

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

First Navy Admiral Takes the Helm at Guantánamo

The Pentagon named the first Navy admiral to relieve a succession of Army generals and take charge of the prison camps for terror suspects at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

CAROL ROSENBERG
Miami Herald
February 23, 2006

WASHINGTON -- The Pentagon has chosen an admiral as the next commander of the controversial prison for suspected terrorists at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, continuing a year-long shift from the Army toward the Navy.

Rear Adm. Harry Harris, a 28-year Navy veteran whose specialty is surveillance aircraft, becomes the first naval officer to run the sprawling center. Previous commanders have been Army generals.

"The Army pulled its weight for the first couple of years and the Navy has stepped up and contributed to the detention operations," said Army Col. Bill Costello, spokesman for the Southern Command in Miami, which supervises the Joint Task Force that runs the prison camp.

Harris' Navy biography says he was born in Yokosuka, Japan, grew up in Tennessee and Florida and has logged 4,400 flight hours in maritime surveillance, more than 400 of them in combat operations.

He has flown or directed U.S. air missions over the Middle East since the Reagan administration's airstrikes on Libya, and also served in the U.S. wars to liberate Kuwait in 1991 and rid Afghanistan of al Qaeda and the Taliban in 2001. He also helped plan the Navy's role in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the operation that toppled Saddam Hussein.

A rear admiral, the equivalent of a one-star general, he is currently at Navy headquarters here, in charge of antiterror "force protection." He said in a statement Wednesday that he was keen to command such an outstanding group of joint military professionals who perform such an important mission in the Global War on Terror."

Harris takes charge next month, amid the latest round of controversy over the 4-year-old prison camps where the United States is holding nearly 500 men and several teenagers as "enemy combatants." Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld recently dismissed a call by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan to close the prison, following condemnation by a team of United Nations human rights fact-finders.

DETAINEE TREATMENT

And The New York Times reported Wednesday that the Southern Command chief confirmed at a Washington, D.C., breakfast with Pentagon correspondents that military medical personnel have been strapping down hunger-striking captives for forced feedings through their noses.

Army Gen. Bantz Craddock said the military began using the "restraint chairs" on "hard-core" detainees who had been "purging" their liquid nutrition either by siphoning it off or vomiting.

Guantánamo's prison camp commander has typically been the Pentagon's point man in defending prison conditions there, and Harris is no stranger to military controversy.

As a P-3 spy plane squadron commander in the mid-1990s in California and Washington state, his crew included Petty Officer Keith Meinhold, a career sailor who had declared his homosexuality on Nightline and fought a long legal battle to stay in the military.

RESPECT

Harris was "one of the smartest people I've known," said Meinhold, who retired under Harris' command in 1996 after nearly 17 years in the Navy and now works at an investment firm in Miami.

"Commander Harris had wonderful potential and everyone knew that; people actually reenlisted to stay in his squadron," he said. "He always treated me as fairly as he could. I think he cared more about the quality of the sailors working for him than the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. I would not hesitate to work under his command again."

The prison was a mostly Marine operation when it opened in January 2002, but swiftly handed off operations to an Army general and to military police called up from the Army reserves and national guard units.

In the past year, however, the Pentagon has deployed a professional guard force of Navy police, called Masters at Arms, who are trained to handle captives considered high-risk and potentially suicidal.