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MACE IN THE HOLE

How do you push an inmate at the D.C. Jail over the edge? Pepper-spray his privates. 18

BY JOHN METCALFE ILLUSTRATIONS BY DEAN HASPIEL


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MACE IN THE HOLE

Inmates on the D.C. Jail's hardest block and a legendary hardass sergeant went to war.

Both lost.

Sgt. Melvin Reese, correctional officer at the D.C. Jail, had this thing for toilet paper. Inmates say that in September 2005 he gathered rolls of it from around his block and took them away with him.

The hoarding might have had something to do with self-preservation: Jail logs from Reese's beat on the supersecure South 1 unit show that, years before, an inmate biffed him between the shoulder blades with a liquidy TP bomb. Whatever the motive, Reese's paper harvesting presented a dilemma for inmates. South 1 had a communal stock of rolls that correctional officers were supposed to dip into when needed. Under Reese's embargo, say inmates, it was often barren.

"You couldn't get it unless you asked [him]," says Ali Pleasant-Bey, 29, who was recently on South 1 while waiting for his homicide case to go to trial. That was a problem, because Reese, who has worked for the D.C. Department of Corrections (DOC) for about two decades, wasn't always around. "Don't forget," says Pleasant-Bey, "he only comes in Monday through Friday. So if I have to shit on Saturday, I have to wait or go next door to borrow some [toilet paper]." If nobody else on the tier had any to spare, Pleasant-Bey used pieces of newspaper.

Inmates who managed to time their constitutionals with Reese's shift learned that the sergeant wasn't willing to share his private stash with just anybody. According to two inmates, Reese wanted certain people on his block to undergo a strip search before he would give them TP. "He wanted you to spread your ass," recalls Curlee Hall, 30, who's been living on South 1 while awaiting trial for homicide.

Strip searches are a fact of life on South 1, the segregation unit for "special-management" inmates—code for inmates deemed too dysfunctional for the rest of the jail. The men are stored in single-occupancy cells, usually by virtue of some jailhouse infraction such as attacking someone or building a weapon. The occasional juvenile charged as an adult might

BY JOHN METCALFE

Illustrations by Dean Haspiel

Sgt. Reese wanted certain people on his block to undergo a strip search before he would give them toilet paper, say inmates. "He wanted you to spread your ass," recalls inmate Curlee Hall.

be hanging around, as well as celebrity criminals and inmates locked up for their own good because everybody else wants to kill them. Officers, according to the unit's protocol, try to keep blood off the tiers by strip-searching their charges every time they enter or exit their cells.

The protocol, however, doesn't mention dropping trou as a prerequisite for toiletries.

Reese's demands and his running away with all the butt paper irked many of the inmates, who say he hoarded other supplies as well. "Sgt. Reese was messing with people, like picking people out of the bunch," says Tyrone Edwards, who was locked up on South 1 last year. "He wouldn't give out envelopes, paper. We couldn't even write our families....He hid all types of stupid shit." The block population was not comforted when it heard that Reese wasn't actually using the goods, just keeping them safe. "He used to have a locker" in the unit's office, says Pleasant-Bey. "He would take all the toilet paper and lock it in his locker."

Reese's cubbyhole of household products became a fixation among South 1 inmates. Folklore was born.

"It got to the point where one officer was told, 'Hey look, we can't get any toilet paper—Reese has it locked up in his locker,'" says Sabrina Wynn, repeating a story she heard from her son, Aaron Wynn. (Other inmates have a similar version of the tale.) That officer supposedly went to Reese's locker and found it secured with a nongovernment lock—so he cut the lock off. "There's all the toilet paper, the little hygiene kits and everything, falling out of his locker," says Wynn. "The guards picked up the tissue and started throwing out the tissue to the guys in [the cells]."

Reese's control-freakiness bothered the inmates so much that on Sept. 27, 2005, they made a stand to take him down—if not in rank, then at least in job satisfaction.

That day, the sergeant reportedly used pepper spray on Hall, who was standing naked in his cell after having refused what he considered to be an overinvasive strip search. The block erupted with furious, screaming inmates demanding to see a lieutenant. A select group of South 1 residents—the jail would later identify nine of the unit's population of 73—decided on a different way to draw attention to their plight. Correctional officers say they crafted crude excrement-firing devices and blocked their cell doors with bedding material.

What happened in the following 48 hours is a subject of investigation by the civil-rights division of the U.S. Department of Justice and the focus of an impending lawsuit against the DOC. It is also an example of how a single hated C/O can tip the tense détente between the keepers and the kept into a shitstorm of epic proportions.

"These are guys that are...facing sentencing of what we call '*Star Trek* time.' They have nothing to lose," says Allan Lucas, one of the first officers to work on South 1 (he's now retired). "So in their mentality, the slightest disrespect can cause them to go off. It becomes a life-and-death struggle for them....They have to give it 100 percent of all they got to get that person that's disrespecting them."

When South 1 opened for business in the mid-1990s, the jail tried to match the hard-core block population with a specialized consignment of officers. Those who had proven themselves skillful in squelching rebellious behavior were volunteered for duty on the new unit. The job entailed memorization and enforcement of the unit's many and multifarious laws, such as no yelling or banging on things, no discourteous conduct toward staff, and no headgear—to foil the dressing of escape dummies.

Yet it's human nature that South 1 officers find themselves battling most often. For inmates who have anger issues, the block's zero-freedom setup seems less than ideal. South 1 provides between 30 and 50 minutes for showering and exercise three days a week. That adds up to three days of "recreation" each year. Zacarias Moussaoui will get more daily outside time at the feds' toughest prison, the Supermax in Florence, Colo., than anybody on South 1 will.

There are no educational programs, and there's certainly no TV. In-cell entertainment includes trying to remember what the sky looks like and imagining the scent of fresh air. Toothbrushes are shortened to a few inches so inmates can't turn them into shivs. "Most of the time it was just me and my [Bible]," says Edwards, "praying to God and just hoping to get up out of that place."

The officers who patrol South 1 no doubt entertain similar thoughts at some point in their careers. The inmates have few outlets for their resentment aside from their keepers, who, according to policy, must guide them hands-on whenever they leave their cells. Though the inmates are supposed to be behind bars at all times, save for showering and rec, they're never altogether neutralized. If they really don't like an officer, they can do horrid things to him, with or without normal-sized toothbrushes.

"They call it 'pissing' or 'shitting,' where they save their feces or their urine in the milk cartons that come through. Then after they collect enough in the container, as you walk by they just toss it out at you," says Lucas. "That is the ultimate sign of disrespect. If you get shitted or pissed down, that inmate or those inmates on the block responsible can't stand you."

Strolling down the tier with an umbrella isn't practical, so avoiding the excrement treatment often boils down to an officer's savvy. It's sort of a tightrope thing. On one side, the officer wants to be considerate. After all, everything in the world that's available to an inmate usually requires an officer to first stop by and listen. On the other side is discipline. That's where Reese excelled.

The 46-year-old sergeant is a former lance corporal in the Marine Corps. His military decorations include the Good Conduct Medal, otherwise known as the "Good Cookie." Millions of Marines have worn the badge to symbolize three consecutive years without institutional reprimand. Reese apparently expected no less stellar behavior from his inmates. "I worked with him. He's a jarhead, a Marine, just like myself," says Lucas. "But always by the book, by the numbers. I know him to be a very strong sergeant."

A juvenile who lived on South 1 says Reese had the blue language of a drill instructor. "He says things that shouldn't be said. He talks about your mother or father and doesn't even care." One of his recurrent talking points was the necessity of strip searches. Claims of the sergeant's searches made enough of an impact on South 1 that three inmates contacted for this

story brought them up without prompting. People on the outside took notice, too.

"We had complaints [beginning in 2002] about an officer in South 1 who was requiring strip searches," says Phil Fornaci, director of the D.C. Prisoners' Legal Services Project (DCPLSP). The C/O identified by inmates, says Fornaci, was Reese. "[He was] having them strip-searched while they're in their cell, for no apparent reason. And there's a focus on—I guess I might as well say it—there was a focus on their butts."

On May 1, 2003—according to one of the complaints—Reese allegedly spread an inmate's butt cheeks with his hands. The inmate told him to stop, and Reese concluded the strip search and went to turn over the inmate's cell. "When [the inmate] tried to watch Reese shake down his cell," wrote a DCPLSP interviewer, "Reese slammed [the inmate's] head against the Plexiglas [window] and hit him many times in the face and chest, yelling things like 'You bitch-ass nigger.'" In the summer of '02, according to a letter the DCPLSP sent to the DOC, Reese pepper-sprayed an inmate who wanted to see a lieutenant before stripping and, with another C/O, "proceeded to punch him repeatedly in the chest and kick him in the back."

The DCPLSP brought the complaints to the DOC's brass in both years, which according to Fornaci led to Reese's transfer out of the unit. Around that time, according to one of Reese's old coworkers and a jail official, the department's internal affairs unit began to investigate the sergeant. The coworker—who, like nearly every employee interviewed for this story, requested anonymity for fear of departmental retribution—believes that inmates banded together to fabricate misconduct charges against Reese.

"Internal Affairs created most of the problems with Sgt. Reese," the coworker says. "Internal Affairs ragged this guy and nagged this guy because they alleged he did something he did not do. They investigated it, and on several occasions they really didn't have anything on him, so they had to let him go."

Three of the correctional officers interviewed for this story have had abuse or sexual-harassment charges lodged against them. A

"Every time he walked the tier they started throwing feces on him," says correctional officer Darrin Bailey, referring to the ambush on Sgt. Reese. "They threw so many feces, it was pathetic."

couple complain vociferously about being kicked off their units in the resulting investigations. Reese's own investigation lasted about two years, remembers his coworker, and it apparently took its toll on the man. When asked if Reese believes the department supports him, the coworker replies: "N-O."

Darrin Bailey, a C/O who works on South 1, says that before he began his own assignment on the unit, he had a powwow with Reese. The sergeant was a little fatalistic in his advice. "He was like, 'You going to go in there and do your job, and then they're going to get you out of there,'" Bailey says. Reese seemed to take this as part of his lot. "He just told me one thing—to be careful."

A nurse at the jail who dated Reese for a few years says that he never wanted to talk about his $54,216-per-year job. Not just the stressful or disgusting parts, but anything related to walking the tier. "We had a rule," she says, noting that they are "just friends" now. "I could not talk about medical, and he could not talk about corrections." To decompress, according to the grapevine, Reese played basketball and traveled the States. After the events of Sept. 2005, however, he was showing signs of burnout, says the coworker. "I know that if he hadn't been reassigned after this South 1 thing, he was going to ask to be transferred out of that unit."

Inmates say Reese's most recent tour on South 1 began in the late summer of 2005, about a month before things went haywire. The block pop already had a mental dossier on him. "Everybody all knew about him because he was on the unit [earlier] and had messed up stuff before," says the juvenile. Yet he didn't do much to dispel their apprehension. Inmates say he used a flashlight to illuminate their rectal cavities during strip searches. And if inmates had anything to say about that, they faced a squirt from the sergeant's pepper-spray canister. Needless to say, inmates didn't like Reese's alleged new world order.

"Everyday almost, the smell of [M]ace burns my nose from Sgt. Reese spraying an inmate down," wrote South 1 inmate Gary Thomas in a Sept. 29 jail grievance form. "Sgt. Reese is a problem. One of many in this institution that has not been addressed."

One jail official thinks the eventual breakdown of South 1 could've been avoided by assigning Reese to a different block. "He wouldn't be the type of guy I would want working in there, because he's not a people person," says the official. "To have him in a situation where he's constantly being called names and feces being thrown at him. This kind of thing constantly, every day, day in and out, 40 hours a week—it takes a special person to be able to take that."

There's one document at D.C. Superior Court that raises questions about the sergeant's people skills. On Jan. 7, 2004, according to an affidavit in support of an arrest warrant for felony threats, Reese stood for four hours outside his nurse girlfriend's office, dialing her phone and telling her to come outside. Police and jail officers had to escort her out of the building.

Later that day, he called her again. She had a friend answer the phone. After a few hangups, according to the affidavit, Reese let this be known: "Y'all don't want a piece of me. I will come to Gaithersburg and kill both of you bitches, because I am the P.I.M.P. I'll come to Gaithersburg and kill you bitches. You will be a piece of greenery because I am a gangster."

Reese later pleaded guilty to misdemeanor attempted threats. "It was a whole other side of him I hadn't seen before," says the nurse.

South 1 was cruel to Reese on Aug. 7, 2002, according to jail records. In the morning, he used pepper spray on an inmate who refused to strip down in his cell. The inmate then threw "an unknown liquid substance" on Reese.

The same records show that, at noon, a different inmate locked in his cell lobbed a wad of wet toilet paper that hit Reese from behind. The man somehow wound up in the infirmary—jail records aren't clear how. About 20 minutes after that, inmates stopped up their toilets and swamped the unit's right side with dirty water. While the sergeant was trying to contain that crisis, residents on the left side flooded their respective toilets. The disturbance ended with officers dousing a group of inmates with pepper spray—three of whom had been similarly doused by Reese in the past two weeks.

Most correctional officers at the D.C. Jail aren't so quick to deploy chemical weaponry, which is available to sergeants and above. The DOC's program statement on Mace and force procedures lays out why: There's a "force continuum" that officers are supposed to follow when deciding how to escalate battle with a dis-

ruptive inmate. First, there's a "physical presence," then verbal commands, a show of force including multiple officers and a video camera, and manhandling techniques such as cell extraction. The jail's own procedures state that it's only after these remedies have proved ineffectual that sergeants, in the company of superior officers and a jailhouse film crew to document the process, can reach for their spray holsters.

Yet some people appear to skip steps. Reese deployed pepper spray at least 13 times during fiscal years '03 and '04, according to an analysis prepared by a jail statistician. He killed his competition: the runner-up had eight, third place six, and the tallies drop off sharply from there. Though Reese had been working on the one block where even jailhouse rodents should get little canisters of pepper spray for their protection, his spraying habits appear to have veered toward a pest-control contractor's.

Maced this man so viciously, you could hear the Mace hitting the back of the shower." (A jail incident report from April 2003 indicates Reese did use a chemical agent on an inmate in the shower, but that the inmate took "almost twenty minutes" to come out.)

Pepper spray typically doesn't cause serious damage unless untreated. However, for the half-hour it can take a victim to get to the infirmary, it's pretty much hell. A dose brings on burning skin, blindness, paralysis of the larynx, uncontrollable retching, and air pipes so restricted that the afflicted person probably won't be able to do much except flail or fall down. "I don't know what death feels like," says Hall, but pepper spray, he says, is a good approximation.

Spraying inmates who won't come out of their cells or drop their pants doesn't jibe with

the DOC's policy as laid out in its program statement: "Chemical agents shall never be used as a form of punishment."

"Let's say the guy's running for the fence with a pole vault. He's got a pole, he's heading for the fence, and he's about to plant it. The guards don't have to go get the video before they Mace him," says Douglas Sparks, a lawyer who's representing inmates reportedly beaten last year on South 1. "But when he's locked in his cell—they've got all the time in the world to get the video camera and get him out of there. They can't just jump to the nuclear option."

Sergeants in the jail are given handcuffs, radio equipment, and pepper spray. If they can't or don't want to fight, one of those things has to substitute for muscles. And what's easier then depressing a trigger to release some chemical Taser?

Spraying locked-up detainees "does happen occasionally when the officers have a beef, as they call it, with some of the inmates," says a medical worker at the jail. "Some of the officers just totally dislike some of the inmates, when it really shouldn't be personal, anyway. They're just there waiting for trial....I guess these people have been in this job so long, they just feel they're going to be the judge and jury as well while they're there."

The use of spray is so widespread that some of the spray-wielders have grown to view it as the normal procedure for subduing bumptious inmates. Not just the normal procedure, but the best one. "Yes, we do use pepper spray on inmates in their cells, if they refuse to come out of their cell for whatever reason," says Reese's old coworker. "If you were locked in a cell, would you rather five guys rush in your cell and just grab you and twist you around any kind of way, or would you rather someone spray a little pepper spray on you, and 20 minutes later you wash the pepper off your face and out of your eye, and you're all right again?"

At the D.C. Jail, internal incident reports show that you might be sprayed for fighting with other inmates; being "combative"; spreading shit on the wall; urinating on the floor; not giving up your skull cap; climbing up on the cell bars; walking away from a C/O; turning too quickly toward a C/O; reaching under your mattress in front of a C/O; threatening to get back at a C/O"on the street"; not taking a shower; spending too much time in a shower; refusing to get out of bed; refusing to go to court; refusing to leave the jail; and for demanding to see a "white shirt," or lieutenant. A sure way to get sprayed, one report shows, is to dig your heels into the ground and say, "You might as well [M]ace me."

Reese's jail reports log chemical encounters with one inmate who, against policy, hung a shirt on his cell bars and then refused a strip search, as well as another who was cutting himself with a razor. Then there was the momentous spraying of Sept. 27, 2005, which occurred after Reese spotted feces in front of Hall's cell. Hall says somebody threw it there earlier; Reese wrote in his report that it belonged to the inmate. The sergeant went to Hall's cell door and ordered him to strip.

Reese said he was "looking for bottles of feces," recalls Hall. The inmate says he took off his clothes and bent over, but when Reese

If the jail's brass is to be believed, neither a new, sophisticated surveillance-camera system nor handheld camcorders captured the violence of last September.

told him to spread his butt cheeks apart, he straightened up again. Then Reese ordered him to put his arms out to be restrained. When he got near the bars, says Hall, the sergeant nailed him in the face with pepper spray. "He tricked me," claims Hall.

South 1's revenge for the Hall incident and other perceived slights was swift and nasty, to hear it from the jail's side. Detainees on one of the upper tiers filled shampoo bottles with urine and feces, say officers, giving them the power to squeeze a stream of filth far outside their cells. They ripped up sheets and covered their faces to counter the inevitable use of chemical agents, and they propped mattresses against their cell doors to frustrate extraction.

"The first officer that walked down the tier to do a security check, they waited until he was all the way down to one end of the tier, which means you have no way to get back out but to come back past them," says Pamela Chase, president of the officer's union. "On his way back [up], all of them started squirting out this combination of urine and feces. So this officer was dressed with the substance."

Darrin Bailey, the South 1 C/O, says that officer was Reese. "Every time he walked the tier they started throwing feces on him," he says. "They threw so many feces, it was pathetic."

It took two days for the jail to break the insurgency in South 1. And it wasn't a clean break.

In riot situations, the DOC usually calls upon its emergency-response team (ERT), a division specially trained in control and extraction techniques. "The overall effort of the ERT is to reduce injuries, quickly diminish potentially escalating negative events, and to better ensure a more peaceful, constructive correctional environment," says jail spokesperson Beverly Young.

Inmates can look forward to matching wits with that team sometime in the future. Right now, it doesn't exist. The DOC is "currently reinstituting" its ERT, says Young, "which was abolished at the closure of the Lorton prisons, and the resulting staff downsizing and retirements." When South 1 went nuts, the jail brass formed a riot-control team by pulling together officers who happened to be working elsewhere in the institution.

They appeared over a dozen in number, according to inmates, tramping through the dirty water that had accumulated on the floor due to inmates' flooding their toilets as they did in August 2002. Some of the posse held a high-pressure fire hose. Others had supersized pepper-spray canisters with pistol grips. Reese was in the crowd; the rest of the unit's staff had retreated into a secure office, says Pleasant-Bey. Inmates say officers cut off the unit's water supply, ostensibly to stop the flooding, and the air supply, ostensibly to prevent blowback of chemical agents onto the officers.

One of the officers, says Pleasant-Bey, cried down the block, "Who's coming out?" The inmate watched as another man volunteered—a guy who was over 6 feet tall who "looks like a football player." The officers restrained him and pulled him out of his cell. "They're running his head into everything that's nailed down," says Pleasant-Bey. They hauled him down the tier until they reached the metal gate at the end of the block.

"They run his head so hard into that door that I thought he went unconscious," says Pleasant-Bey. Then they dragged him down the steps and out of the unit, toward the infirmary.

Other officers began going down the row of cells, pulling inmates out onto the tier. When they got to Pleasant-Bey's door, one officer turned the hose on him, forcing him to the back of the cell. "About six guys" came into the cell, says Pleasant-Bey, and pinned him down with a riot shield. Somebody kicked him in the stomach. He and his mother say he was wearing a colostomy bag for a recent kidney surgery and that the kicking caused internal bleeding. "I was defecating blood until December," Pleasant-Bey says. Several officers then dragged him to the unit's exit and dropped him: "Aw man, then I got a free ride down the stairs."

Things escalated from there. "They popping these cells, dragging these inmates out," says the juvenile on South 1. Inmates who didn't want to come out were doused with pepper spray. The giant canisters, recalls Pleasant-Bey, made screaming sounds when deployed. One inmate, writing home to his mother afterward, claimed "they spray that shit in our face, on our Dick (no disrespect), all over our bodys." Because the unit's water supply was cut off, inmates reportedly had to use whatever liquid was in their toilets to flush their eyes and genitals.

Several South 1 residents say officers, including Reese, brought them in cuffs to the unit's

Pepper-spraying inmates who are locked in their cells appears to violate the jail's own rules–yet it happens with regularity. "Yes, we do use pepper spray on inmates in their cells, if they refuse to come out of their cell for whatever reason," says one of Sgt. Reese's former coworkers.

sallyport. "That's always a place they going to get you at," says the juvenile, echoing many inmates' claims that the surveillance-camera coverage in that area is nil.

Hall is one of the people who says he wound up in the sallyport. In a jailhouse interview, he opens his mouth to show off chipped teeth.

They beat him like *The Passion of the Christ*," says his mother, Glenda Hall. She saw him later in a court appearance and says that he had two black eyes and was acting strange. "He wrote some stuff for his attorney....He wrote it down like somebody in kindergarten wrote it down. I know that child can write."

Inmate Andre Miller also got the treatment, according to his mother, Muriel Miller. "They split his eye," she says, "and his wrist was cut so deep [from the handcuffs] they brought him back and put him in his cell," fearing he would "bleed to death."

More inmates wrote about alleged abuse in the suppression's aftermath. "I was [M]aced by Sgt. Reese and dragged up the stairs and into the shakedown cage w[h]ere I was ass[a]ulted by Sgt. Reese and the other officers..." wrote inmate Melvin Blackwell in an Oct. 9 grievance.

"[A C/O] and Sgt. Reese got me into the Sally Port. [The C/O] took off his shirt and took me into a little room on the left," wrote Gary Thomas to his mother on Sept. 28. "Since I was handcuffed with my arms behind my back, there was no way for me to block his punches....He punched me all in my head[,] kicked me in my balls, threw me to the ground, kicked me and punched me while on the ground, then Sgt. Reese came in and got his licks in."

"[They were] hurt up real bad," says the jail's medical worker, who remembers treating another South 1 inmate, Jerome Luter, around that time. "They beat Jerome Luter terrible.... I didn't even want to look at him," says the employee, noting that his ear was ripped and had to be reattached with stitches. "They beat him with his handcuffs on."

A couple of days after the South 1 disturbance, a mother of an inmate got a call from the jail. The man on the other end of the line was claiming that somebody had erased all the video footage of the incident.

How was such a breakdown possible? Last February, after all, the department boasted of a fail-safe video-surveillance system. "DOC Breaks New Ground with Installation of Sophisticated Surveillance System," read the PR release. "The system, consisting of 25 computers, 156 stationary cameras and 20 cameras with pan, tilt and zoom capability, is designed to serve as a deterrent to violence and provides 24-hour continuous monitoring of the entire facility."

The DOC's ex-interim director, S. Elwood York Jr., had a public forum to explain away the rumors when he testified late last year before Councilmember Phil Mendelson's Judiciary Committee. York instead played up the need for silence. The case, he said, was under investigation. "All information pertaining to the conditions of the cameras, recording of the incident has been transmitted to the US Attorney's Office," he elaborated in a follow-up letter. "Therefore, no other information can be shared."