

**Prisoners
await rescue
on a freeway
overpass**



“I was on the overpass for several days alongside the prisoners. Civilians were told not to take photographs, but I took this picture on Wednesday afternoon. At one point, the prisoners were seated all the way up the bridge. The trash in the photos is actually the belongings of the prisoners that some of them were able to take with them from the jail. When they were moved from the bridge on Wednesday morning, they were told to leave all of their belongings behind.”

-Mary Gehman, writer, New Orleans. PHOTOGRAPH: MARY GEHMAN

Sitting on the hot asphalt, prisoners began suffering from dehydration and heat exhaustion. A deputy witnessed “several inmates passing out from heat exhaustion, dehydration. About twenty inmates passed out before water was even considered to be brought to the bridge.”⁴ A prisoner from South White Street saw “one gentleman laying under a van for shade, seemed near death. . . . His breathing was real slow, he wasn’t responding. I brung it to a number of deputies attention, even a couple of nurses who was walking by and they refused to give him attention. The guy was like foaming from the side of his mouth.”⁵

Prisoners were assaulted when they attempted to stand to go to the bathroom. One man says that he was “maced several times because I either wanted to stretch my sore & numb limbs or because I need to use the bathroom.”⁶ According to one deputy, on the Overpass there were “some instances where pepper spray was used where it could have been avoided. . . . When the inmates were getting pepper sprayed, the only things they were asking for was food or water. They wasn’t getting hostile or whatever. But when they got loud, they got pepper sprayed.”⁷

Prisoners complain that the use of force went beyond pepper spray. Dozens of prisoners recall officers using taser guns on prisoners who were stretching or who asked for help. “Many inmates suffer being maced, shot at with bean-bag gun, tasered and I saw an old man being attacked by police K-9s simply because his limbs became numb & he needed to stretch,” writes one man.⁸ Another states that he watched an inmate he knew “get bitten by a dog because he had to use the bathroom and ‘stood up’ when were ‘told’ to stay sitting in the sun on that ‘hot’ concrete. . . . The guard couldn’t get the dog to release [his] leg for about 5 minutes.”⁹ One female prisoner states: “Some inmates got mace or sprayed. They brought the dogs out on us. I have never seen anything like this in my 45 years of living.”¹⁰

Robie Waganfeald was arrested several days before the storm on a charge of public intoxication; he was in New Orleans for the night after returning from a seven-week summer vacation with a childhood friend.¹¹ In a letter written to his father, Mr. Waganfeald states that he sat in the sun on the Overpass for ten hours with “no water and with National Guardsmen threatening to shoot people. Some got hit with rubber bullets, others with pepper spray. It was the most humiliating, unjustifiable thing I’ve ever seen.”¹²

Another prisoner writes:

By mid-day many inmates were falling down, apparently from dehydration or sunstroke. Many inmates were pushing and shoving one another to get onboard one of the airboats. At this time I was pushed by a crowd of inmates toward the boats and S.I.D. ordered everyone back. I couldn’t turn back, and S.I.D. began to spray the crowd with pepper spray. I was sprayed heavily in the eyes and on my back. Over the next several hours I was sprayed twice more for no reason whatsoever.

More officers arrived to relieve S.I.D. personnel, bringing dogs with them. I saw one man attacked by

V. THE OVERPASS

Interstate 10 lies several blocks away from the main buildings of OPP. Parts of the Interstate were submerged by the time officials began evacuating prisoners from OPP. Therefore, prisoners were taken by boat to the Broad Street Overpass, which rises in an arc above Interstate 10. Boats dropped the prisoners off a short distance from the Interstate 10 on-ramp, and prisoners then waded through chest-deep water until they were able to climb the on-ramp and get to the dry portions of the Overpass.

Thousands of prisoners were eventually transferred to the Overpass, where they remained anywhere from several hours to several days. When buses arrived to transport prisoners out of New Orleans, they stopped on the Interstate below. DOC officers eventually built a scaffold that prisoners were ordered to use to climb down to the buses on the Interstate. Later, evacuees from the prison were driven by boat directly to the Interstate.

When prisoners reached the Overpass, most of them were filled with the hope that their ordeal was now over. One prisoner writes: “[W]hen I made it to the bridge I thought things would get much better but it got worser. I though I was going to die that I was’nt going to make it out there. I was stuck on that bridge for 3 days no water or nothing I past out I was miserable.”¹ Unfortunately, many of the prisoners found that “on the bridge, we were exposed to even worse treatment then when in the prison.”²

On the Overpass, prisoners were placed in rows, and were ordered to remain seated back-to-back. One prisoner writes:

Apon arriving to the broad St. Bridge the guards then were placing us in rows. Each row were back to back and next row were the same. This was going on all through the night. We had to sleep sitting up in a cural like position. All through the night they continuously transporting inmates to the bridge. Placing them into the back to back position all night long. This was the most uncomfortable sitting position I ever sat for at least 10 hours.³

a dog while heading to the side of the bridge to relieve himself. I saw guards “march” an inmate past me with Taser Wires attached to his back. At no point were we given food or water, and we spent the entire day sitting directly in the sun, at gunpoint.¹³

A female prisoner states that she “had to urinate behind a truck with a rifle pointed at me.”¹⁴ Another writes, “[w]e were made to sit there, back to back, unless we had to use the bathroom, then we could stand walk a few feet away and urinate right there on the overpass in front of *everyone!*”¹⁵ Another female prisoner recalls that SID and members of the SWAT team:

made us urinate and make bowl movements in our clothes where we sat. It was inhumane, humiliating and also degrading. I and other females we on our ministrations and had no sanitary napkins to change our old ones. We wore what we had on for 3 days. Some of us had menstrual blood all over us. The S.I.D. and Swat team called us “crackheads”, “whore”, “bitches” and all sorts of other names.¹⁶

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PHOTOGRAPH: AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS