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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

close

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | November 27, 2013

Former political prisoner Ray Luc Levasseur was raised in Maine, born to a working-class family of Quebecois origin. He became politically radicalized at a young age, first after serving a term of duty in Vietnam, and again after spending two years in a Tennessee prison. In 1986, Ray Luc Levasseur was convicted for militant activities conducted with the United Freedom Front. He would ultimately spend about 15 of his 18 years in prison in solitary confinement. First sent to the Control Unit at USP Marion, he was transferred to the federal supermax, ADX Florence, after refusing to work for the Federal Prison Industries (UNICOR) since it produced military equipment for the Department of Defense. Levasseur was released in 2004 and now lives in Maine. (For more on Ray Luc Levasseur, see the [interview](#) published in conjunction with this piece.)

The following is an excerpt from a larger piece that Levasseur is writing. It describes the day he arrived at ADX Florence and his initial experiences at the prison. Aviva Stahl

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Approaching the federal prison complex, I saw majestic snow capped mountain peaks in the distance, an image to cherish when all else disappears behind closed walls. We rode through the complex: minimum security camp, medium security prison, maximum security prison, and continued to the end of the compound of the federal prison system.

ADX, administrative maximum, a prison where the building becomes the shackles. From outside ADX look half-buried, built against an earth berm. It wasn't underground but might as well have been, once you're inside. The mountains and the reminder of the outside world were erased as we entered the first door. We were led through a maze of polished hallways and bright lights, bar grills, steel doors and ubiquitous surveillance cameras. My travelling companion and I were placed in cells on an unoccupied tier. The cells were brand-spanking new, never before occupied. I had never had a new house, a new car or a new apartment but I now had a new prison cell.

This is a boxcar cell, designed to suppress human sound and constrain the five senses. I spoke to the walls. Ray Luc, present and accounted for! My voice echoed throughout the cell, a cough sounded like a racket ball carom. There would be no casual conversations with my one neighbour.

When fed through a shoe-box sized slot in the door the meal looked like dog-food on noodles. We missed the regular feeding time and this tray was sitting around somewhere. I hadn't eaten all day so despite my trepidation I pushed the dog food aside and ate the noodles with a plastic spoon. I spent most of that first night retching and vomiting into the stainless steel commode. Food poisoning. Forty-eight years old and I've entered a new phase in my life a mid life crisis embodied in a techno-fascist architectural wet dream.

Society reflects the self in a microcosm of prison. In a class based, economically driven, racially motivated life, devolved of a series of Chinese boxes. A set of boxes decreasing in size so that each box fits in the next larger one. I'm in the smallest box.

The essence of ADX is the boxcar cell. This boxcar doesn't move. It is a cage within a box encased by concrete. Entry is through a solid steel door that contains a small Plexiglas observation window. And then the trap dead space. Then a series of vertical steel bars which forms the front of the cage and a second door. I am confined to the boxcar cell 157 hours of each 168 hour week. I am allowed 11 hours a week into a barren concrete area adjacent to the cellblock between Mondays and Fridays. The rec space (i.e. recreation space) is like the deep end of a dry swimming pool with walls. I see only walls, except straight up through the wire mesh, steel cables and joists a section of sky. That's the term, outside rec.

Other men begin occupying the cells on my tier. The boxcar cell is designed to gouge prisoners' senses by suppressing human sound and communication with others. It puts blinders on one's eyes and limits on touching to that which is lifeless. A boxcar cell is designed to inflict physical, psychological, and spiritual isolation. You will feel the pain. You will not leave the boxcar cell except in restraints. Within months it seems endless. Every morning begins with a loud grating of the steel gate opening to the tier. One at a time, each of the electronically controlled doors opens, a guard steps to the second barred door and slides the food tray through the slot, then steps back while the door is closed, with a vengeance. On down the line, until the last tray is delivered. A half hour later we go through the paces again until the last tray is retrieved, followed by silence.

At my first visit with a friend and lawyer from Chicago, she said, Ray, you seem agitated.

I had a thousand yard stare by then, and responded: Hey, you'd be agitated too if you felt like your face was slapped every morning you get up in this shithole.

Okay, I understand but why don't you sit down while you're talking? You step left to the wall, then right to the wall, you don't sit still.

You see what I got to sit on? A concrete stump it's a ***** post- same as in my cell. Why would I wanna sit on that?

But you're unfocused at times, you're jumping all over while you're talking. First you talk about your kids one minute, then tell me about a prisoner in seg [segregation] who's tearing his flesh with his teeth. Then without missing a beat you're into Agent Orange and Vietnam.

Look, there's nothing wrong with me, alright, nothing that the shining light of freedom wouldn't fix. I know why I'm in prison in ADX, I'll be a witness to what's happening here. That's what I'm doing, that's what I'm writing about. They're keeping that segregation prisoner in four point restraints, you understand. He's four pointed to a concrete slab. They say every time they unchain him, he's back to tearing at his flesh. Even the hacks are spooked by him. You know, what is it about this place that makes a man do that to himself. Several prisoners have already been a packed off to the psych ward at Springfield.

How do you know this?

I know it from prisoners rotating in and out of segregation unit, otherwise there could be a major riot in the cellblock next to mine and I wouldn't know about it, sound doesn't travel far here. You can't see beyond immediate walls and doors.

You're in the same environment Ray, it's got to affect you.

It does, it ***** enrages me, I get homicidal thoughts and migraines that begin with a spider crawling up my cervix and injecting a twelve load jolt of mind-***** pain into my skull. But you know what, in the immediate aftermath of physical pain I feel good. It takes the absence of pain to feel good here. It's scary, the psychological is not always as evidence as the physical.

Unless you're eating your own flesh.

Right, unless you're eating your own flesh, or your own shit, I saw that in MCC [Metropolitan Correctional Center] in New York.

I didn't dwell on if or when I'd extricate myself from ADX because this line of thinking would drive me into deeper depression.

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](#)

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P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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