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Prisoners at Guantánamo have a Penchant for Pepsi

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK | CAROL ROSENBERG

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GUANTANAMO BAY NAVY BASE, Cuba -- Pepsi rules.

Successive military briefers on a recent news media tour underscored, with more than a tad of amusement, the clear-cut cola of choice among captives held as suspected terrorists at Camp Delta.

"They're not eating bad. They get Pepsi, ice cream, Hershey's kisses, fruit salad," reported Navy guard Ismael Oliver of Brooklyn, 23, a petty officer who patrols a barracks-style portion of the prison called Camp Four, and reported that the captives consume gallons of the cola from giant plastic bottles.

It was left to a visiting Voice of America reporter with Middle Eastern reporting experience to explain the phenomenon to puzzled U.S. security personnel: For years, he told them, Coke was taboo in the Muslim world because the bottling company set up shop in Israel.

So Pepsi sold to the other side under a marketing scheme that carved up the Middle East; it was called The Arab Boycott.

MARINE CORPS COMIC

A Miami Coral Park Senior High School graduate, Marine Cpl. Denis Espinoza, is giving the weekly fence-line tour these days to newcomers and visitors to the Navy base -- with a real flair that embraces both the mystique and political intrigue of the place.

"This is the famous Northeast Gate, which you see on Bad Boys 2 and A Few Good Men . It doesn't look as good as in Hollywood. But it's the Northeast Gate," the 2 ½-year veteran Marine told a minibus load of journalists, sailors and soldiers on a tour that gave the history of the 17.4-mile frontier and Cuban minefield.

Along this fence-line, 100-plus Marines face off night and day with a handful of Cuban troops from leader Fidel Castro's Frontier Brigade.

Espinoza, 22, who is of Nicaraguan background, was tapped for tour-guide duty from his regular daily responsibility as the Marine Corps Security Force Company's computer network administrator -- and he's embraced the chore with enthusiasm.

Stopping the minibus near a now-cleared U.S. minefield, he suggested some might want a souvenir photograph in front of one of two stenciled, English messages: "Enter if you dare," and "Leave if you wish."

"I guess that was Marine Corps humor back in the day," he said.

"I still think it's funny."

Contractors may come and contractors may go, but there's a small cadre of die-hard Cuban exiles who have been living on the base since the 1960s, waiting for the U.S.-Cuban political climate to change so they can go back home.

CACTUS CURTAIN

But an elderly worker named Claude B. McPherson could not wait for the so-called Cactus Curtain to come down.

The man who worked for 50 years at the Navy Public Works Department here passed away late last year and, through a diplomatic handoff not unlike the return of Cuban asylum seekers who don't meet U.S. requirements, his remains were returned through the Northeast Gate for burial in his hometown, Caimanera.

McPherson had been a day-worker on the base since 1943, a so-called commuter. By 1968 he tired of the conflict that had seen Castro complain that the United States was stealing water and the United States build its own desalination plant. So he requested asylum here, never went home, and retired from government work in 1993. He continued to live in base housing, considered an unofficial historian, under a pledge from the Navy secretary.

A CRYPTIC MESSAGE

U.S. diplomats and military officers here learned of a pending change in Castro's representative to talks with the U.S. military through a cryptic message via a computer link that U.S. and Cuban officers use to avoid misunderstandings over the minefield.

Cuban army Brig. Gen. José Solar Hernández added his impending retirement to the agenda of last month's regular fence-line meeting.

Solar was only the second Cuban commander to engage the Americans since the two sides instituted the fence-line meetings amid the rafter crisis of the mid-1990s.

Solar introduced the Cuban navy officer who is now the main interlocutor between the Pentagon and the Cuban military, Capt. Pedro Roman Cisneros.

Because the Cuban navy is mostly engaged in coastline patrols these days, it may make sense that Cuba is drawing from the navy this time rather than ground forces: A major interest of both sides is keeping would-be Cuban asylum seekers from entering the base.