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Photo from AP



DIESEL THERAPY

Torturing Prisoners Legally Takes the Bus

Transit, better known as "diesel therapy" to the feds, is maybe the worst part of being incarcerated. Imagine being handcuffed with a chain around your waist securing the handcuffs to your stomach area. You can't move your arms up and down or side to side. Your feet are shackled, limiting you to baby steps. Now get on a bus. And then be stuck on the bus with similarly shackled convicts forever. (It starts at three or four in the morning, and 12–16--hour days are the norm.) You can try and guess where you're going, but you never will. After five institutions and nine years in the feds, I've learned to dread transit more than anything.

The Bureau of Prisons can never do anything easily. Like take you from point A to point B. Instead, they drag you through a spiraling maze of transitional moves with zero logic. What's the method to the madness? Is it intentional chaos—pure torture to keep us beat down, controlled, docile? Only the BOP knows for certain.

Recently I was transferred from FCI Fort Dix to FCI Fairton on a closer supervision request. While my journey was not a diesel therapy nightmare, it was definitely a mini-diesel. I packed my stuff on December 31st. On the 2nd of January I was called up at 8:00 a.m. I got processed and placed in the bullpen with 10 other prisoners. I proceeded to sit there until 2:00 p.m., when we were sent back to the compound. Oops—we were leaving tomorrow. We had spent the whole day in a tiny holding cell for no reason. We were sent back to the compound with no sheets, no blankets, no toothpaste, no soap, no toilet paper, and no change of clothes. And we had no property—that was already boxed up.

The next morning, we were called up again. The whole processing procedure was completed for the second time, and finally, in the late afternoon, we heard the clank of chains. Salvation had come in the form of the Lewisburg BOP bus crew.

GUIDES

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We were strip-searched, given new clothes, and shackled. I knew FCI Fairton was only two hours south of Fort Dix so I figured on a short trip. I asked the CO and didn't get the answer I wanted. "You missed your stop, buddy," he said. "We're going to Lewisburg." He smiled while telling me this, like it was some big joke and I was the punch line. I was going to Lewisburg. The famous penitentiary and a favorite holdover spot of the BOP.

So into Pennsylvania I went. A five-hour bus ride, followed by the whole processing/screening routine again. You would think after your initial screening they would already have a record of you, but the BOP is not only barbaric, it's archaic. Most files are on paper. You have one that travels with you, and at every place you stop, they create a new one for you.

Five days in Lewisburg. No phone, minimal reading material, and one TV for 50 people—complete and utter boredom. The whole ordeal requires a willed suppression of instinct. Every night is a toss up to see who'll be on the outgoing bus the next day. If your name is on the list they post at 3:00 a.m., you're stoked. If not, look forward to another day of nothing. The only advantage of being in the holdover is hot meals, because when you're on that bus and in the bullpens they kill you with baloney-and-cheese sandwiches with milk.

Finally, my name was on the list. I was out of there. I figured I would be in Fairton that night. I went though the same routine again: bullpen, strip-search, change clothes, get chained up, 4:00 a.m. wake up, many hours spent in the holding cell. Then it was finally time and we were marched out into the snow with no jacket (BOP policy, I guess). We ended up at Allenwood. I was getting the grand tour of the whole industrial prison complex. Next we processed to FDC Philly, then we entered New Jersey and drove right through it. I couldn't believe it. It seemed I'd missed my stop again.

Then we were in New York. MDC Brooklyn. This was a new twist. I'd always heard this place was pre-trial. I had never been there before, and I hope to hell I never go there again.

We were herded off the bus like cattle for the umpteenth time, prodded into this tiny little processing bullpen, and held there forever. No hot meals, either—more bag lunches. They didn't have any bed space in the units so they put me in the hole.

Two days I was on a bus supposedly bound for Fairton. And you'll never guess where I ended up. Eight days of traveling, after having traversed three states and going five hours west into PA and then six hours east into NYC, I was now right back at the gates of FCI Fort Dix. Right where I started.

Two hours later, I was in Fairton, where I had to get screened and processed all over. I was ready to hit the pound, hook up with some friends, but—boom—they threw me in the hole, where I waited for four

The Zen Of The Chain

1. Don't protest. It only makes them feel better. Don't ask where you are going, or why. They will only lie to you anyway.
2. When you kneel on the bench for them to put the leg shackles on, point your toes as far back as you can. Stretching the tendon on the front of the ankle will provide just that squidge of space between you and the steel bracelet when you return to a standing position. Your anklebones will be grateful at the end of each day.
3. Start to grow your thumbnails.
4. On the bus away from your home prison you'll hear speculation on where you're headed. Listen to none of it.
5. You'll notice that the seating arrangements on the buses and planes are color-coded. No matter how enlightened you believe you are on the issue of race, obey the color code. Otherwise one night your cellie is going to be a bald-headed bigot who, upon removing his shirt, reveals two lightning bolts rippling across his chest. His enquiring mind wants to know: "Why you been woofing it up with the niggers all day?" The same holds true in reverse for black prisoners.
6. A small white box will be tossed into your lap each day. This is lunch. It is, and it always will be, a baloney sandwich on white bread and one of those pale oranges with the thin skin that's impossible to peel, even without handcuffs. This is why you are growing your thumbnails.
7. Always treasure hunt. Check the bullpen, and later your assigned cell, for contraband. Feel under the benches, along any ledges, inside toilet bowels. Investigate the lump in your mattress. You never know when you'll get lucky, when someone's had to dump something or simply forgot. A handcuff key, a joint, whatever.
8. Avoid the guy hobbling across the tarmac flanked on all sides by about 15 escorts and a marshal bringing up the rear holding a 10-foot trip chain attached to his leg manacles. You can bet your baloney sandwich that this guy is just off a fresh homicide, with zero to lose. In all likelihood he has a sharpened toothbrush hidden up his ass, and he's just looking for a warm body to stick it in.
9. To survive, you must find the zen of the chain. Don't be

days to see the captain so he could decide if he would let me on his compound. I guess the regional director didn't check with him before they designated me there.

Now, as I'm writing this, not even two months later, I'm back in the hole. Under SIS investigation. Wondering if my journey is about to start anew. Check with me two years from now. Maybe I'll have some horror stories to tell. Until then, wish me luck, because this diesel therapy shit can drive you nuts.

Seth M. Ferranti

a new wave crack baby criminal. Suck up them fumes, concentrate on your breathing, find your mantra. Diesel in, diesel out. One day the bus will rumble to a stop at some front gate and you will walk in, passing by enough piles of coiled razor wire to make a knife, fork, and spoon for every person on the subcontinent of India. You will step into the induction area, they'll take off the chains and do the strip fan. You'll get dressed again but this time the bulls will direct you to the right. And just like that, you're walking down a corridor towards a mainline. You feel weightless. You have survived. Life is grand.

STEPHEN REID