
No Time For Goodbyes - Phiber Optik's Journey to Prison

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Subject: File 1--No Time For Goodbyes - Phiber Optik's Journey to Prison

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It was almost like looking forward to something. That's the feeling we all had as we started out on Thursday evening, January 6th - one day before Phiber Optik (hereafter called Mark) was to report to federal prison in Schuylkill, Pennsylvania for his undefined part in an undefined conspiracy. We were all hackers of one sort or another and this trip to a prison was actually a sort of adventure for us. We knew Mark's curiosity had been piqued as well, though not to the point of outweighing the dread of the unknown and the emotional drain of losing a year of life with friends, family, and technology.

There were five of us who would take the trip down to Philadelphia in a car meant for four - myself, Mark, Walter, Roman, and Rob. The plan was to meet up with 2600 people in Philadelphia on Thursday, drive out to Schuylkill and drop Mark off on Friday, drive back and go to the Philadelphia 2600 meeting, and return later that evening. It sure sounded better than sending him away on a prison bus.

Knocking on the door of his family's house in Queens that frigid night, a very weird feeling came over me. How many times had I stood there before to take Mark to a conference, a hacker meeting, a radio show, whatever. Today I was there to separate him from everything he knew. I felt like I had somehow become part of the process, that I was an agent of the government sent there to finish the dirty work that they had begun. It doesn't take a whole lot to join the gestapo, I realized.

I talked to Mark's father for the very first time that night. I had chatted with his mother on a number of occasions but never his father before then. He was putting on as brave a front as he could, looking at any glimmer of optimism as the shape reality would take. The prison wouldn't be that bad, he would be treated like a human being, they'd try to visit on the weekends, and anything else that could help make this seem like an extended vacation. As long as he learns to keep his mouth shut and not annoy anyone, he'll be all right. Of course, we both knew full well that Mark's forthright approach *always* managed to annoy somebody, albeit usually only until they got to know him a little. Imagining Mark fading into the background just wasn't something we could do.

Everything in Mark's room was neatly arranged and ready to greet him upon his return - his computer, manuals, a videotape of "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" with extra footage that a friend had sent him (I convinced him to let me borrow it), a first edition of "Hackers" that Steven Levy had just given him, and tons of other items that could keep anyone occupied for hours. In fact, he was occupied when I got there - he and Walter were trying to solve a terminal emulation problem. My gestapo duties forced me to get him going. It was getting late and we had to be in Philadelphia at a reasonable time, especially since it was supposed to start snowing at any moment. And so, the final goodbyes were said - Mark's mother was especially worried that he might forget part of his medication or that they'd have difficulty getting him refills. (In fact, everyone involved in his case couldn't understand why Mark's serious health problems had never been mentioned during the whole ordeal or considered during sentencing.) The rest of us waited in the car so he could have some final moments of privacy and also so we wouldn't have to pretend to smile while watching a family being pulled apart in front of us, all in the name of sending a message to other hackers.

Our drive was like almost any other. We talked about the previous night's radio show, argued about software, discussed nuances of Star Trek, and managed to get lost before we even left New York. (Somehow we couldn't figure out how the BQE southbound connected with the Verrazano Bridge which led to an extended stay in Brooklyn.) We talked about ECHO, the system that Mark has been working on over the past year and

how, since Wednesday, a couple of dozen users had changed their last names to Optik as a tribute. It meant a lot to him.

When you're in a car with five hackers, there's rarely any quiet moments and the time goes by pretty quickly. So we arrived in Philadelphia and (after getting lost again) found our way to South Street and Jim's Cheesesteaks, a place I had always wanted to take Mark to, since he has such an affinity to red meat. Jim's is one of my favorite places in the world and we soon became very comfortable there. We met up with Bernie S. and some of the other Philadelphia hackers and had a great time playing with laptops and scanners while eating cheesesteaks. The people at Jim's were fascinated by us and asked all kinds of questions about computers and things. We've had so many gatherings like this in the past, but it was pretty cool to just pull into a strange city and have it happen again. The karma was good.

We wound up back at Bernie S.'s house where we exchanged theories and experiences of our various cable and phone companies, played around with scanners, and just tried to act like everything was as normal as ever. We also went to an all-night supermarket to find Pennsylvania things: TastyKakes, Pennsylvania Dutch pretzels, and pickles that we found out were really from Brooklyn. We managed to confuse the hell out of the bar code reader by passing a copy of 2600 over it - the system hung for at least a minute!

It was around five in the morning when one of us finally asked the question: "Just when exactly does Mark have to be at this prison?" We decided to call them right then and there to find out. The person answering the phone was nice enough - she said he had until 11:59 pm before he was considered a fugitive. This was very good news - it meant a few more hours of freedom and Mark was happy that he'd get to go to the Philadelphia meeting after all. As we drifted off to sleep with the sun rising, we tried to outdo each other with trivial information about foreign countries. Mark was particularly good with obscure African nations of years past while I was the only one who knew what had become of Burma. All told, not a bad last day.

Prison Day arrived and we all got up at the same moment (2:03 pm) because Bernie S. sounded an airhorn in the living room. Crude, but effective.

As we recharged ourselves, it quickly became apparent that this was a very bizarre day. During the overnight, the entire region had been paralyzed by a freak ice storm - something I hadn't seen in 16 years and most of the rest of us had never experienced. We turned on the TV - interstates were closed, power was failing, cars were moving sideways, people were falling down.... This was definitely cool. But what about Mark? How could we get him to prison with roads closed and treacherous conditions everywhere? His prison was about two hours away in the direction of wilderness and mining towns. If the city was paralyzed, the sticks must be amputated entirely!

So we called the prison again. Bernie S. did the talking, as he had done the night before. This time, he wound up getting transferred a couple of times. They weren't able to find Mark's name anywhere. But that good fortune didn't last - "Oh yeah, I know who you're talking about," the person on the phone said. Bernie explained the situation to them and said that the State Troopers were telling people not to travel. So what were we to do? "Well," the friendly-sounding voice on the other end said, "just get here when you can get here." We were overjoyed. Yet more freedom for Mark all because of a freak of nature! I told Bernie that he had already been more successful than Mark's lawyer in keeping him out of prison.

We spent the afternoon getting ready for the meeting, watching The Weather Channel, and consuming tea and TastyKakes in front of a roaring fire. At one point we turned to a channel that was hawking computer education videos for kids. "These children," the fake schoolteacher was saying with equally fake enthusiasm, "are going to be at such an advantage because they're taking an early interest in computers." "Yeah," we heard Mark say with feigned glee from another room, "they may get to experience *prison* for a year!"

It took about 45 minutes to get all of the ice off our cars. Negotiating hills and corners became a matter of great concern. But we made it to the meeting, which took place in the middle of 30th Street Station, where all of the Amtrak trains were two and a half hours late. Because of the weather, attendance was less than usual but the people that showed up were enthusiastic and glad to meet Phiber Optik as he passed by on his way up the river.

After the meeting we found a huge tunnel system to explore, complete with steampipes and "Poseidon Adventure" rooms. Everywhere we went, there were corridors leading to new mysteries and strange sights. It

was amazing to think that the moment when everybody figured Mark would be in prison, here he was with us wandering around in the bowels of a strange city. The karma was great.

But then the real fun began. We decided to head back to South Street to find slow food - in fact, what would probably be Mark's last genuine meal. But Philadelphia was not like New York. When the city is paralyzed, it really is paralyzed. Stores close and people stay home, even on a Friday night. We wanted to take him to a Thai place but both of the ones we knew of were closed. We embarked on a lengthy search by foot for an open food place. The sidewalks and the streets were completely encased in ice. Like drunken sailors in slow motion, we all staggered down the narrow streets, no longer so much concerned with food, but just content to remain upright. People, even dogs, were slipping and falling all around us. We did our best to maintain dignity but hysterical laughter soon took over because the situation was too absurd to believe. Here we were in a strange city, unable to stand upright in a veritable ice palace, trying to figure out a way to get one of our own into a prison. I knew it was going to be a strange trip but this could easily beat any drug.

We ate like kings in a Greek place somewhere for a couple of hours, then walked and crawled back to the cars. The plan now was to take Mark to prison on Saturday when hopefully the roads would be passable. Actually, we were all hoping this would go on for a while longer but we knew it had to end at some point. So, after a stop at an all-night supermarket that had no power and was forced to ring up everything by hand, we made it back to Bernie's for what would really be Mark's last free night. It was well after midnight and Mark was now officially late for prison. (Mark has a reputation for being late to things but at least this time the elements could take the blame.) We wound up watching the "Holy Grail" videotape until it was practically light again. One of the last things I remember was hearing Mark say how he wanted to sleep as little as possible so he could be awake and free longer.

We left Bernie's late Saturday afternoon. It was sad because the aura had been so positive and now it was definitely ending. We were leaving the warmth of a house with a fireplace and a conversation pit, journeying into the wild and the darkness with wind chill factors well below zero. And this time, we weren't coming back.

We took two cars - Bernie and Rob in one; me, Mark, Walter, and Roman in the other. We kept in touch with two way radios which was a very good idea considering the number of wrong turns we always manage to make. We passed through darkened towns and alien landscapes, keeping track of the number of places left to go through. We found a convenience store that had six foot tall beef jerky and Camel Light Wides. Since Mark smokes Camel Lights (he had managed to quit but all of the stress of the past year has gotten him right back into it), and since he had never heard of the wide version, I figured he'd like to compare the two, so I bought him a pack. I never buy cigarettes for anyone because I can't stand them and I think they're death sticks but in this case I knew they'd be therapeutic. As we stood out there in the single digits - him with his Wides, me with my iced tea - he said he could definitely feel more smoke per inch. And, for some reason, I was glad to hear it.

Minersville was our final destination but we had one more town to pass through - Frackville. Yeah, no shit. It was the final dose of that magical karma we needed. As we looked down the streets of this tiny town, we tried to find a sign that maybe we could take a picture of, since nobody would ever believe us. We pulled up to a convenience store as two cops were going in. And that's when we realized what we had been sent there to do.

Bernie S. went in to talk to the cops and when he came out, he had convinced them to pose with Mark in front of their squad car. (It didn't really take much convincing - they were amazed that anyone would care.) So, if the pictures come out, you can expect to see a shot of Phiber Optik being "arrested" by the Frackville police, all with big smiles on their faces. Frackville, incidentally, has a population of about 5,000 which I'm told is about the distribution of Phrack Magazine. Kinda cosmic.

So now there was nothing left to do. We couldn't even get lost - the prison was straight ahead of us. Our long journey was about to come to a close. But it had been incredible from the start; there was no reason to believe the magic would end here. The prison people would be friendly, maybe we'd chat with them for a while. They'd make hot chocolate. All right, maybe not. But everybody would part on good terms. We'd all give Mark a hug. Our sadness would be countered by hope.

The compound was huge and brightly lit. We drove through it for miles before reaching the administration building. We assumed this was where Mark should check in so we parked the cars there and took a couple of final videos from our camcorder. Mark was nervous but he was still Mark. "I think the message is 'come here in the summer,'" he said to the camera as we shivered uncontrollably in the biting freeze.

As we got to the door of the administration building, we found it to be locked. We started looking for side doors or any other way to get in. "There's not a record of people breaking *into* prison," Bernie wondered out loud. It was still more craziness. Could they actually be closed?

I drove down the road to another building and a dead end. Bernie called the prison from his cellular phone. He told them he was in front of the administration building and he wanted to check somebody in. They were very confused and said there was no way he could be there. He insisted he was and told them he was in his car. "You have a *car* phone?" they asked in amazement. When the dust settled, they said to come down to the building at the end of the road where I was already parked. We waited around for a couple of minutes until we saw some movement inside. Then we all got out and started the final steps of our trip.

I was the first one to get to the door. A middle-aged bespectacled guy was there. I said hi to him but he said nothing and fixed his gaze on the five other people behind me.

"All right, who's from the immediate family?"

"None of us are immediate family. We're just--"

"Who's the individual reporting in?"

"I'm the individual reporting in," Mark said quietly.

"The only one I need is just him."

The guard asked Mark if he had anything on him worth more than \$100. Mark said he didn't. The guard turned to us.

"All right, gentlemen. He's ours. Y'all can depart."

They pulled him inside and he was gone. No time for goodbyes from any of us - it happened that fast. It wasn't supposed to have been like this; there was so much to convey in those final moments. Mark, we're with you... Hang in there... We'll come and visit.... Just a fucking goodbye for God's sake.

It caught us all totally off guard. They were treating him like a maximum security inmate. And they treated us like we were nothing, like we hadn't been through this whole thing together, like we hadn't just embarked on this crazy adventure for the last few days. The karma was gone.

>From behind the door, a hooded figure appeared holding handcuffs. He looked through the glass at us as we were turning to leave. Suddenly, he opened the outer door and pointed to our camera. "You can't be videotaping the prison here," he said. "All right," I replied, being the closest one to him and the last to start back to the cars. As I turned away, he came forward and said, "We gotta have that film." "But we didn't take any pictures of the prison!" I objected. "We gotta take it anyway," he insisted.

We all knew what to do. Giving up the tape would mean losing all recordings of Mark's last days of freedom. The meeting in Philadelphia, slipping down the icy streets, hanging out in Bernie's house, Frackville.... No way. No fucking way.

Roman, who had been our cameraman throughout, carefully passed off the camera to Bernie, who quickly got to the front of the group. I stayed behind to continue insisting that we hadn't filmed any part of their precious prison. I didn't even get into the fact that there are no signs up anywhere saying this and that it appeared to me that he was imposing this rule just to be a prick. Not that I would have, since Mark was somewhere inside that building and anything we did could have repercussions for him. Fortunately, the hooded guard appeared to conclude that even if he was able to grab our camera, he'd probably never find the tape. And he never would have.

The hooded guard stepped back inside and we went on our way. If it had been dark and cold before, now it was especially so. And we all felt the emptiness that had replaced Mark, who had been an active part of our conversations only a couple of minutes earlier. We fully expected to be stopped or chased at any moment for the "trouble" we had caused. It was a long ride out of the compound.

We headed for the nearest major town: Pottsville. There, we went to the only 24 hour anything in miles, a breakfast/burger joint called Coney Island of all things. We just kind of sat there for awhile, not really knowing what to say and feeling like real solid shit. Roman took out the camcorder and started looking through the view screen. "We got it," he said. "We got it all."

Looking at the tape, the things that really hit me hard are the happy things. Seeing the cops of Frackville posing and laughing with Mark, only a few minutes before that ugly episode, puts a feeling of lead in my stomach. I'm just glad we gave him a hell of a sendoff; memories of it will give him strength to get through this. What sticks with me the most is the way Mark never changed, right up to the end. He kept his incredible sense of humor, his caustic wit, his curiosity and sense of adventure. And he never stopped being a hacker in the true sense. What would a year of this environment do to such a person?

Our long ride back to New York was pretty quiet for the most part. Occasionally we'd talk about what happened and then we'd be alone with our thoughts. My thoughts are disturbing. I know what I saw was wrong. I know one day we'll realize this was a horrible thing to do to somebody in the prime of life. I don't doubt any of that. What I worry about is what the cost will be. What will happen to these bright, enthusiastic, and courageous people I've come to know and love? How many of us will give up and become embittered shells of the full individuals we started out as? Already, I've caught myself muttering aloud several times, something new for me.

Mark was not the only one, not by far. But he was a symbol - even the judge told him that at the sentencing. And a message was sent, as our system of justice is so fond of doing. But this time another message was sent - this one from Mark, his friends, and the scores of other hackers who spoke up. Everybody knew this wasn't right. All through this emotional sinkhole, our tears come from sadness and from anger. And, to quote the Clash, "Anger can be power." Now we just have to learn to use it.

Date: Thu, 9 Dec 1993 10:58:52 -0800
From: fen@IMAGINE.COMEDIA.COM(Fen Labalme)
Subject: File 2--Federal Prison Regs on Computer Classes/Books

((MODERATORS' NOTE: Fen Labalme heard a rumor that "computer books" could not be sent to federal prisoners. So, he tracked down the information. Here's what he found)).

Well, after quite a few calls and re-directions, I finally got through to one Tom Metzker at the federal bureau of prisons public affairs office (202/307-3198). He was quite helpful, if a little "tentative" as we talked.

He told me of a new (June 1993) prison policy that states that "no computer training" will be done in federal prisons. This includes (but is not limited to!) "programming techniques, computer languages, and computer repairs". He went on to say that programming includes "macros; for example, no DBase commands may be taught".

Tom informed me that many prisons now have computers for use by the inmates, but that "people who exhibit a propensity towards computers may be denied access to them".

I asked "what is the harm of learning a trade, such a C programming, that could be useful when the prisoner leaves?" He said that the rule was worded (as, he allowed, most such rules were) in a vague way that ultimately left it up to the warden as to what would or would not be allowable, and that special exceptions could be made by the warden in any case.

Anyway, this all sounds pretty unfair to me. I could understand, perhaps, if a person's crime was committed on computers that part of the punishment may be denial of access to a computer. But my friend was growing pot (a terrible crime -- aren't you glad that his punishment is greater, thanks to those wonderful mandatory

minimum sentences, than if he had committed rape?) and now wants to learn about computers as a legitimate way to make money in today's information-centric world.

I think the prison system is failing us, the American society, if we don't allow inmates to learn valuable, socially beneficial skills while incarcerated. What can be done?

Date: Tue, 11 Jan 1993 14:21:18 EST
From: CuD Moderators
Subject: File 3--How to Contact Phiber Optik

Emmanuel Goldstein's sensitive description of Phiber Optik's last day of freedom underscores the need to rethink contemporary prison philosophy: The punitive ethos emphasizing the "lock-'em-up" agenda has failed. One of its nasty consequences includes incarcerating those for whom prison time serves little purpose, costs the taxpayers unnecessary money, and has no significant impact on crime rates.

Phiber will likely spend less than 10 months in prison, much less if placed in an alternative program such as community corrections. However, prison time--especially short time--is unpleasant. The daily monotony, boredom, restrictions on freedom, and deprivation of even the most common things that most of us take for granted, erode one's psyche.

Schuylkill (pronounced "school-kill") FCI is in Minersville, PA in a mountainous, rural-agricultural area. The central prison is fairly large, about 1,000. There is also a Level One (minimum security) satellite camp of about 290 residents where Mark will do his time.

According to a prison spokesperson, Mark will live in a two-person cubicle. The prisoners in the camp were categorized as "non-violent, first-term offenders," and instances of violence, assaults, and attacks were described as "extremely rare." The spokesperson said that all camp prisoners were assigned a prison job.

Those wishing to correspond with Mark or to send him packages should note the following:

- 1) He may, in general, receive PAPERBACK BOOKS, soft-cover magazines, newspapers, and conventional letters.
- 2) HARDCOVER BOOKS must be sent DIRECTLY from the publisher.
- 3) He MAY NOT receive in the mail clothes, food, money, stamps, or anything else. No exceptions.
- 4) There are no explicit restrictions on the types of books or periodicals he may receive. These are done on a case-by-case basis. With the exception of legal correspondence, all incoming mail is subject to screening by prison staff.

The prison spokesperson indicated that there is no set limit on the number of books that Mark may receive, but emphasized that people should use common sense. A prisoner's personal area, he said, is rather small. Sending more than one or two books at a time could quickly become a storage problem.

Emmanuel Goldstein of 2600 Magazine will be coordinating Mark's needs. Those who wish to send books should contact Emmanuel at emmanuel@well.sf.ca.us and see what kinds of books or papers should be sent.

Mark's address:

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HTML Markup by Brad Cox (bcox@gmu.edu)