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A Look Inside 'GITMO'

Tour of the military base used to house terror detainees reveals a strange and secret world

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On June 20, President Bush invited journalists from around the world to take a firsthand look at Guantanamo Bay, the controversial holding pen for Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners in Cuba. His invitation came as a challenge to critics who claim mistreatment of what they see as political prisoners being held without charges.

I took the President up on his offer.

After several months of developing contacts and a monthlong application process, I was granted a three-day visit to Guantanamo Bay, or GTMO, pronounced "Gitmo" by the military.

I was unsure what I would find. Released prisoners and human rights groups have claimed that physical and mental abuse is common. The base holds 520 detainees; only three have been charged with crimes since the operation began in 2002.

GTMO is the oldest U.S. overseas base still in operation, the only one in a Communist country. In 1903, after aiding the Cuban fight for independence during the Spanish-American war, the United States began leasing 45 square miles of land and water on the southeast corner of the island for use as a coaling station for the Navy's fleet. It wasn't until Fidel Castro came to power the relationship soured. Since the 1960s, Castro has only one of the United States' \$4,085 annual lease payments to the Cuban government.

When I arrive at GTMO, I am greeted by Sgt. Justin Behrens, who will serve as one of several people who will shadow my every move. He is a charismatic soldier who has served in Iraq and Afghanistan and plans to run for Congress when his tour ends. The Army Reservist says he loves his country, and that he can't wait to meet his newborn son in Pennsylvania.

Four journalists and two military guides are in our group. Our first stop the next morning is Starbucks. The base has three of them.

Once on our tour, we visit the courtroom where detainees will be tried. It's in the Commissions Building, atop the hill where U.S. blood was first spilled in Cuba. I sit in the seat in front of a microphone where alleged terrorists will plead their cases to three strangers. The room is silent.

Camp X-Ray is next. Though unused since 2002 - and even then for only four months - X-Ray became the face of GTMO for many when the first handout photos of orange-clad prisoners were released.

The facility looks more like a dog pound than a place to house people who - we have been told - are highly trained and deadly terrorists.

The cells are little more than chain-link-fence enclosures under a corrugated metal roof. The detainees were exposed to the elements, and did not have running water or toilets. Doors were sealed with simple padlocks, now scattered and on the ground.

The maze of razor wire and fencing has begun to succumb to the elements. Waist-high grass and collapsed guard towers are now home to birds, butterflies, spiders, lizards and banana rats.

The next day we visit the current detention center, Camp Delta, considered one of the front lines in the war on terror. It is built with a splendid view of the Caribbean - water and sky as far as you can see. The camp is divided into five sections of varying levels of security. A sixth section is under construction after a \$30 million contract was awarded to Halliburton, the company formerly headed by Vice President Cheney.

As we enter the main gate, Sgt. Maj. Anthony Mendez greets us amid the hustle and bustle of military activity. He is a stern leader. I get the feeling he doesn't like journalists and would much rather be doing his regular job than dealing with us.

He takes us through the Alpha block of Delta Camp 1. I had heard soldiers on the base complain that the detainees have a more comfortable living space than they do, but I strongly doubt any soldiers would want to trade places. The are 8 feet long, 6 feet wide and 8 feet tall. Each one has an elevated bed, running water, a flushable Mideast-style floor toilet, and steel mesh walls that allow inmates to talk.

All cells and recreation yards have a clearly marked black that points toward Mecca for the multiple calls to prayer each day. In the two hours I'm inside the camp I do not hear or see any prayers, but I am shown that each has been given a prayer rug, prayer cap, prayer beads and a Koran.

After hearing a long talk from Mendez about how good the detainees have it, we move to Delta Camp 4, the section where compliant prisoners are provided with added comforts. This is the only place where we clearly see prisoners within their environment.

The camp consists of several large, rectangular buildings flanked by picnic tables, each enclosed by fence. The series of buildings surrounds a central guard tower and recreation yard. Soccer balls rest on the dry soil. Without the armed guards and razor wire, it would look like a schoolyard.

Detainees here must abide by all rules and provide credible intelligence during interrogation. As a reward, they are allowed to eat, sleep, exercise and pray together in a communal setting.

The Bush administration says the GTMO detention facility is only temporary. As we move through Delta Camps 1 through 4, I could agree. However, when I see Delta Camp 5, it becomes a tough line to swallow.

The military calls Delta Camp 5 a "maximum security, semi-permanent, hardened facility." It looked more permanent and secure than any of the three prisons I've visited in Tennessee and Mississippi. Solid concrete walls tower over the landscape. Inside, two stories of cellblocks stretch out from a central guard station like a spider web. No one can see into or out of the individual cells except the guards - by closed-circuit television.

A few of us jump at the sound of the several-inch-thick steel doors slamming shut behind us. Mendez informs us: "That's the sound of security."

The detainees in Camp 5 are ranking Taliban and al-Qaida members who were captured on the battlefields of Afghanistan. They are kept in a solitary environment where they cannot see or communicate with one another. As we enter the cellblock, Mendez requests that we not ask questions. An inmate tapping on the covered rectangular window in his door fills the silence.

We are taken to a small white room used for interrogation. The plush blue couch, rug and television seem out of place, more like a scene from a college dorm. Handcuffs stick out noticeably from beneath the sofa.

We see a medical facility and two empty cells. A sign above one door reads: "TOUR CELL."

It seems fitting that the landscape around most of the base is a desert. I can't be sure how much of what I've seen is simply a mirage. Within the prison I'm constantly reminded that personnel know that "media is on the ground." My guides and hosts are all pleasant, but so much of my tour feels spoon-fed.

I do not see any signs of physical mistreatment. But I also don't see any sign that the operation is only temporary. The battle over semantics used to classify the prisoners - and thus determine their fate - has been left to the courts to decide. After that, it will rest on the nation's conscience.

Before our tour began, Mendez told us that if, at the end of the tour, we don't believe the prisoners are bad people, we are free to take one home. Although I'm not sure what to believe about the facility from my brief, controlled view - his offer is one I'll pass on.

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