing for when he gets here around 1:00 PM. I’ll deliver it, but you’ll need to bring me up to speed, when I return from meeting with the commissioner inside the prison.”

Captain LaFountain arrived and I advised him of my recent conversation with the superintendent. “Bob, where are your guys located?” I asked.

“Right up the hill there,” he said, pointing past the western perimeter of the facility, “...At the OSI (Office of Special Investigations, aka Internal Affairs) Building.” We’re working with their investigators, and they have Internet,” he said.

“We’ll stop there next,” I said. “Let’s head in.”

The prison was in complete lockdown, but the front gate was expecting us. After securing our firearms, we were escorted up to the superintendent’s office. An antiquated facility, the small office was crammed with DOCCS personnel. At the head of the conference table sat “Acting” Commissioner Anthony Annucci. To his right sat, First Deputy Commissioner Joseph Bellnier, and other headquarters staff from Central Office in Albany, including Colonel Dennis Bradford, commander of the statewide Corrections Emergency Response Team (CERT). At the opposite end of the room stood Clinton Correctional Facility Superintendent Steven Racette, his first deputy superintendent, the deputy superintendent in charge of security, along with other ranking Clinton staff.

Over the next 23 days, I would work closely with Commissioner Annucci, Deputy Commissioner Bellnier, and hand in glove with Colonel Bradford; there would prove to be no finer partners in this effort. But, for now, after introductions, I was listening to the superintendent of Clinton, and his deputies, rehash how they thought Matt and Sweat escaped. On the wall and table in front of us, they had hastily assembled schematics and photographs of key areas along the route of escape. A captain or lieutenant, who had just walked the route, assisted in providing a description.

As we took it all in, I leaned across the table and asked the commissioner if he’d gotten word that Governor Cuomo was en route. He had and advised me that it was his understanding that the Governor would be

stopping first, at the Command Post for a briefing, and then he may wish to enter the facility himself.

This came as no surprise to me. Governor Andrew Cuomo is a very “hands on” chief executive. I had worked closely with him and his staff over the years as the major- in-charge of the State Police Aviation Unit, and knew that he preferred to make his own, personal, on-scene assessments, of natural or man-made disasters. Just his leadership style and hard to disagree with. Invariably, massive state assets would be brought to bear, and what better way to understand and orchestrate a response leading to a successful outcome, than to see for yourself?

With the clock ticking, an escape on our hands, and the impending arrival of Governor Cuomo, all of us had tasks to attend to. Consequently, we wrapped up our meeting and agreed to reconvene at the Command Post, in advance of the Governor’s arrival. Before my departure, I met briefly with the CERT commander, reiterating the obvious, “Colonel our operation must be in sync. I just came from the Command Post and people are headed in different directions. There was not even a rep from DOCCS stationed with the troopers. That needs to change forthwith, and I would appreciate whatever you can do to address that.” Fortunately, I was talking to the right guy, because Colonel Bradford made it happen and ensured that DOCCS and the State Police remained *unified* in our command, control, and operational efforts from that moment forward.

LaFountain and I exited the facility, but before returning to assess the level of improvements at the CP, we headed up the hill to visit the remote BCI lead desk. Characterizing it as remote, does not mean it was ineffectual or that it was not buzzing with activity; it was. The Troop “B” Major Crimes Unit, a superlative group of investigators responsible for solving many heinous crimes throughout the region, had commandeered the entire garage adjoining the Office of Special Investigations (OSI) offices and set up tables, run phone lines, and positioned Wi-Fi modems near the garage door. Perhaps most significantly, they had established direct contact with the DOCCS OSI regional investigators; this relationship would prove fruitful.

Right off the bat, Captain LaFountain described how Major Crimes was tying in to DOCCS, plus other troops and specialized units within the

NYSP. Additionally, our local law enforcement partners were being further dialed in and outreach had commenced to the Vermont State Police (VSP), our federal colleagues in the FBI, U.S. Marshals Service (USMS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. One thing about being a “border” Troop, after decades of inter-agency cooperation, Troop “B”, had deeply rooted connections, arguably the best in the NYSP.

Part of the briefing I received entailed a noteworthy development. It seems that in 2014, an allegation had been made that a Civilian Employee, Joyce Mitchell, an Industrial Training Supervisor in Tailor Shop 1, had been accused of having an “inappropriate relationship” with Inmate David Sweat. At the request of Superintendent Racette, OSI had conducted an internal investigation, regarding such conduct, closing it as “unfounded”; clearly, there was more to investigate here.

Mitchell became a person of interest, and State Police Investigators were looking for her. Relatively quickly, they’d learned the location of Mitchell and verified that she had checked into Alice Hyde Medical Center in Malone, NY, the previous evening (June 5), complaining of chest pain. Efforts were now underway to interview her.

While satisfied with how the Bureau (BCI) was progressing, they were “connected,” gathering intel, and issuing assignments to field investigators, they were still undeniably segregated from the Uniformed operational folks at the CP. In fact, during my quick visit, computer access was briefly severed, when someone inadvertently lowered the garage door. I knew this had to change, but we would have to create a suitable working space for the BCI at the Training Building before pulling the plug here and ordering them to relocate. I advised Captain LaFountain of my concerns and intention, so that he and his staff could adequately prepare.

This was my responsibility, and through experience, I had a definitive vision of what an adequate Command Post should look like for the growing multi-agency response. It would take time and coordination to establish the organizational structure *and* infrastructure for such a mission, but time was measured in hours, not days. And, the change-over had to occur *seamlessly*.

Two hours later, I returned to the Command Post, where Captain Gillam ushered me in, and I almost didn’t recognize the place. On the

chalkboard, Lieutenant Boyea had outlined our total staffing strength by agency and assignment. Two large photos of the escapees and several facility schematics and aerial photographs had been mounted. Additional desks and chairs had been added, along with a couple of phone lines, and some rudimentary placarding, identifying responsibilities. Perhaps the greatest achievement, was the fact that a representative from every agency, currently on the ground, was now located at the CP. They were physically present, which afforded me my first opportunity to address the Unified Command staff, as the Incident Commander (IC). Brent gave me a brief update on our external search and patrol activity, and coupled with what I had learned during my visit to our BCI lead desk, and the prison itself, I felt as prepared as I could be in that amount of time for the Governor's arrival. Gillam and company had indeed been busy!

By now, I was plugged into the SP Protective Services Unit (PSU) our version of the Secret Service, and was tracking the Governor's movement. I had friends in the unit who, knowing what I was dealing with, were keeping me well-informed. Minutes before his arrival, Commissioner Annucci and his entourage arrived in anticipation. As the Governor's motorcade pulled up alongside the Training Building, the commissioner and I walked out to meet Andrew Cuomo. The Governor, who earlier in the day had been on his way to the Belmont Raceway, intending on watching what turned out to be the first Triple Crown winning horse, American Pharaoh, in the last 37 years, before the situation compelled him to redirect to Danemora, stepped out of his Suburban in a blue blazer and khaki pants. The commissioner went first, greeting the Governor, and then Cuomo turned to me. I extended my hand, as he looked quizzically at me, as if to say *something's out of place here*, and I said, "Good afternoon, Governor. Major Guess... the 'new' troop commander of Troop "B". Now it was clear to him.

He made the connection and replied, "Hello, Major. You may wish you had stayed in Aviation." That helped to break the ice, and we headed inside.

As we proceeded down the hall to the Command Post, I noticed we were being preceded by a member of the Governor's staff, who arrived at

the room before we did. Apparently, as became clear later, the well-meaning staff member, had made a comment before we walked in directing, in sum and substance, “Anyone not assigned to a State Agency should leave the room, while the Governor gets a secure briefing.” Unbeknownst to me, that was all it took to lose the initial coalition of outside agency reps Gillam had worked so hard to get in the room. As Governor Cuomo entered and began shaking hands, one by one, several individuals representing the Sheriff’s Department, DA’s Office, and local police slipped out. By the time we worked our way to the front of the small room and turned around, only the State Police, DOCCS, and Forest Rangers remained. The room was still quite full, so, the changeover largely went unnoticed. I would understandably hear from those disenfranchised partners later, and I had additional work ahead of me – getting them all back to the table.

At the front of the room, the Governor, as calm and collected as one could be, looked at the DOCCS Commissioner and asked, “Just how did this happen?”

Commissioner Annucci provided a thorough overview and then turned to Superintendent Racette to describe the mechanics of the escape. After all, it was his prison. Racette, a 37-year veteran, an experienced, and by all accounts admired, DOCCS employee, stepped forward and described to the Governor the purported escape route.

In summary, Inmates Matt and Sweat, after leaving bundles of material (clothes, etc.) in their bunks to appear as though they were sleeping, had both cut rectangular holes through steel walls in the back of their adjacent Honor Block cells, in an area behind their respective bunks, gained access to the catwalks behind the cellblock, shinnied down some three stories to the bowels of the prison, broke through a brick wall near a 18-inch steam pipe, cut their way *in* to the steel pipe, snaked some 14 feet through the base of the prison’s 30-foot-tall wall, then cut *out* of the steam pipe, exiting into the sewer system under the street outside the wall, and continued another 400 feet south, in the direction of the power plant. Finally, they cut their way out of a chained and locked manhole cover, in the heart of the village, climbing to freedom and emerging at the intersection of Bouck Street and Barker Street, one block south of the prison.

As improbable as that sounded, the route of egress had been “confirmed” by a team of C.O.s accompanied by a State Police K9. Adding insult to injury, Matt and Sweat had mockingly left a sketch/calling card behind, a derogatory “Asian” caricature, attached to the pipe by a magnet, admonishing the C.O.s to “Have a Nice Day!”

Governor Cuomo had questions: Did they have help from or the knowledge of other inmates? When were they last seen? How long had they been gone? What tools did they use, and where did they get them? How could all the cutting and noise have been overlooked? How could routine cell searches and head counts have missed what must have been going on for weeks? How did they orient themselves to find their way out? Had they received assistance by staff? *DOCCS had none of those answers at that time.* [The mechanics of the escape, will be broken down in significant detail in Chapter 18.]

The Governor then turned to me and said, “Major, what are your thoughts about how we’re set up, and what are we doing right now?” I gave him a thorough overview, based on the efforts of Captain Gillam and his staff. The Governor seemed satisfied, for the moment, and it was clear his thoughts turned back to simply, *How could this have happened?* [I must admit, we in the State Police were immediately thinking accomplices, but would hold off on voicing that notion until we had better indication.]

Despite DOCCS official’s description and reference to building schematics and several photos of key portions of the route, the Governor had just too many unanswered questions, and who could blame him. He had to see for himself.

Resultantly, and in short order, DOCCS and PSU transported the Governor of the State of New York into a maximum-security prison under full lockdown. Accompanied by a core of key people from DOCCS and the State Police, Commissioner Annucci and me among them, Governor Cuomo was escorted onto the Honor Block, and taken right to the third-floor of A-Block, adjoining cells A6-22 and A6-23, where Matt and Sweat had resided until the previous night. During the walk along the tier, we passed within arm’s reach of cell after cell of inmates under lockdown.

To my surprise, it was extraordinarily quiet. I had half expected jeers and raucous behavior, but you could've heard a pin drop. More surprising still, was the conditions of the cells. As a State Trooper, I'd toured many facilities, as part of our joint-security planning visits, and although I do not claim to have a great deal of familiarity of conditions within the walls, I was stunned to observe that this so-called Honor Block, which apparently permits the housing of convicted "cop killers" and multiple-murderers, appeared to allow a very lax living standard. Within the cells, I observed inmates able to wear (certain) articles of civilian clothing, possess hot plates, electronics (not cell phones or computers) and allow a plethora of items to be hung from every available surface within the cell. Aside from the associated "reform" value, this, in my opinion, created the net effect of individual enclaves, where the occupants *and* their activities, were largely shrouded from view by blankets, clothing, towels, hooded sweatshirts, and the like. Now, I do not profess to speak for the prison system, but I will offer the following layman's observation. *No wonder these guys weren't observed cutting through their cell walls or spending nights over many weeks OUT of their respective cells, down the catwalks and catacombs, tunneling to freedom.* I couldn't even clearly see the back wall of many of the cells, or some of the occupants, as I walked by with the Governor.

"Somebody must have heard something," I heard the Governor exclaim, as he peered into the cells observing the holes cut through steel. From there we proceeded to the catwalk behind the tiers, where Sweat had gained access during the preceding weeks, and commenced rummaging around, reconnoitering the underground labyrinth of the prison, crafting a way out. Ultimately, this led us to the area where Sweat had been engaged in digging and cutting, which had been processed by my crime scene technicians in the Forensic Identification Unit (FIU).

Proceeding back outside to the courtyard near the Administration building, we were then able to view, from street level, a gated access shaft to a portion of the subterranean route, as it made its way under the asphalt leading towards the outer wall. From here, we headed outside the prison, and proceeded by vehicle to the now infamous manhole on Bouck Street; which had led Matt and Sweat to freedom, albeit temporary.

Upon arrival, we observed the manhole, taped off and guarded by C.O.s. There wasn't much to say, as we stared down into the sewer, some 400 feet south of the prison wall. My investigators were already conducting neighborhood interviews and looking for any possible CCTV (closed circuit television) from the scant commercial establishments in the area, all of which would be evaluated as soon as practicable. But for now, the Governor just shook his head. He had seen what he'd come to see. The "impossible" had occurred. Initial media reports claimed that in 170 years, no one had *ever* escaped from Dannemora. While that's not entirely accurate, there were a number of escapes and walk offs in the early days, remarkably no one had escaped from the main section of the prison since 1912.¹ It was thought "unthinkable." And, that was part of the problem.

Throughout the "tour," the Clinton staff had authoritatively described "how" they believe two dangerous killers escaped from their control. Now, they appeared spent, and could not begin to account for "why" it happened, on their watch. Good men. You couldn't help but feel for them. As I looked at the superintendent of the facility, I couldn't imagine a scenario where he could survive this professionally. And, now it was *my* turn. I had to do everything within my power to protect the public, find these two, and bring this nightmare successfully to a close.

After what seemed like eternity, staring at the final breach point, and with my mind racing, the Governor said, "Let's head back. Major, you hop in with me." In the vehicle, he asked directly, "Where do we go from here?" I provided a brief recap of what we had done to date, what additional assets were en route, my projection of future resource requests, an overview of uniformed search and containment tactics, and investigative strategy such as: interview priorities, phone/wire taps, prospective surveillance targets, accomplices, contractors, missing tools (if any), *and* our connectivity and compacts for assistance with other federal, state, and local agencies.

I wrapped up by assuring the Governor of my personal commitment to "follow every lead," no matter where it takes us, and "leave no stone unturned."

As we rolled back into the parking lot of the Training Building, the Governor turned around in his seat, looked me straight in the eye and said, “The State Police are in charge. Anything you need, you let me or your superintendent know.” I could not have received a clearer expression of support.

Outside the truck, the Governor resumed his dialogue with the key players. Acknowledging the growing national media coverage, including the throngs of journalists, and media trucks descending on Dannemora, the next responsible step was a press conference. Governor Cuomo set the schedule, and we all agreed to rendezvous at the front of the Training Building, at the agreed upon time.

In front of a battery of mics and cameras, the Governor himself led off. He confirmed, for the world, what many in the press were already speculating, there had been an escape from Clinton Correctional Facility of two convicted murderers. The Governor provided a brief overview of the escape, leaving the details to the DOCCS Commissioner, but added “It was an elaborate plot. When you look at how it was done, it was extraordinary.”

In fact, this was the first escape from the maximum-security portion of the prison, since the establishment and creation of the 30-foot wall raised in 1887. Furthermore, statewide, before this day, the last escape from any maximum-security prison in New York State was from the Elmira Correctional Facility in 2003. Thereafter, the Governor turned the podium over to Commissioner Annucci, who would then turn the podium over to me.

Accordingly, I described, without disclosing operational tactics, techniques, and procedures, our current resources on hand, acknowledging the multiple agencies currently assisting us in the ongoing search effort and those pledging cooperation going forward. I acknowledged the difficult task ahead, and the fact that the inmates may have as much as a six-hour head start on us, and that they could literally be “*anywhere*.” As such, I reminded local members of the community that we had no evidence that the two had, in fact, made it out of the area. I implored them to remain vigilant and to call us with any bit of information or concern, something I

would do countless times in the weeks ahead. I closed by saying, “We have over 200 law enforcement officers in the area with a variety of specialized units and equipment at their disposal. No stone is being left unturned.”

After each of us took a few questions, the Governor closed by expressing confidence in law enforcement and pledging his direct support and involvement at this crucial time, reminding the world, “These are dangerous people, and they’re nothing to be trifled with, and we want the help of the public.” After the conference, the Governor pulled me and the commissioner aside, issued additional instructions, including the need for frequent status reports, and reasserted his support.

Although I hadn’t let them “out,” thank God, it was crystal clear I was responsible to catch them. Most importantly, I felt profoundly responsible for the safety of every man, woman, and child in the community, not to mention the ever-growing number of first responders. I’ll admit to saying more than a few prayers for their safety and well-being in the coming days.

Turning to Commissioner Annucci, I said, “We’ve got work to do. What do you need from me right now?”

He said, I’m returning to the superintendent’s office inside the facility and would appreciate it if you could assign a member of your staff to the office.”

“Consider it done,” I responded. From that point forward, a ranking member of my staff remained inside Clinton to act as a liaison to the commissioner. This proved invaluable. In addition to regular meetings at the CP, anytime DOCCS had a priority question or concern, the State Police liaison was on hand to get or facilitate the answer.

Before entering the Command Post, I took the opportunity to call Field Commander Patricia Groeber and Superintendent D’Amico to provide an update based on the Governor’s visit. I told them the Command Post was taking shape, just in time for the Governor’s visit, and he seemed pleased overall with the State Police response thus far. In short order, Colonel Groeber advised me that a member of her staff would contact me to set up a conference call between me, the superintendent, key members of his executive staff, and my fellow troop commanders statewide. This

was necessary, to ensure our organization was dialed in for the burgeoning statewide response, but was more added to an already overflowing plate. I began to feel as though I was juggling chainsaws, and there is only one way to deal effectively with that...*delegate*.

Inside the CP I sought out the two individuals, I knew would become instrumental in building the successful fabric of a sustainable operation: First, my Troop Emergency Management NCO (EMNCO) Sergeant Chad Niles, an expert in all things pertaining to State Police response to emerging incidents, both natural and man-made. Second, Captain John Streiff of the Forest Rangers, a longtime friend and colleague, who had both the expertise to integrate the federally recognized Incident Command System (ICS) into the Command Post, *and* the subject matter experts (SMEs) among his rangers, to staff many of the key functional areas. As it turns out, Chad and John knew each other from years of working on a variety of incidents in the North Country, and both were fluent in the language and concept of the Incident Command System; in fact, Niles was an ICS Instructor.

The system, long utilized by firefighters and rangers, as a method of organizing an effective response against wilderness wildfires, had been fine-tuned, and became the national standard of response after 9/11, as part of President G.W. Bush's Homeland Security Presidential Directive – 5, to ensure federal, state, and local assets are properly organized to: *prepare for, prevent, respond to, and recover from* domestic incidents, in accordance with a universally recognized and systematic approach, designed to save lives and manage scarce resources. Although, law enforcement is trained, and depending on who you talk to, well-versed in the system, we didn't use it every day as part of routine patrol operations. As a former captain in the Office of State Police Emergency Management, I understood the advantages of ICS, if properly implemented, and the looming, multi-agency disaster, if ignored. In fact, I had seen ignorance or neglect of the system bite others in the ass before. Not on my watch. As the Incident Commander, I considered the inbound federal, state, and local assets a necessary force-multiplier, and ICS was the tool to manage them.

So, I corralled my two associates for a heart to heart. Both had already been working the escape throughout the day, and recognized, per-

haps even more deeply than I, as I had been tied up with high-level meetings and the press, what challenges and limitations we were currently experiencing. I got right to it, “Men, I’ve got a conference call with NYSP execs coming up. At that time, I’ll be making additional personnel and equipment requests. We have the beginnings of a Command Post established, but this thing is about to explode as we try to integrate the FBI, USMS, USCBP, and additional SP personnel. As specialized units from around the state arrive and we increase our aviation and tactical assets, we’ll need enhanced coordination to make our ground search truly productive. And, you both know, at the end of the day, I’ll have to account for each acre covered and every building searched; and I’ll have to do so with confidence. With that in mind, the only way to do this effectively and safely, is to fully implement and embrace ICS. I turned to the Forest Ranger captain and said, “John, can I ask you to handle that?”

John immediately said, “Yes, Sir.”

This was a Herculean task, and he knew it. It involved setting up the structure, manning key positions, especially in twice-daily operational planning sessions, managing logistics, facilitating daily briefings, and recording the operational progress of the search. As a member of another state agency, not within my daily SP chain of command, he could have waffled and given me a song and dance about being happy to assist, but needing someone else to be in charge, but not Captain Streiff. He readily accepted the responsibility and took on the challenge of applying structure to what turned out to be the largest manhunt in New York State history. I needed a partner with his expertise and commitment, and John didn’t blink.

I then turned back to State Police Sergeant Niles. “Chad, I’d like you to assist John with whatever he needs, *but* I need you to specifically focus on incident-wide SAFETY, across all levels and agencies, *and* facilitate the infrastructure expansion of this Command Post to accommodate all agencies; including taking over the second floor of this building for BCI relocation. I was blunt, “I don’t have time to worry about this, you know what needs to be done to build this out, including future field locations if necessary. Let me know if you need anything, or if you can’t break through

some layer of BS, and I need to get involved. As my Safety Officer, you have my full support and authority to speak on my behalf when necessary.

Next step was a long-overdue conversation with Troop “B’s” senior NCO, my friend and colleague, First Sergeant Steve Lacey. Steve, a seasoned professional and 30-year SP veteran, had busied himself throughout the day managing resources, deploying troopers, checking the perimeter and check points for post integrity, and ensuring what needed to be happening on the ground and in the field was indeed occurring. Additionally, he and his closest subordinates, the Troop “B” zone sergeants, were already knee deep in meal acquisitions and lodging requests to take care of our inbound troopers. This, the seamless feeding, lodging, and rotation of what would become over a thousand troopers and investigators, was critical to sustainment.

In addition, Steve supervised key functional area members of the command, who had crucial roles, such as: EMNCO Niles, Communications Supervisor Sergeant Chris Giovazzino, who was responsible for perhaps the most *critical*, if not most *difficult* tasks of keeping all agencies talking, by virtue of an ad hoc system of phones, computers, communications vehicles, etc., and Senior Firearms Instructor Mike Pena, who was responsible for a small group of Troop “B” patrol riflemen, responding to virtually every key sighting, affording command tactical feedback and continuity of operations. All self-starters, who required little oversight, but Steve recognized if *any* of these SMEs missed their targets, the operation would collapse under its own weight and cease to be effective.

First Sergeant Lacey made sure that did not happen.

Finally, before focusing on the upcoming conference call, I took an opportunity to brief the assembled Command Post staff. It had taken us a while to recall the agency reps, and while we didn’t have all the initial players back yet, who had unfortunately been asked to step out of the previous briefing, we did have a representative from every agency on the ground at the time. Thus, it was time to introduce myself to those I had not previously addressed.

From past experience, I knew it was essential that we set a collaborative tone from the start. Yes, it was important to have a chain of command

and I was the Incident Commander, but more importantly, it was critical that we established the *unified* nature of this command from the onset. While I would assume full responsibility, the team would make collective decisions with the best interest of safety and success of the search effort in mind. To that end, it was imperative we embrace ICS, and efforts were currently underway to transition into a viable *Unified Command* structure, led by the Forest Rangers. Additionally, we sought to establish the commensurate infrastructure to accommodate growth and efficiency.

I asked for and acknowledged input regarding closing existing gaps, and Captain Streiff posted a future planning and meeting schedule, confirming an Incident Action Plan was under construction. I reiterated ALL operations would be coordinated out of the CP, with special consideration given to preventing *Blue vs. Blue* (friendly fire) incidents. Additionally, all future tactical (SWAT) and aviation operations would now be coordinated through a special operations branch director. Additionally, I acknowledged the essential requirement that past, current, and future search efforts be cataloged and recorded to ensure our efforts are meaningful, productive, and defensible.

Furthermore, it was stated that we would have open communications, recognizing the vitality of input and candor required for productive, safe operations. In furtherance of this objective, it was not simply requested that every agency have a seat at the table, regardless of size, it was *expected*. In this way, and this way only, could each organization have input and access to the latest information driving operations. True, from time to time, specific, *sensitive*, pieces of information may be developed, that only investigators or key decision makers would be privy to, but that was necessary to preserve the integrity of investigative leads and targets. However, that concept should be nothing new, as all law enforcement entities are familiar with these investigative protocols. Again, to ensure the *safety* of all personnel and ensure coordination of effort, ALL agency representatives were afforded *unfettered* access to the Command Post and daily operational briefings. Only the most *sensitive* of information was withheld, under the direction and authority of the Superintendent of the New York State Police.

The mission was straight forward. The expeditious apprehension of two escaped killers, while ensuring the health and safety of members of the community and assigned law enforcement. That remained our mandate throughout the entire operation; on that, there was *unanimous* agreement. I wrapped it up by thanking everyone for their quick response and efforts to date, and introduced the Incident Safety Officer, as safety was of paramount concern. I then excused myself, knowing I had to attend the SP conference call in five minutes.

At approximately 5:00 PM, I, along with my key staff, dialed in from the only working landline speaker phone available to me at the time. Six or seven of us crammed into a one-desk office, like it was “clown car” and listened for Colonel Groeber, the Field Commander, to kick off the meeting. After ensuring the superintendent was on the line and brief introductions, she turned the call over to me. I prepared to bring my colleagues up to speed on what we knew, and where we were, to date. Much had transpired since that 6:06 AM phone call, and while we had made some progress, we had a long way to go.

Of significant interest to all involved, was the timing of the escape, just after midnight early that morning, and the fact that the inmates were *not* discovered missing until 5:30 AM and confirmed escaped until 7:15 AM. That afforded Matt and Sweat a minimum six-hour head start, and the two of them could be headed towards, or passing through, the adjacent territories of my fellow troop commanders as we spoke. Accordingly, each troop had been put on high alert earlier in the day and a corresponding BCI Lead Desk stood up. Effectively, what that meant was, any sighting or information called in regarding this escape would be handled by a dedicated team of investigators in the Troop where reported and then investigated, documented, and forwarded to the Troop “B” Lead Desk in Dannemora, for review and continuity of investigation. For example, a lead was developed in Troop “D”, an adjacent troop, regarding an alleged sighting at a McDonald’s in Oswego, NY. Information gathered indicated a food service employee had seen the photos of the inmates in the media and claimed two men matching their description had just ordered a meal together at the restaurant. Investigators reviewing in-store closed-

circuit camera footage agreed that the grainy, profile stills looked a lot like our two guys. As a result, a brief, but significant undertaking was underway to investigate this development to confirm or deny its efficacy. Ultimately, investigators located the two persons of interest and ruled out any connection. Similar sightings, many from credible, ordinary citizens, would be repeated countless times over the next 23 days. They ran the gambit of individual(s) of similar description reportedly: walking down the road, along railroad tracks, on ferries, on buses, at the border, in NYC, hiking the Adirondack Mountains, occupying camps and cabins throughout the Northeast, even knocking on doors in neighboring states because of a disabled vehicle, etc. And, *each one* of them, had to be investigated and ruled out.

Over all, throughout the entirety of the investigation, over 3,400 leads would be handled by the NYSP, and its law enforcement partners, and cataloged by us in Troop “B”.

The conversation wrapped up with an overview provided by my BCI Captain, as to what we had gleaned from interviewing Joyce Mitchell, which wasn’t much at that point. Mitchell had checked herself out of the hospital that morning, and came to the State Police barracks in Malone, after learning that we were attempting to locate her. Beginning at about 1:00 PM, she was interviewed. Mitchell was evasive, and we knew she was lying. With little to go on, we left her “*out there*,” so we could surveil her, develop the case, and interview her further.

We also knew from DOCCS: Mitchell, as all employees, had received repetitive training regarding resisting inmate’s attempts to find out personal info, exploit, and manipulate prison workers. Essentially, maintain a professional distance and don’t reveal personal details that could be used to compromise you, as inmates readily threaten to expose C.O.s, and Civilian Employees, for violating prison rules or protocols.

The conference call then concluded, with several of my fellow troop commanders later contacting me to wish me luck and pledge their support.

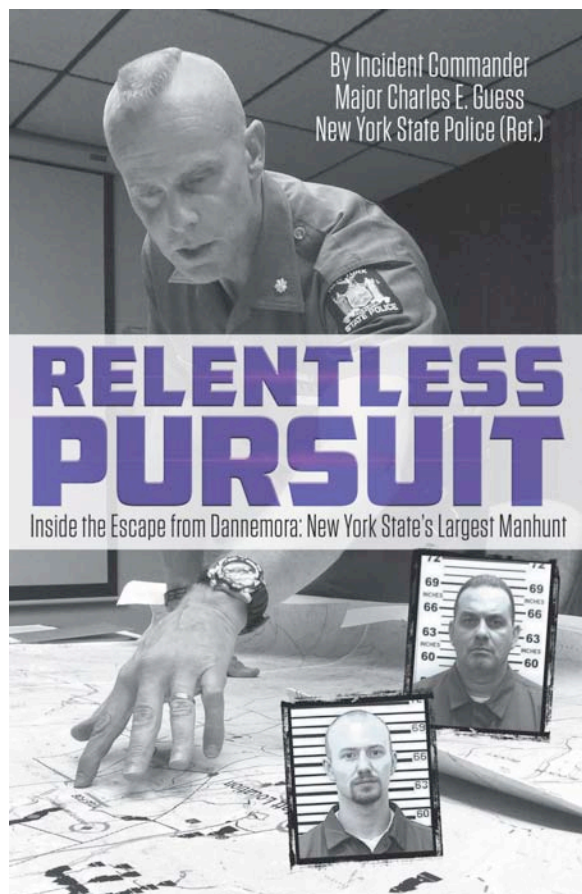
Later that evening, Captain LaFountain and I returned to the Clinton superintendent’s office inside the prison. The purpose was as much a recap, between DOCCS and the State Police, as it was to generate the first

joint update to the Governor's office. Commissioner Annucci dictated several tenets of Corrections developments. As of close of business: The lockdown was still in place, key staff and inmates were being interviewed, some moved from their respective assignments or cells, a facility-wide search (frisk) of all critical infrastructure and cells was being completed, and a comprehensive tool inventory underway. A lot of work. Then, I and Captain LaFountain, contributed bullets regarding the numbers of officers and assets on hand and deployed, the results of initial door-to-door searches, a description of the "perimeter," anticipated challenges going forward, the results of joint staff and inmate interviews with OSI..., etc.

We kept the message brief, agreed on its contents and DOCCS fired it off to the Governor's office at about 1:00 AM. I forwarded a duplicate to Superintendent D'Amico and Colonel Groeber almost simultaneously. Acknowledging the ongoing, 24/7 nature of the search, it was wisely concluded at this point, that each of us needed to get a few hours of rest, to be able to maintain this pace.

I got in my car, under a combination of the very bright lights of the prison and the additional construction lights we had erected lining the village streets, and headed out of town. Compared to the morning, the perimeter staffing appeared to have doubled since my ride in. Dannemora appeared "under siege" by law enforcement, and for good reason...the safety of those working the escape, and all residing in the area.

As I headed back to Ray Brook, for what I hoped would be a couple of hours of sleep, I began to wonder, *Am I truly prepared for the task ahead?* For most of the hour-long drive back to my room at Troop HQ, there is no cell coverage. So, like it or not, this afforded me ample opportunity to be alone with my thoughts. My mind was racing, as I assessed the training, professional development, and *skill set* I had developed over the last 25 years with the New York State Police.



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