

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | June 7, 2012

The following is a chronicling of inmate M.O.'s entry into a now 16 years in Oregon's various isolation units. Convicted of murder, he later assaulted a codefendant he claims wrongly pinned the blame on him and testified against M.O. in exchange for a reduced sentence. M.O. spent nine years in Oregon's isolation units before being transferred to Oklahoma and New Mexico, where he has remained in solitary confinement. An earlier piece on his recent [struggles with PTSD](#) was published by Solitary Watch. Sal Rodriguez

Exiled in Purgatory: Six in One Hand a Half Dozen in the Other

As I sat in my Black Box cell it wasn't hard taking in the surroundings. There is a solid cement bunk. A ceramic sink that is encased in cement. A ceramic toilet encased in cement. The light is a bulb set into the wall with an opaque cover, which is in turn covered by a grill. It gives the cell a dark dim look. If you had a book you would hardly be able to read it. But you don't. In the Black Box it is you and the voice in your head.

The first door is bars. Just a regular old cell front; but it extends another three feet to a second door. Solid, thick and sound proof. The guards shut it 24-7. They are supposed to do checks every 15 minutes but they don't. You have no way to signal for help. No emergency call buttons. You'll only see a guard when they open that door to give you a food tray. That's when they'll know if someone's dead, cut up or has some emergency.

I pace around my cell thinking about the assault on Dave. I don't feel satisfied. A deep hate grows in me. A deep resentment. That feeling would continue to grow over the years, but the mustard seed of the incident with D is a root of it all. The Black Box becomes a comforting friend where I can talk to myself, reassure myself I did the right thing. Hate becomes an easy emotion. It can give you an energy, an outlet, a comfort. It is a blanket that wraps you warm in isolation.

By age 14 I was diagnosed with ADHD and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I was put in an inpatient Drug and Alcohol facility. By the time I had entered the military at 17 I had been in in-patient treatment centers twice and out-patient several times. One psychiatrist diagnosed me with organic brain damage before my murder trial. A term to this day I am not sure what it is. Nobody knew, or possibly didn't care, that a person with a mental health background like mine could get worse by isolation. That is, in fact, what eventually did happen (but that's my story to come).

After pacing back and forth in my cell (three steps forward, turn around, three steps back, turn around, repeat) I grew tired and thought of my girlfriend (who had just had my daughter only a few months before). I lay on my bunk and think about the last time I held her, made love to her. As the years went on even those memories fade and isolation holds only memories of other days of isolation.

I lay down to sleep. No sooner am I asleep than staff wake me up and tell me to cuff up. I'm going out on an emergency transport. They hustle me to the intake area to put shackles on for the transport. As they are putting the shackles on the officer tells me if I fucking move wrong he'll smash my head. He then brags to the other officers how the warden has got him off three prior excessive force allegations and is sure he'll be beat the next one too.

As they walk me out to the van I am told I'm being transported to the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) with other assholes. OSCI wasn't used to weapon assaults. Just gladiator fights. OSP didn't care. The guards talk back and fourth. The excessive force bragger tells the other that next week he's going to OSP's hobby shop to have one of the pieces of shit make him a belt. The pieces of shit are the prisoners working in the hobby shop making leather goods. I know quickly guards see me as less than shit. My hate grows. I hate this guy's voice. I hate the way he walks. I just hate. I picture smashing him in the face and smile to myself. Maybe even cut him up like D. Hate makes me smile.

The transport from OSCI to OSP is short. Just a few minutes across town. It's late, after midnight. When we arrive at OP the guards there tell me they don't have a cell open in Disciplinary Segregation right now so they had to put me in Special Management Unit (SMU) over the weekend. SMU is the isolation unit for the mentally ill. It is a fresh new Hell.

My experiences in SMU would fuel my hate, fertilize my contempt, and cut the last thread of sympathy I had.

Exiled in Purgatory: The Psych Ward

Within 24 hours of assaulting my codefendant I had gone from the Black Box Disciplinary isolation cell at OSCI to an after midnight transfer to the Psych Ward, better known as the Special Management Unit (SMU) at the Oregon State Penitentiary. The SMU was called Smoo (a pronunciation of the letters). If you were crazy you went to Smoo. I wasn't in the unit for mental health needs but because OSP Disciplinary Segregation Unit (DSU) was full and didn't have a cell available. As overflow I went to SMU.

You learn in prison that there is always a shortage of beds. In fact, it is one of the primary excuses prison administrators put forward in building new isolation units and supermax facilities the existing ones are full and they need more space for the new hard core felons who just can't learn to behave so they argue. Isolation and the overall poor prison conditions are, in my opinion, the largest contributing factor in negative prisoner behavior.

In Smoo, it is a new kind of Hell. The cell is approximately 6 feet long and 4 feet wide. There is no place to walk or pace. You either stand at the door or window at the back of the cell or lay on your bunk. The toilet and sink are so close to the bed there are only inches from the bed. It is encased in cement. The prison loves encasing everything in cement. It is not sealed with a cement sealant. Lacking a sealant the cement has soaked up years of urine, feces, spit, puke, and whatever else finds its way to the cement thrown. The prison, every few years, paints the cement. It's never cleaned, just painted over. Every time you squat over it you fear if your ass touches down it may not come back off.

I wasn't given any blankets or pillow. Just two sheets and a mattress. The room has an old ancient heater. The window is covered with a thick metal screen which is open. Despite being mid-December and the window being open, I'm warm. For that I am grateful. I have no books or magazines, no other property, no hygiene (no toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo, etc.) It's me, my two sheets, and time. I'm doing life, all I have is time.

I go back to my bunk and lift the mattress to put a sheet on it and it peels away like Velcro. The metal bunk is a full restraint bed used to restrain psychotic and suicidal prisoners. Usually they are left there for hours or days to urinate and defecate themselves. The bunk reeks of urine and looks as if the yellow blob is growing across it. I ask for cleaning supplies but in response the officer puts a piece of cardboard over my window something I'd learn is routine when they don't want to be bothered with things like sanitation or prisoner complaints. The cardboard would come off and on over the days following.

I lost track of time. I don't know how long I was in that cell. No other prisoners were near me, empty cells on both sides. Across the hall was a female. I could hear her voice. Back then they brought the psychotic females to the Special Management Unit. She was yelling and screaming a lot talking incoherently at times. Sometimes a guard would talk to her, sometimes they just put cardboard over the window.

On one day she begins banging her head on the door. The cops rush her cell, strip her of all her clothing and four point strap her to the bed. One guard is on duty to watch her. Usually he sits in the office out of sight. This time he goes to her cell after all the other guards leave. I hear her talking in sexual tones, not to the guard but to God, she's not praying, but telling God they want to fuck her in the ass. That they're sinful. I look out my window and the guard has his hand in his pocket clearly masturbating.

I yell, You sick fuck! It scares him. He marches over to my door and without a word puts up the cardboard over my window. I go back to bed.

I've been isolated for days or weeks. You lose track of time in isolation. Some days fly by, others drag with no end. With no books I live in my mind. You lose track of time but in your mind reality blurs. I think of suicide. I have no voice. No one to hear my pain.

Exiled in Purgatory: The Walls

The walls. That is what they call the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP). In less than 30 days I had gone from the assault on my codefendant, to the OSCI hole Black Box, to the OSPs psych ward, to OSPs hole. It was the beginning of a journey in isolation that would last for the next two decades.

I was in OSPs old Disciplinary Segregation Unit (DSU). The walls, back then, was where hard cases were. This was my first time incarcerated. And I'd get schooled by the older cons, not the gladiators in the kid camps.

In the OSP hole there was both single and double cells. I was initially put in a double cell and given a cellie. During that time I met C, a guy only a few years older than me who had been down several ears and in the Intensive Management Unit (IMU), Oregon's supermax. He would prepare me by explaining what to expect and how to cope with isolation.

Shortly after I got there C's hole time was up and he went to general population. My next cellie wouldn't prove to be so friendly and I grew tired of him within days which grew into open hostility. It was with him I learned how much fear a person can have if they believe they'll be stabbed. I had a newly minted reputation of being a lifer with the willingness to hurt someone. That can have a lot of power in prison.

I didn't know it then, but that reputation was a single brick in developing an institutional personality. In prison people often adopt and develop personalities, beliefs, and morals, such as the so-called convict code, that they never had prior to prison as a way to survive the hostile prison environment. More often than not prison administrators promote these attitudes. Being young and never having been incarcerated I was especially vulnerable to adopting institutional personality characteristics.

My new cellie constantly complained about paroling in three months and how his girlfriend is probably cheating on him. All the usual short-timer gripes. Serving a life sentence for a crime my codefendant committed, I wasn't trying to hear some guy whine about a lousy three months in prison. I told him he had to get out of the cell or I'd end up stabbing him and he wouldn't have to worry about parole.

In situations like this a prisoner would usually throw their tray on the tier and the cops would usually make them move to a single cell isolation cell for a disciplinary violation. Obviously throwing a tray is something the cops don't like. The following morning after breakfast he takes his tray, throws it on the tier, and then crawls back into bed. When the cop comes by he tells me to pick the tray up and

kicks it to my door. I tell him its not my tray so Im not going to pick it up. He picks it up and moves on.

I berate my cellie as a coward, tell him he better stay up and claim the tray and get out. He assures me he will. Lunch comes, he throws the tray, and the cop, again, orders me to pick it up. When I refuse and tell him its not my tray he leaves. When he returns there are four guards with him. He asks what the problem is. My cellie tells him that its his tray. They order us both to back up and be handcuffed. We complied. At that point Im thinking my cellie will be taken out. It never works out that way.

Rather than move my cellie they move me. The officer points at me and tells them to take me to the Black Box. One more time I find myself in the isolation of isolation. This time, however, it would last much longer than a few hours, and Id be introduced to a New Hell called Nutra Loaf. But there are more vivid Hells ahead

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

I agree with Barrie. I am being more aware of solitary confinement with thanks of facebook. Now I know about Solitary Watch too. Most we can do is keep spreading the word. It so hurts to know how prisoners are treated and for Security needs to be held accountable. Always about money and not human beings.

the main stream media and the human rights people only worry about foreigners never hear or read anything about the torture of American prisoners. Prison is the punishment the constitution is supposed to protect us from torture every chance i get i write my law makers about this issue i have written CO lawmakers as well if even the people that read SW would write it might help. doing nothing will definitely not help

You can watch a video of Christopher Hitchens undergoing waterboarding here:

<http://bcove.me/ij0os5um>

<http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/08/hitchens200808>

Excerpt from a August 2008 Vanity Fair article republished today:

Here is the most chilling way I can find of stating the matter. Until recently, waterboarding was something that Americans did to other Americans. It was inflicted, and endured, by those members of the Special Forces who underwent the advanced form of training known as SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape). In these harsh exercises, brave men and women were introduced to the sorts of barbarism that they might expect to meet at the hands of a lawless foe who disregarded the Geneva Conventions. But it was something that Americans were being trained to resist, not to inflict.

It took this article by the late Christopher Hitchens to change Eric Holders mind about the use of this technique by Americans on enemy combatants.

The exploration of ways for Americans to resist such practices was also the original motivation for the exploration and development of other unsavory practices now in use in America such as behavior modification techniques employed by our prisons.

The father of this field of exploration and development these techniques is a man by the name of Dr. Edgar H. Schein. Others followed, Dr. Skinner developed the behavior operant conditioning theory which is the basis for the step down program, and Dr. Levinson designed the sensory deprivation or Control Unit to carry out these live experiments. Others made their own unique contributions and presto we have the Supermax prison system.

One chilling thing that I noticed in this mans story on SW is how the placing of an incompatible roommate in those tight quarters had affected him.

Hell is other people. ~ Jean-Paul Sartre from his play No Exit.

Id like to also say hi to both Carl and BJ it is always good to read your thoughts on this.

I am an American, and feel the exact way Barri feels. How long can they keep these inmates in isolation? This is worse than war tortures.

Realistic emotional cry for help is what I read here..

Can honest and decent Americans ignore this that is going on in their name, OK the guys need to be in Jail (well some of em) but do we have to treat them like pieces of Turd, once we have them there, what about making a serious effort in trying to rehabilitate those that can be re habbed. From what i can glean being a UK citizen, your prisons treat its charges like mad dogs, and oh my you are suprised when it backfires and they retaliate and kick back.

As a foreigner to your country you might say, how are you over there aware of what happens here! well I have a very good friend in ADX Florence.

The punishment these men recieved off the Courts was to be incarcerated, not sent to a Torture chamber for futher punishment

This is happening ALL over America, and its happening to your fellow citizens, how much longer are you going to keep your heads buried in the sand and hope it will go away soon, it wont go away until you lot STAND UP and make your voices heard.

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