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Title:

Organization or Agency: Incarcerated in CT DOC

Topic: Meeting Date Not Listed

NA

Testimony:

“I must not break. I must not break. No matter what they do to me, I will not break...”

This is what I told myself as I lay face down, cuffed and chained to a cold, hard concrete slab. My wrists and ankles were handcuffed to four steel rings which were embedded in the concrete, and a chain went across my lower back, which was also attached to a steel ring.

This is a punishment used by guards to both inflict pain and immobilize a prisoner that has exhibited any form of aggression towards the guards. But “exhibiting any form of aggression towards the guards” lends itself to subjective interpretations. One could threaten staff or actually assault staff; both would lead to a ‘four-point restraint.’

Typically, one is held like that for two to eight hours, being released and repositioned every two hours as per Connecticut D.O.C. (Department of Corrections) policy. I was not released, either to be repositioned or to use the bathroom, for one entire week. I lay like that for 168 hours. 10,080 minutes. 604,800 seconds. One entire week with no food, water, mail, clothes, shoes, blankets, or sheets. One week where I had zero rights or protections as a so-called “American citizen.”

During that week, I was forced to urinate and defecate on myself. None of the guards, who made rounds every thirty minutes or so, made any effort to release me from this torture. Instead, they taunted me: “Shit yourself, nigger, I don't give a fuck what you need.”

I lay there thinking, how can they legally get away with this? There must be some policy or law against such treatment; yet, there I lay: chained like some kind of animal. I then began to wonder if I would live through this; would I die of hunger or thirst? These thoughts were interrupted by my torturers’ taunts.

“Hey nigger, you hungry? Hey nigger, you thirsty? You fucking nigger son-of-a-bitch, I should stick my billy club up your fucking ass you fucking punk. You ain't so tough now, are ya? You'll never make it out of Leavenworth alive boy.”

As a group of them stood behind me, throwing bread and water on my exposed backside, I wondered if their threat would prove to be true. I did eventually leave Leavenworth federal prison alive and walking; inside, however, I was broken.

What led to my torture was a physical confrontation with a notoriously aggressive guard. This guard was stationed outside of the commissary, meaning anyone who went to the commissary had to get past him to gain access to the canteen in order to shop. He and I had been heading towards a confrontation for months. The tension between us began with his verbal bullying of older Black prisoners, and, one of them being my homeboy, I spoke out against it. He told me to “mind [my] own fucking business.” I responded by cursing him out.

Due to his hostile and aggressive nature, particularly towards minority prisoners, from the day of our initial confrontation on, I mentally prepared for combat, or death. All I knew was that I would not

willingly accept being bullied by him or physically attacked. It followed, then, that it was just a matter of time before we had a major clash.

That moment came when he denied me entry to the canteen. I had done nothing but ask him what number he had called, as I hadn't heard him the first time. He smiled at me, and in that moment I knew this was his opportunity for revenge. As I walked away, I said some very choice words to him. He responded by grabbing my arm, and as I pulled away, he put me into a chokehold from behind.

As soon as I slipped the hold, I beat him senseless: bloodying his nose and damaging his orbital bone. As he lay on the floor unconscious, other guards arrived en masse to subdue me. They tackled and hog tied me right there in the center hallway. I was then carried to the medical department for a quick examination before being taken to the segregation unit and 'four-pointed.'

After my release from the four-point restraints a week later, I was placed into a 'dry cell' for a month. A dry cell has no toilet, so as to monitor a suspected contraband holder's bowel movements. As I neither had, nor was suspected of having, contraband, this placement simply represented the guards' retribution for the assault of their cohort.

Over the 17 years that followed me leaving Leavenworth, I was transferred to seven different high security federal prisons. During this period of time, I lived in full rebellion. Every encounter I had with guards was antagonistic and there were additional instances of physical confrontation. I understand now that what happened to me in Leavenworth impaired my ability to think rationally, leading to my aggression in heated confrontations with guards. Being housed in some of the federal system's most violent prisons, I was made worse. In order to survive, I had to embrace extreme violence as a way of life. I became a savage, moving in total opposition to who my mother raised me to be and the man my father worked so hard to mold me into.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) occurs when one has been so deeply hurt by violence that one mentally revisits the traumatic event(s) regularly, i.e. having flashbacks. As a result of the Leavenworth prison guards' abuses, I have suffered PTSD symptoms since 1993. I often experience flashbacks as I am simply walking the halls of prison. I know that I'm not alone in this.

My prison experiences, while extreme, are not an anomaly. Men and women captives throughout the U.S. and the world suffer from various forms of PTSD. Many of them, like myself, have endured various forms of torture while held within the carceral system: physical abuses, deliberate indifference to medical needs, denial of medical care, denial of mental health treatment, fabrication of incident reports, forced celling with incompatible cellmates, invasive pat and/or strip searches, mail withholding, and the list goes on. Unfortunately, many prisoners I have encountered in Connecticut have dissociated from their conditions so extensively that they are unable to recognize the oppression that is inflicted on them daily.

None of us leave prison, especially high-security federal prisons, mentally intact. As I suffered anxiety attacks, difficulty relaxing, nighttime panic attacks, and extreme hyper-vigilance, I wondered how I could ever be normal in such an emotionally-crippling environment? I knew I was in desperate need of mental health treatment, but there was little to none to be found. The Federal Bureau of Prisons had laid off many of its mental health staff of color, just as men of color became the majority among captives. In addition, mental health staff had a reputation for sharing confidential information with guards. This blatant violation of privileged information is something that was prevalent in the '90s and early 2000s, and it is something that I presently see in Connecticut today: mental health staff engaging in overtly personal relationships with guards—a clear violation of professionalism and separation of departments. And then, there is the stigma associated with seeing a mental health professional. It is said that once you

are seen as ‘a nut case,’ you are either punished or ostracized—a fate worse than death in a jungle.

Without quality mental health treatment, alongside the stigma that comes with accessing it, many of us continue to suffer in silence, leading to a tortured existence inside of prison. I felt the need to keep my “game face” on at all times, but I was clearly unwell. I self-isolated, experienced extreme mood swings, and used violence as some twisted form of therapy. I was a drowning man without a life jacket, looking for someone, anyone, to save me.

I am traumatized today from the torture of yesterday. I am: your neighbor, brother, son, father, best friend, husband...I am you. And I am a living, breathing testimony of torture and deliberately inflicted suffering in America’s prisons.

Today, I am working very hard to reclaim my lost humanity. However, I must admit that I struggle on a daily basis. I have days where I just want to lie down, curl up into a ball, and cry. Many of my fellow captives have encouraged me to cry, saying how cathartic doing so would be. I have tried to do so many times. Only dust seems to come out.

This is a carceral system which places more emphasis on protecting guards’ pride and vengeance than on the mental wellbeing of the captives who have been subjected to all of the above-listed traumas. This is the brutal reality for me, and many others, a reality that is deliberately hidden in “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

We are captives, made invisible and hidden behind the prison's walls, razor wire, steel doors, and the veil of secrecy promulgated by lying prisoncrats. I sit in this cage at this very moment, traumatized, tired, and alone.