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In New Book Ex-Chaplain at Guantánamo Tells of Abuses

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WASHINGTON - James J. Yee, a former Muslim chaplain at the Guantánamo Bay detention center, says in a new book that military authorities knowingly created an atmosphere in which guards would feel free to abuse prisoners.

Mr. Yee, 37, is a former Army captain and a West Point graduate who was arrested and imprisoned in 2003 on suspicion of espionage. It was a case that, in the end, proved groundless, to the embarrassment of the Pentagon.

Mr. Yee was ultimately deemed guilty of minor administrative charges involving adultery and the presence of pornography on his computer, and given an honorable discharge. But those convictions, too, were later dropped.

The book, "For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism Under Fire," offers Mr. Yee's first public comments on what occurred at the camp while he was there.

In the book, to be published this week by PublicAffairs, Mr. Yee writes that Maj. Gen. Geoffrey D. Miller, the prison's commanding officer - who would later become Mr. Yee's chief antagonist in pressing suspicions of espionage against him - regularly incited anger toward the prisoners with emotional slogans delivered to the troops.

Mr. Yee writes that when General Miller visited the prison, he would tell the guards sternly, "The war is on." That remark and similar comments, Mr. Yee writes, were designed to let soldiers know they were operating in a combat environment where it was understood that rules protecting detainees were relaxed and instances of mistreatment would be overlooked.

"Soldiers know that when you are in combat there's considerable leniency in the rules," Mr. Yee said in an interview, "and the leaders, including General Miller, wanted to put them in that frame of mind."

He said that General Miller told him that he remained deeply angry over the loss of military friends who were killed in the attack on the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001.

The general, who is now assigned to duty in the Pentagon, declined through a spokesman to comment on the book.

Mr. Yee says the guards were constantly reminded of the Sept. 11 attacks by General Miller and others, and they "retaliated in whatever way they could" against the detainees.

"In some cases, punishment often meant physical force," he writes.

Mr. Yee describes how, to extract prisoners from their cells, soldiers used a procedure known as "irfing": a team in heavy body armor, called an Immediate Reaction Force, would physically subdue the prisoners and remove them from their cells.

He writes that the irfing operations were sometimes needed to control unruly prisoners, but "they were doing it so frequently, so regularly at Guantánamo that I came to believe it was solely to rile the prisoners."

He says some prisoners were irfed because of such violations as having extra plastic foam cups in their cells; the procedure would later be described as necessary to "retrieve contraband."

The military has said repeatedly that incidents of abuse have occurred, but that they are isolated and that all accusations are thoroughly investigated.

In the book, Mr. Yee writes that as he got to know prisoners through his chaplain duties, he became increasingly certain that many were not the hardened terrorists that the authorities had depicted them to be.

He says that while he was chaplain to about 600 detainees, the authorities regularly arranged for him to meet reporters and Congressional visitors to demonstrate the military's efforts to accommodate the inmates' religion. He came to believe, however, that he was being exploited to present a false image about the camp's atmosphere.

He writes that he rarely witnessed physical abuse of the sort that has since become a point of contention between the military on one side and human rights groups and defense lawyers on the other. But he says that in his tenure at Guantánamo, he regularly heard about prisoners being beaten and humiliated in their interrogation sessions.

He says he was told of the abuse by detainees and by Arabic-speaking translators who were present at many of the interrogations. He writes that these accounts were given to him months before similar accusations became public through press reports and the disclosure of internal memorandums by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

In the interview, Mr. Yee declined to discuss the details of the adultery and pornography charges against him, except to say they were used to humiliate him because the military was embarrassed over its handling of his case. He also does not go into the details of the charges in his book.

Mr. Yee was reared as a Lutheran in New Jersey and graduated from West Point in 1990. He converted to Islam and left the Army in the early 1990's, returning later as a chaplain. He now lives with his family in Olympia, Wash., where he is studying for a doctorate in international relations.