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Former Abu Ghraib Guard Calls Top Brass Culpable for Abuse

Wife of Jailed Soldier Says Tactics Were in Place From Start

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Stepping into the Abu Ghraib prison for the first time, Megan Ambuhl was stunned. There were naked men in dusty cells, male prisoners wearing women's underwear, others hooded and shackled in contorted positions to metal railings.

An enlisted officer giving her a tour of the U.S. facility in October 2003 pointed to a group of detainees chained to a cell. He said the bars had often "been decorated like a Christmas tree," with prisoners as ornaments.

"He explained it was a military intelligence tactic," Ambuhl said in a recent interview, speaking publicly for the first time since the Abu Ghraib prison abuse was disclosed nearly two years ago. "He said it was to break the detainees that were being interrogated. It was clear it was a military intelligence facility. As I saw it, I thought that if they were doing it, it must be all right for them to be doing it."

One of the original seven military police soldiers singled out by the Pentagon for their roles in abusive techniques, Ambuhl is speaking out because she believes the truth has been obscured by high-ranking officials intent on covering up a policy of abuse. Though her defense differs little from the arguments made previously by the defendants' attorneys, Ambuhl's first-person description of the macabre world of Abu Ghraib provides a vivid perspective on how things went out of control at the prison outside of Baghdad, a place where there were few rules and little guidance. Her account also shows that some of the abusive tactics were in place when the MPs arrived at the prison.

Ambuhl has since married one of her fellow MPs -- Charles A. Graner Jr., the man the military has labeled the ringleader of the abusers -- and is on a mission to secure his release from prison.

Now out of the Army, punished with a reduction in rank and a fine for dereliction of duty but no prison time, Ambuhl says the military's top brass have dodged responsibility for what was going on at the prison by scapegoating her and other low-ranking soldiers.

By the time of her tour in 2003, Ambuhl had been in the Army reserves for about a year. She realized she was walking into something she clearly did not understand. Her unit, the 372nd Military Police Company, had been trained to do combat support jobs, not detention. She was ordered to work the night shift and said she asked few questions because she did not know what questions to ask.

Ambuhl says she and other MPs used aggressive techniques against detainees because that is what military intelligence soldiers and civilian interrogators told her to do.

She described a "roster board" that included which military intelligence "treatment" to give to certain detainees and said trainers from the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, taught the MPs how to put detainees in "stress positions." She said military intelligence officials told them to keep detainees naked, embarrass them or make them exercise until they reached exhaustion.

"We were told to handcuff people in uncomfortable positions, to put people on [Meals Ready to Eat] boxes, to pour cold water on them, to make them do physical training," said Ambuhl, who worked the night shift on Tier 1B. "We did what we were told to do."

That defense has not worked well for several of the MPs charged with abuse, most notably Graner, who worked the night shift on Tier 1A, alongside Ambuhl. Graner is serving a 10-year sentence at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

Ambuhl married Graner last April after his conviction, sending marriage documents to him to sign in prison. The Army has prevented them from meeting or even speaking, alleging that they are co-conspirators.

Ambuhl knows that many people consider him a monster but says that is because the military has done an effective job of painting him as a ringleader and because people do not know him.

"I love being around him," said Ambuhl, 31, of Centreville, who has taken Graner's last name. Their relationship developed while the two were marooned for months at a base in Baghdad after the abuse was discovered and after Graner's relationship with Lynndie R. England, another MP serving a prison sentence for abuse, had ended. "We understand each other. I put my life in his hands day in and day out, and there isn't anyone I'd rather trust with my life, knowing everything I know."

Now back in her job as a histology lab technician, Ambuhl is determined to tell the public her version of events to free Graner. She has built a Web site, which includes documents and discussion, at www.supportmpscapegoats.com, where she also has a petition on Graner's behalf.

Military officials "have been trying to conceal that it was a policy that spiraled out of control," Ambuhl said, a rare moment of anger rising in her voice. "They made us out to be the cause of every ill in Iraq."

Paul Boyce, an Army spokesman, said there have been more than 500 investigations into allegations of detainee mistreatment and that the Army is taking each allegation seriously.

"Thus far, allegations against more than 251 military members have been addressed in courts-martial, non-judicial punishment and other adverse administrative actions," Boyce said.

It was in early October 2003 that Ambuhl's unit made its way to Abu Ghraib from an assignment in Hilla, Iraq, where it conducted neighborhood searches for insurgents in what the military calls "law-and-order missions." Ambuhl, a Humvee driver in Hilla, said she received no training in dealing with enemy prisoners of war, was never specifically instructed about the Geneva Conventions and was presented with no standard operating procedures for the prison. In the middle of a war, a world away from Northern Virginia, Ambuhl did not question her superiors.

Ivan L. "Chip" Frederick II, who worked in the prison's higher security facility -- called the "hard site" -- and was also convicted of abusing prisoners, told investigators after his conviction that he, too, was shown the aggressive tactics on his first tour of the prison.

"He didn't say anything about the detainees, how to treat them, etc., but when we went in 1A, I did see detainees handcuffed to the bars and naked," according to Frederick's sworn statement. "I asked him about it and he told me MI ran the section, they didn't want the detainees talking to one another and that was their punishment."

Ambuhl's unit arrived just weeks after Maj. Gen. Geoffrey D. Miller, then Guantanamo Bay's commander, made a visit to Iraq to help set up the Abu Ghraib operation. She said some of the tactics her unit employed -- such as stress positions, the use of dogs, and nudity -- came from teams Miller later sent over. Pentagon investigations have shown that such tactics were in use on high-value detainees held in Cuba almost a year earlier, but also determined that there was no policy of abuse.

Pentagon and Army officials have argued that the abuse at Abu Ghraib was isolated to a few individuals who decided to break the rules.

Ambuhl said some of the images seen in the photos depicted events that occurred every day.

"At the very least, there were a whole slew of people who knew about it," Ambuhl said. "These pictures were in no way hidden. We didn't sneak around pretending this wasn't going on."

Members of Other Government Agencies (OGA) -- a euphemism for the CIA -- were all over the hard site, keeping as many as 100 detainees there for interrogations. Once, two men with OGA had finished interrogating a detainee in a shower room and asked her to go get him.

"They said it would be funny if I burned him with my cigarette," Ambuhl said, adding that she tossed her cigarette before releasing the detainee, who was shackled to a window.

She said in hindsight she should have intervened.

"None of us were in the right frame of mind to get help for this situation," she said. "This was the norm. We didn't know any different. Maybe that's why they sent a combat support unit to do it. We wouldn't know how it was supposed to work, and we wouldn't question it.

"I wish I had done more to stop it," she said.