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## **Guantanamo Chaplain Tells His Side of Story**

Jane Sutton  
Reuters  
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MIAMI - Shackled at the wrists and ankles and forced to wear earmuffs and black goggles as he was driven in a sweltering truck to a small and isolated cell, the Muslim former chaplain at the Guantanamo prison figured he knew what was coming next.

"I knew from Guantanamo that everything I had experienced thus far ... was meant to soften me up to be interrogated," U.S. Army Capt. James Yee, the former chaplain, wrote in his newly released book about his ordeal as an accused spy and traitor.

"Surprisingly," he adds, "they never came."

Yee, 37, was arrested in Florida as he stepped off a flight from Guantanamo in September 2003 and held in solitary confinement for 76 days at a military prison in South Carolina. He was accused of removing secret documents from the base and told he could be executed for espionage and aiding the enemy.

Yee was exonerated without ever being interrogated or charged with spying and was honorably discharged from the Army in January.

In his book, "For God and Country," Yee blames his ordeal on "the misguided suspicions of a few inexperienced soldiers" at Guantanamo, where he said Islam was used routinely as a psychological weapon against the prisoners and Muslim U.S. soldiers were viewed warily as terrorist sympathizers.

"After 9/11, the nation is struggling to really balance national security with civil liberties," Yee said in a telephone interview. "I'm writing as someone who's lived this struggle."

### **WEST POINT GRAD, MUSLIM CHAPLAIN**

Yee, the grandson of Chinese immigrants, grew up Lutheran in suburban New Jersey and marched in his junior high fife-and-drum corps.

He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, served with a Patriot missile unit in Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf war, then left the Army, converted to Islam and studied Arabic and the Koran in Syria, where he met his wife.

He rejoined the Army as a Muslim chaplain in January 2001 and was asked to brief military units on Islam after the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States, becoming "the U.S. military's poster child of a good Muslim."

Yee, an Army captain, was sent to Guantanamo in 2002 to see to the religious needs of the prisoners and the few other Muslim personnel. His predecessor warned, "This is not a friendly environment for Muslims, and I don't just mean for the prisoners," Yee wrote.

He describes a tense environment where his loyalty and patriotism were questioned and lower-ranking guards felt free to disregard rules as the chaplain mediated disputes on the cellblocks, passed on prisoners' complaints about their treatment and wrote the procedures for handling the Koran, which Muslims consider the physical word of God.

He said he received e-mail referring to Muslims as "ragheads," was called "Chinese Taliban" and was kept under close watch as he led Friday prayers with the Muslim personnel.

### **'CLAIMING INNOCENCE ESTABLISHES YOUR GUILT'**

Accused of espionage and held in a cell the same size as those back in Guantanamo, Yee said he believed protestations of innocence would be discounted because "it's an al Qaeda tactic to say you're innocent. ... Claiming innocence actually establishes your guilt."

He was initially charged with the lesser crime of mishandling classified documents, described in leaks to the media as a sketch. He said the only secret document he saw at Guantanamo was a hurricane evacuation plan, which he had shredded.

When arrested, he did have a notebook containing a sketch of the human body he had drawn during a briefing on the physical effects of stress, he said.

His only hearing on the charge was suspended because the military had not performed a required review to determine what documents were, in fact, classified.

"You're made to believe that everything that happens down there is classified," Yee said in the interview.

He was found guilty of the administrative infractions of adultery and downloading pornography on a government computer, and those were later overturned. He would not discuss them except to call them part of a smear campaign, charges tacked on to divert public attention from the fact that the case against him had fizzled.

He writes in his book that when he phoned his wife a day after she learned of the charges from the television news, she was in their apartment, holding his .38-caliber Smith and Wesson and two bullets in her hand.

"Tell me how to use it," Yee quotes her as whispering.

He called the police who took the gun away and took his wife to a hospital.

Yee said his family had suffered irreparably and he was burdened with legal expenses. He thinks the military should apologize, if only to regain the trust of the American people.

"We entrust the lives of our sons and daughters to the military," Yee said. "Here we have a huge mistake and someone needs to say, 'We take responsibility for that and we are ready to try and improve ourselves.'"

In response, Col. Bill Costello, a spokesman for the military's U.S. Southern Command, which oversees Guantanamo, said "Those issues were taken care of almost two years ago," when disciplinary actions against Yee were erased.

"James Yee is a private citizen now and he's free to write a book about his experiences," Costello said of the book.