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## "War Crimes in Harris County Jail"

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August 2004 - May 2005

Handcuffed, a group of ten piled into the back of the Van that was to take us to the Harris County Jail. Having turned 17 that Summer, merely a month later my life had taken a serious turn for the worse.

The metal cage and amount of bodies left little room for movement. Next to me a older man with long hair nudged me to get my attention.

"We'll be there in a little bit youngster... Now listen, when they strip us down, they're gonna put us up against a wall. When you're getting naked, whatever you do, don't raise your arms over your head. They'll slam your ass on that concrete." He said with a wild look in his eyes.

I nodded, butterflies filling my stomach. I was reminded of those old World War II movies I used to watch. The briefing before the battle. I would come to understand just how accurate this first impression was.

The advice turned out to be valuable. Once inside the intake area - a large cement room with benches made of the same - we were ordered to put our backs against the wall and undress. Six or seven aggressive-looking Sheriff deputies stood watching, their dark uniforms and weapon belts making them seem even bigger.

"Everybody naked!" A Sergeant yelled.

"Get out of 'em! You're in my house now. If you got anything hidden, now's the time to throw it on the floor."

Already barefoot (the detectives had kept my shoes as evidence) I began taking off my pants and underwear. Remembering the advice, I took my shirt off carefully, one arm at a time, with Sheriff deputies watching me intently, waiting to spring. I passed my test. A guy down the line didn't. The slap of naked flesh on concrete and the swarming of dark uniforms made me look to my right.

A deputy's loud voice pierced the air, "Everybody turn the fuck around! Face the wall!"

All of us did just that. The sound of blows and yells from the naked men on the ground filling the room.

"You wanna raise your arms at me boy! That was your

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first mistake," one of the deputies yelled.

My arms began to shake and I tried to stop them from doing so. I now knew fear. The example had been set. Fear, nakedness and violence would dominate my life in the coming year.

I was placed in a pod that housed younger inmates. Everyone was under 25. We all came from difficult backgrounds, from poverty. No one had money to make bail and so we were forced to endure that place. We did our best to get along but nevertheless there were fights amongst us. We were loud and full of energy. Anxiety, attention-deficiency, and other mental illnesses made their presence known.

There was always a threat of violence, either from other inmates or the jailers and deputies. Physical abuse was commonly perpetrated against us by the jailers and deputies. Dozens of times I remember being forced to stand in a circle as deputies made their way around slamming our heads against the wall and slapping us. Whenever this happened, I would place my head against the wall so that my head would not rebound on the wall.

Certain guards at night would not let us talk and listened in on us through the speaker system. It was on nights that these guards worked that I experienced the most humiliating moments of my life.

On these nights, the lights would flash on suddenly and a voice would come over the intercom. In a calm manner, the order would come, "Everybody to the dayroom tables."

Everyone would begin grumbling and complaining. We all knew that a long night awaited us now. We also knew that to not follow directions would be even worse. Slowly, we made our way to the picnic-style tables but it was not a picnic that was in store for us.

"Get naked, out of 'em!" came the order over the speaker; the sheriff deputy watching down on us from the plexiglass wrapped picket which housed the controls. By now a second deputy had joined us. We all followed directions, trying to cover our genitals from view with our hands, the air-conditioning causing goosebumps on our exposed body.

We crowded onto the cold metal benches, naked flesh, touching naked flesh, with hands behind our backs and heads on the table. With the smell of the next man's genitals and body odor wafting up into our face, we were forced to sit there until the night-shift finished at 7 in the morning. Our ignorance, youth, and the threat of overwhelming violence left us with little choice but to endure and follow orders. No one dared to stand up or even lift our heads from the table.

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It was not until years later that I realized what had occurred would have constituted as war-crimes if done to enemy combatants. It was not too different from what had caused such a scandal when American soldiers had been found abusing Iraqis at the Abu-Grahib detention center. Except this time it was happening to American citizens. None of which had even been convicted of any crime and therefore considered "pre-trial detainees". Yet none of us had the money or ability to bond out and so were forced by our poverty to endure these torments. Poverty was working against us in so many different ways that we were unable to understand or for that matter remedy.

Our poverty did not allow us to secure a proper attorney to pursue our interests. Over-worked public defenders had little incentive to adequately advocate on our behalf. Many would begin serving in a semi-prosecutor role in trying to get us to accept plea deals and sign for time.

For us, this would be the most trying time of our lives. A time that would decide our future for years, if not decades to come. I understand now that it is impossible for a 17 or 18 year-old to understand these large concepts of life and now, as a older man, I realize that these times of trials can make or break you.

Further, our poverty did not allow us to bond out and maneuver in an attempt to better defend ourselves. Our poverty forced us to sit in jail facing almost daily abuses at the hands of both guards and inmates, with no chance to bond out and try to marshal together some sort of defense. We had to endure these tortuous circumstances while being pressured by trained lawyers to sign away our lives and plead guilty. This was the only way out, they would say. "Take the time and get going."

How many hundreds, thousands, of man years of imprisonment have resulted and continue to result from this systemic injustice is not known or measured. How many people have pled guilty to charges and been sentenced to years of imprisonment due mainly to their desire to escape this tortuous environment and "move on" to "doing their time."

The American fetish of imprisonment has led to an assembly-line form of incarceration where constitutional protections have fallen to the wayside. Political careers now depend on the maintenance of this status-quo; in the minds of these politicians,

Conviction-rates equate to "justice". We must make political careers depend on the reform of this unjust system of incarceration, and it is incumbent on this generation to make it happen.

As I look back on those months spent in the Harris County jail, I realize that there is a story to be told. There are questions to be answered.

In 2007, word reached us in prison that the Harris County jail had been "taken over" by the Feds. Rumor had it that 50,000 complaints of abuse had been levied and had led to this federal attention.

In my mind, what happened in the Harris County jail and the things which thousands of us experienced have never been resolved to the benefit of anyone. While the media covered abuses of prisoners in faraway places like Guantanamo or Iraq, the very same abuses were occurring in downtown Houston to Americans, many not yet turned 18, nor convicted of any crime.

We might as well have been invisible. Business men and women walked the clean downtown sidewalks on their way to office jobs or luxury sedans. If they were to have looked skyward and somehow had gained the ability to see through concrete and steel, they would have seen us there, at those picnic-tables, quietly waiting for the nightshift to end.