

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/08/08/voices-from-solitary-life-on-level-3-texas-death-row/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | August 8, 2010

In many prisons, there are different levels of solitary confinement, with differences in their living conditions, degree of isolation, and the handful of privileges: visits, phone calls, personal hygiene products and reading materials, and in some cases even blankets afforded to prisoners there. At Louisiana's Angola prison, for example, there are [three levels of solitary confinement](#): The long-term solitary isolation unit is called CCRClosed Cell Restriction. But even worse than CCR are the punishment unit called Camp J, and the dungeon known as The Hole, where prisoners are put while awaiting disciplinary hearings.

Even on Texas's notorious death row housed in the Polunsky Unit, a prison in rural East Texas there are three levels on which condemned prisoners can be placed. Prisoners on Level 1 can be moved to Level 2 or Level 3 based on rule violations, as adjudicated by prison staff. Thomas Bartlett Whitaker, who has been on death row since 2007 for his part in a 2003 double murder, spent most of that time on Level 1, but earlier this year he did a stint in F-pod on Level 3, where inmates are denied virtually all property and visits. He [describes his stay](#) on the blog, Minutes Before Six, where a friend posts his journal entries.

I am told by reliable sources that first impressions are important. If this adage is true, then I must say that F-Pod (sometimes referred to hereafter as simply Level) made a very poor initial showing for itself. How to sum up the cages of F-Pod in as few words as possible? Let's start with: burnt. I mean, I-left-the-fryer-on-during-my-nap, carbon-is-good-for-you, extra-crispy. It looked like someone had scrawled some arcane astrological sigils all over the walls with charcoal and it smelled like a burning pile of refuse. In seg, when you have a problem, your first avenue of recourse is to speak with the officers working the pod. If they can't help you, they are supposed to kick the problem up to the sergeants. Some do, and some, of course, do not. Lighting a fire is therefore a pretty good means of simultaneously showcasing your displeasure, as well as an almost guaranteed means of making a ranking officer deal with you.

I've seen plenty of [fires on other pods](#) of course, though F-Pod is certainly more flame-scarred than anywhere else on 12-Building. More than that, these burn marks were inside the cells; every fire I had ever seen up to this point was set on the run. I must admit I fail to see how giving oneself smoke-inhalation-induced respiratory problems teaches TDC any lessons, but maybe I am just being dense. In any case, it didn't take me long to give up on the idea of ridding my cell of the stench; I was just going to have to get used to it.

One of the positives about F-Pod is that it is fairly quiet. I think I value silence more than most; some of the pods I've lived on here sounded like a jungle scene at night, which can pretty much wreck any attempts at productivity. You do have to keep one wary eye on your own behavior, though. Humans are not made to live in total isolation, and certain systematic breakdowns are inevitable, and well-documented. Solitude and isolation are not necessarily equivalent concepts, but the former does melt into the latter very softly, and once it does, it is a devil to get out. I am not even sure that a man who has completely disconnected from the world should still be called human to be honest with you.

I have written several entries on SHU Syndrome already, so I will not belabor the point here, save to say that I basically manifested three different symptoms during my time on F-Pod. (Or, I should note, I noticed three symptoms; it is entirely possible that I missed some.) The first was a form of benign vertigo that would come and go at random intervals. Sometimes it would last for minutes, sometimes hours. It was only strong enough on a few occasions to make me vomit, but even at its weakest, it made writing impossible. These effects lasted until April 17th, two days after I made my upgrade from level 3 to Level 2.

The second manifestation of SHU that I experienced was an increased sense of weariness and a desire for sleep. I wrote about this, also, while on Level, and you can read this entry [here](#), complete with a graph of the average increase in hours of sleep experienced by twenty of the men on F-Pod.

The final pathology I noted in myself is somewhat common to a certain subset of convict, namely those of us who pride ourselves on our independence. On Level, this desire for self-reliance gets very, very strong, almost insane in its demands. Since they have taken my visits, my property, my rec, even my toothbrush, you reason, I may as well be a crash dummy and test the limits. This is a bad idea, completely unethical but it whispers in your ear constantly. I found other ways to vent the pressure, such as refusing to eat the trays that I deemed to be truly heinous. I have always done this, but the tactic is not one usually employed on F-Pod, where one has no access to food from the commissary. Me and a good friend eventually expanded this minimalist campaign into other parts of life. When a ranking officer threatened to take away our mattresses if we didn't come forward with some information, I made a point of rolling mine up every

night for a month and placed it in the corner, where he could both see it and me sleeping on the concrete floor. Eventually I wasn't even using the sheets anymore. I think he got the message: you can't threaten a man who isn't afraid to lose everything. If all of that sounds a little crazy, that is exactly my point: isolation changes you.

Also on Whitaker's blog is a set of photos of Texas Death Row, which according to him were taken by the state of Texas in response to a FOIA request by an attorney. We are posting a few, with captions by Whitaker; you can view the whole collection [here](#).



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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Unfortunately, Whittaker's dad PAID someone off for the Governor to grant that shit-bag clemency. There is NO WAY I can believe that the Governor of Texas did this on his own, they have not granted clemency in A VERY long time, something stinks here. It goes to show that Money DOES change everything for the ones that have it and screw the ones that don't. This is a corrupt system. Having said all that, DR is supposed to be what it is. It is supposed to make one BEG for their sentence to be carried out. It is not supposed to be a Comfortable place. They committed the worse of crimes and they should be treated as such. [THE REMAINDER OF THIS COMMENT HAS BEEN REMOVED BECAUSE IT VIOLATED SITE RULES.]

This POS Whittaker is hopefully not long for this world. Good riddance.

@jeff- That may be true. Obviously I don't know because I wasn't there but the whole point of this discussion seemed to go right over your head. I'm not saying that EVERYONE in TX prisons (Or ANY prisons for that matter) are guilty but it's quite possible that you just might look at things differently if someone like Bart Whitaker put a hit out on YOUR family AND SUCCEEDED WITH YOUR SIBLING AND YOUR MOTHER.

what they do to the men on DR at Polunsky is inhumane to say the very least. some are innocent even if not all are poor and had public defenders in most cases, so they never had a chance. they spend 23 hrs a day in a 6 by 10 foot cell with a steel door no TV no contact visits. Texas is the worst by far state in the US. I live in GA and my son used to work for a company that sent him all over the US but never Texas. His last several projects were in California well his comp always flew there employs to and from the jobs, well he flew from Tallahassee FL and he and 3 coworkers 2 of which were black and from great families they were not thugs anyway my wife's cousin new they were driving back my son was going to drop the two black guys in Atlanta and his other co-worker in Macon wife's cousin who was a former police officer said tell my son reroute their trip they will never make it through Texas without being pulled over and probably arrested because the K9 cops will place pot in the car in the but only after hiding the dog's training toy that is drenched in pot and making the dog do a false alert. I begged my son not to thru the corrupt shit hole known as Texas he said I was being paranoid. they got about 3 hours into TX and get pulled over officer said he was weaving and looked high. called the K9 unit the dog circled the car 6 times never alerted officer went and got something out of his car put his hand in back seat and the dog immediately alerted in this case he sat down they tore the car apart my son called me while they were doing this I called my brother in law who is an attorney he called this asshole boss and said he was headed to TX if they filed any charges against these hard working kids to have officers dash cam video because if dog circled car 6 times no pot was in that car and be ready for a highly publicized lawsuit officer got a call on his cell told the guys they could put all their shit back in car and go. check out Barry Cooper's videos on YouTube to see how corrupt the worthless pieces of shit are he is a former Permian Basin K9 officer it will blow ur mind what these horrible people do to get a pat on the back of their bosses. not all TX lawmen are bad but many are worse than those poor souls isolated in their concrete tombs. I hate that state with a passion and that piece of shit officer was about to place several bags of pot or worse and send 4 law-abiding hard working kids to prison I hope he rots in hell if there is one.

When does this excrement head get offed?

The Allan B Polunsky unit is just awfull.

wow. where to start, first of all let me say i beleive in the death penalty but my problem is the innocent lives taken because of corruption in the system that was supposed to protect them.so i feel sorry for the innocent ones on the row and now i also understand the ability to change. with time people have a chance to sober up an learn whats important an i find that also sad that 10,15, or 20 years on the row can make such drastic changes in some an then there r the ones that will never change.yes change must come but the dealth penalty must stay it just needs to be fine tuned so to say not everything is is black or white there is alot of gray in things the system needs to b overhauled an the corruption weeded out but that will surely never happen

the lady in the pics doesnt have a friendly face at all

All I can say is, mans inhumanity to man. I can not stand to think of human beings suffering inside a coffin like existence, and the fact that this kind of treatment is acceptable sickens me. I am so sorry. Change must come, and a voice of power must change the conditions. I pray for this segment of society to not be forgotten. Guilty of a crime must not warrant torture becoming another form of a legal crime.

Seriously?

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