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Muslim Soldier at Guantanamo Wants Apology for Spy Charges

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WASHINGTON, Oct 13 (AFP) - Captain James Yee may have worn a US military uniform, but at the war on terror prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the Muslim chaplain says his religion aroused suspicion among fellow soldiers who questioned his patriotism.

Ten months after arriving at Guantanamo in 2002, Yee left handcuffed, accused of spying, and was thrown in solitary confinement for 76 days, only to be cleared of all charges.

In a recently-published book, the soldier of Chinese origin is asking the Pentagon to apologize for putting him through the ordeal, which he called a "gross miscarriage of justice."

Yee, 37, who was sent to Guantanamo to serve as chaplain to Muslim detainees and soldiers, said he wanted to help his colleagues understand Islam.

"My experience had taught me how little cultural understanding of Islam most military leaders had," he wrote in his 240-page book, "For God and Country, Faith and Patriotism under Fire."

Yee, a graduate of the prestigious US Military Academy at West Point, New York, whose father and two brothers were also soldiers, quit the US military after he was cleared of espionage charges.

"There are times when I fear that my ordeal simply stemmed from the fact that I am one of 'them' - a Muslim," he wrote.

"I am a soldier, a citizen, and a patriot. But in the eyes of a suspicious, misguided minority who have lost touch with America's national inclusiveness, above all else I am a Muslim."

Yee said he learned that people became suspicious because of a presentation he made about Islam to new soldiers.

"Is he on our side, or is he on the enemy's side?" one newcomer asked, according to Yee.

His knowledge of Arabic, his praying and his denunciation of mistreatment of the Koran by some soldiers fed the suspicions against him and other Muslim soldiers. Some soldiers called the Muslim group "Hamas," the name of the radical Islamist movement.

"Troopers ... claimed that we were too sympathetic to the plight of the detainees and too critical of how the MPs (Military Police) treated the prisoners," Yee wrote.

"The accusations were retold and exaggerated in backyards and on the beaches during the hot Cuban evenings, fueled by the boredom of restless young soldiers and discount vodka."

Yee said he was accused by a linguist of having a "subversive" conversation with a detainee by allegedly mocking a poster urging detainees to cooperate.

Every time he would visit a cellblock, guards would shout "chaplain on the block!" before letting him in.

"I sensed that the call was meant as a warning to anyone who was engaged in behavior they'd rather I didn't witness," he wrote.

"The environment at Guantanamo was incredibly hostile for Muslims, and it was impossible to ignore the palpable division that existed between many soldiers and the Muslim personnel."

About 505 detainees are held at the Guantanamo detention center, which was set up in 2002 soon after the US-led offensive against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001.

Yee also described the harsh tactics used by guards against offending detainees.

One detainee was forcefully removed from his cell after he pushed a guard who searched the prisoner's buttocks for weapons or contraband, Yee wrote.

A so-called Initial Force team of eight soldiers wearing riot gear charged the detainee's cell, forced him to the ground, tied his hands and dragged him out of the cell and into solitary confinement, according to Yee.

The soldiers celebrated their action, he wrote. "They high-fived each other and slammed their chests together, like professional basketball players. I found it an odd victory for eight men who took down one prisoner."