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Soldier Lifts Lid on Camp Delta

For the first time, an army insider blows the whistle on human rights abuses at Guantánamo

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An American soldier has revealed shocking new details of abuse and sexual torture of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay in the first high-profile whistleblowing account to emerge from inside the top-secret base.

Erik Saar, an Arabic speaker who was a translator in interrogation sessions, has produced a searing first-hand account of working at Guantánamo. It will prove a damaging blow to a White House still struggling to recover from the abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib jail in Iraq.

In an exclusive interview, Saar told The Observer that prisoners were physically assaulted by 'snatch squads' and subjected to sexual interrogation techniques and that the Geneva Conventions were deliberately ignored by the US military.

He also said that soldiers staged fake interrogations to impress visiting administration and military officials. Saar believes that the great majority of prisoners at Guantánamo have no terrorist links and little worthwhile intelligence information has emerged from the base despite its prominent role in America's war on terror.

Saar paints a picture of a base where interrogations of often innocent prisoners have spiralled out of control, doing massive damage to America's image in the Muslim world.

Saar said events at Guantánamo were a disaster for US foreign policy. 'We are trying to promote democracy worldwide. I don't see how you can do that and run a place like Guantánamo Bay. This is now a rallying cry to the Muslim world,' he said.

Saar arrived at Guantánamo Bay in December 2002, and worked there until June 2003. He first worked as a translator in the prisoners' cages. He was then transferred to the interrogation teams, acting as a translator.

Saar's book, *Inside the Wire*, provides the first fully detailed look inside Guantánamo Bay's role as a prison for detainees the White House has insisted are the 'worst of the worst' among Islamic militants. His tale describes his gradual disillusionment, from arriving as a soldier keen to do his duty to eventually leaving believing the regime to be a breach of human rights and a disaster for the war on terror.

Among the most shocking abuses Saar recalls is the use of sex in interrogation sessions. Some female interrogators stripped down to their underwear and rubbed themselves against their prisoners. Pornographic magazines and videos were also used as rewards for confessing.

In one session a female interrogator took off some of her clothes and smeared fake blood on a prisoner after telling him she was menstruating. 'That's a big deal. It is a major insult to one of the world's biggest religions where we are trying to win hearts and minds,' Saar said.

Saar also describes the 'snatch teams', known as the Initial Reaction Force (IRF), who remove unco-operative prisoners from their cells. He describes one such snatch where a prisoner's arm was broken. In a training session for an IRF team, one US soldier posing as a prisoner was

beaten so badly that he suffered brain damage. It is believed the IRF team had not been told the 'detainee' was a soldier.

Staff at Guantánamo also faked interrogations for visiting senior officials. Prisoners who had already been interrogated were sat down behind one-way mirrors and asked old questions while the visiting officials watched.

Saar also describes the effects prolonged confinement had on many of the prisoners. He details bloody suicide attempts and serious mental illnesses. One detainee slashed his wrists with razors and wrote in blood on a wall: 'I committed suicide because of the brutality of my oppressors.'

Saar details a meeting with an army lawyer where linguists, interrogators and intelligence workers at the base were told the Geneva Conventions did not apply to their work as the detainees could not be considered normal prisoners of war. At the end of the meeting the group was told: 'We still intend to treat the detainees humanely, but our purpose is to get any actionable intelligence we can and quickly.'

But Saar said that many, if not most, of the detainees were rarely interrogated at all after their initial arrival. They just sat listlessly in their cells for months on end. He believes that many of them were either simple footsoldiers caught up in the war in Afghanistan or elsewhere, or innocent men sold out to the Americans by local enemies settling a grudge or looking to collect reward money.

Saar accepts that some genuine terrorists have been held at Guantánamo. 'There are individuals there who I hope will never be set free,' he said, but he contends that they are in the minority. 'Overall, it is counter-productive,' he said.

Saar was an enthusiastic supporter of George Bush in the 2000 elections but he has changed his world view after being exposed to Guantánamo Bay. 'I believe in America and American troops,' he said, 'but it has drastically changed my world view and my politics.'

Saar left the army and has become a hate figure for some right-wing groups which say he and his book are unpatriotic. But Saar believes exposing the abuses of Guantánamo will lessen the damage done to America's reputation in the long run. 'The camp is a mistake. It does not need to be that way. There should be a better way, more in line with American morals,' he said.