



With all that tear gas I thought that I was going to die

By José, 48 years old, 29 years in prison, 22 of which on death row in Texas

Last week one of the most memorable moments I've ever experienced in prison happened. Memorable, as in I'll never forget it not because it was pleasant but because it was quite horrible. This is what happened: A guy on the recreation yard decided to make the administration gas him. This happens all the time in Ad. Seg. and occasionally in general population. I've experienced tear gas many times as collateral damage because it spreads far and wide. But I've never experienced it as a result of direct application. Nor have I been near someone that is getting gassed in their cell. I've always gotten the residue and that is enough to wreak havoc on my body.

The reason I got a full direct application is because the recreation yard the guy was in was right next to the building I'm housed in, right in front of my cell, and all the windows were wide open because it's nearly summer weather. When officers threw three tear gas grenades into his recreation yard, the gas just rose straight up and came into the building through the windows. I could see the cloud of gas approaching me like a scene right out of a horror movie and I knew that when the cloud reached me I was going to be in a lot of trouble.

Luckily I was awake that morning and knew what was happening. I was drafting and when I heard that someone was going to be gassed the first thing I did was cover my back vent in order to keep the gas from getting sucked into my cell. I've been through this many times, I know what I'm doing (or so I foolishly thought), so I prepared and went back to drawing.

After I heard the three grenades (tear gas) explode with a loud pop, I got up from my floor (where I was drawing) to go see this inmate fight the officers. What I saw instead was this creeping doom cloud coming through the windows and rising straight up to three rows where I am housed. At that moment I realized in horror that covering my back vent was not going to keep that thick cloud of gas out of my cell and that I was in big trouble. I barely had time to grab my sheet, ball it up and cover my nose. But the gas went through all that fabric like nothing and soon after I could no longer breathe. I had to pull the sheet away from my face because my lungs couldn't get a breath of air. It was the chemical tear gas that was attacking my body that caused my air passages to constrict so that no more of it would get into my lungs. I thought I was having an allergic reaction to the chemical and that I was going to die. But that's just the way tear gas works and after this incident I learned that all the inmates here with me were going through exactly the same thing as me.

That feeling of suffocating where you can't breathe is something horrible to experience. So what I started doing is picking up everything off the floor and on my bunk so I could lay down and die comfortably. At some point right before you pass out, your body instinctively realizes that it has to allow you to breathe even if it means sucking in those chemicals otherwise you will die from a lack of oxygen.

So my air passages relented just a little and precious oxygen started entering my lungs along with the chemical that burned my lungs so badly. Days afterward everyone's lungs are still hurting. But at least I was breathing – barely. I couldn't move around and exert myself. I just laid there and waited what seemed like an eternity until they finished with the inmate on the recreation yard and all the gas cleared away. Afterwards, I saw my eyes and they were stinging and all red exactly like when I suffer from allergies. That's how bad my allergies get! I wasn't exaggerating when I said my allergies are so bad it's like getting gassed. Except with the tear gas it goes away in a few hours. My allergies last 30 to 60 days!

Now I look back on that incident and I can laugh about it. Everyone was talking about it for days. Imagine this: some guys were dead asleep when this happened and they suddenly woke up to being suffocated to death. But no one died. I can imagine their horror.

I hope that I never have to experience that ever again. It's such a barbaric thing to put people through just to give officers an advantage in physically overcoming a rebellious inmate. Especially on an outside recreation yard where they could use up to 20 officers to subdue an inmate if necessary. Can you believe there are some inmates that like to get gassed just because they are bored and need some excitement?

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