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Base Commander Replaced

Guantánamo Bay is getting a new Navy base commander amid an investigation of the previous captain's management practices.

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The Navy has dispatched a former Key West commander to Guantánamo Bay to run the Navy base -- including direct talks with a Cuban general -- following the sudden removal of the base captain, a spokesman said Monday.

Navy Capt. Lawrence Cotton took over the sensitive job on Saturday in an interim capacity at the base in southeast Cuba best known as home to the Pentagon's prison for terror suspects, said Navy spokesman Pat Dooling.

In a surprise move, the Navy announced that Rear Adm. Annette Brown had fired Navy Capt. Leslie McCoy as base commander after an investigation into his management of the 45-square-mile base, the last Cold War outpost in the hemisphere.

'LOST CONFIDENCE'

"She lost confidence in his ability to effectively lead," a Navy announcement said.

McCoy's removal was not related to the Bush administration's controversial 3-year-old interrogation center for war-on-terror captives, Dooling said. That is considered a base tenant and is run by another commander -- a one-star Army general who answers directly to the Southern Command.

In fact, members of Congress toured the prison camp on Monday, part of a Bush administration campaign to show that the 520 captives are held in humane conditions.

Dooling also said there was no connection between the decision to relieve McCoy and his role as the top U.S. officer authorized to have routine talks with the Cuban military.

"It has nothing at all to do with detainee operations or with interaction with the Cubans," he said on Monday from Jacksonville, where Cotton most recently served as chief of staff for the Navy Southeast region. "It focuses on inappropriate personnel and management practices."

The admiral notified Capt. McCoy that he was being relieved on Friday, following a three-month Navy Inspector General investigation of McCoy's leadership. Dooley said the probe included "statements and interviews of numerous persons -- including active duty officers and enlisted, civilian employees and their family members."

He would not give details, citing privacy protections. The Herald has filed a Freedom of Information request for the report that led to the dismissal.

Cotton is an airman. He joined the Navy in 1977, has worked at the Pentagon and before his Jacksonville job ran the Key West Naval Air Station until July 2003.

His responsibilities include command of an airstrip and port used by U.S. law enforcement aircraft and boats patrolling the Caribbean and quasi-diplomatic contact with a senior Cuban army officer.

BUSTLING EXPANSION

McCoy arrived in March 2003, a time of bustling expansion, and he announced plans to impose a stricter military lifestyle at the once sleepy, remote base. He had "colors" played twice a day through the public address system as the American flag was raised and lowered, a ritual that brought base traffic to a stop. And he planned to have contract laborers rearrange palm trees into a row along Sherman Avenue -- a scheme that was stymied in part because it required special equipment brought in by barge.

Successive Navy commanders have likened the job to a small-town mayor, in part because Guantánamo feels like small-town America.

Beyond the prison camp on a bluff overlooking the Caribbean, the base has a school for sailors' children, plants to provide power and desalinated water for about 10,000 inhabitants, a golf course, a chapel and a McDonald's -- all serving a mixed military and civilian contract workforce.

It is governed by military law, meaning the captain can discipline residents, impose curfews and supervise contents of the base newspaper.

As base commander, McCoy also met monthly with Cuban army Brig. Gen. José Solar Hernandez on issues shared by Cuba's so-called Frontier Brigade and the 100-year-old base, which Fidel Castro has wanted closed since his 1959 revolution.

Past commanders have said the Pentagon established the direct talks in 1995 to coordinate migrant issues and to defuse any potential tensions between Cuban troops and bU.S. Marines who guard a 17.4-mile fence line and minefield.

An example: The U.S. military notifies the Cubans of planned live-fire exercises involving explosives, so the Cubans will not mistake them for an invasion. It was agreed at one of the so-called fence line meetings that U.S. cargo aircraft could fly over Cuban airspace as they delivered suspected Taliban and al Qaeda members from Afghanistan.

In his caretaker capacity, Cotton will take over those talks, said Dooling.