

# Gitmo Jive

The real abuse at Guantanamo Bay

By Gordon Cucullu

**G**UANTANAMO BAY, CUBA—In the fall of 2001, the U.S. Naval Facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (“Gitmo” to those who live here) was teetering on the edge of oblivion, with a skeleton crew of fewer than 2,000 servicemembers on duty. Now a contingent of more than 10,000 resides here. Behind that surge: the need for secure confinement of a collection of human debris snatched from the battlefields of Afghanistan in early 2002.

These “detainees” are not innocent foot soldiers, or confused Afghan opium farmers drafted by the Taliban. They are Islamic fundamentalists from across the Middle East, rabid jihadists who have dedicated their lives to the destruction of America and Western civilization. Among the residents are al-Qaeda organizers, bomb makers, financial specialists, recruiters of suicide attackers, and just plain killers. Many of these men met frequently with Osama bin Laden. The terrorist Maad Al Qahtani, a Saudi who is a self-confessed collaborator with the September 11 hijackers, is one of many infamous captives.

In the opening salvos of the global war on terror, our forces took a lot of prisoners from the battlefield. Estimates are that more than 70,000 Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters were captured and screened. Of that number, approximately 800 were deemed of such high value for intelligence purposes, or such a severe threat in their own person, that they needed to be interrogated and confined in a secure locale from which they could not easily escape or be rescued. Welcome to the new Gitmo.

I was able to observe conditions at the detention facility, firsthand, at the end of June, when I was invited to join a group of ten former military and intelligence analysts on an inspection tour. Briefings commenced aboard our aircraft shortly after take-off, and continued until landing. We were met planeside by Brigadier General Jay Hood, the commanding officer of Joint Task Force Gitmo, whose soldiers are responsible for the security, interrogation, housing, and oversight of all the terrorists confined there. General Hood and his staff fielded all questions and criticisms, and were very forthcoming.

## Who are these men?

While we observed absolutely no evidence of torture of prisoners at Gitmo, it is clear that the daily atmosphere is rife with harsh abuse: The prisoners are constantly assaulting the guards.

Our young military men and women routinely endure the vilest invective imaginable, including death threats that spill over to guards’ families. All soldiers and sailors working “inside the wire” have blacked out their name tags so that the detainees will not learn their identities. Before that step was taken the terrorists were threatening to tell their al-Qaeda pals still at large who the guards were. “We will look you up on the Internet,” the prisoners said. “We will find you and slaughter you and your

.....  
*Former Special Forces lieutenant colonel Gordon Cucullu is a frequent television commentator on military matters.*

family in your homes at night. We will cut your throats like sheep. We will drink the blood of the infidel.”

That is bad enough, but the terrorist prisoners throw more than words at the guards. On a daily basis, American soldiers carrying out their duties within the maximum-security camp are barraged with feces, urine, semen, and spit hurled by the detainees. Secretly fashioned weapons intended for use in attacking guards or fellow detainees are confiscated regularly. When food or other items are passed through the “bean hole”—an opening approximately 4 inches by 24 inches in the cell doors, the detainees have grabbed at the wrists and arms of the Americans feeding them and tried to break their bones.

When guards enter the cells to remove detainees for interrogation sessions, medical visits, or any number of reasons, detainees sometimes climb on the metal bunks and leap on the guards. They have crammed themselves under the bunks, requiring several guards to extract them. Some have attacked unsuspecting soldiers with steel chairs. Determined to inflict maximum damage, detainees have groped under the protective face masks of the guards, clawing their faces and trying to gouge eyes and tear mouths.

Keep in mind that our soldiers—young men and young women—are absolutely forbidden from responding in kind. They are constrained to maintain absolute discipline and follow humane operating procedures at all times, at risk of serious punishment. Documents recently obtained by the Associated Press through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit show that one detainee punched a guard in the mouth, knocking out his tooth, then began to bite the MP. Several guards were required to repel the prisoner’s attack; one soldier who came to the rescue delivered two blows to the inmate’s head with a handheld radio. For this he was dropped in rank to private.

In a different incident, an MP doused with toilet water responded by spraying the offending inmate with a hose. For this he was charged with assault. Another American soldier was disciplined for cursing at inmates. One guard punched a detainee after being struck and spit on while placing the man in restraints in the prison hospital in October 2004. (“My instincts took over after the hitting and spitting,” the soldier wrote in his report.) He was recommended for a reduction in rank to E-4, loss of a month’s pay, and extra duty for 45 days.

How cooperative a detainee is determines where he is housed, how much free time he is given, whether he lives alone or in a group, and what color clothing he wears. The most dangerous wear an orange jumpsuit. Those who heed instructions earn a beige jumpsuit, and those who are deemed to be fully compliant wear white. The latter groups have daily recreation periods, live in groups of as many as ten, and receive extra privileges. The compliance rating, by the way, has nothing to do with cooperation with interrogators. Indeed, many fully compliant detainees have maintained stoic silence, while some of the most notorious, dangerous prisoners speak freely with interrogators.

Nearly all of these hardened terrorists have been well coached on how to be an American captive. Given any opportunity, they

## *The daily atmosphere at Gitmo is rife with harsh abuse: The prisoners are constantly assaulting the guards.*

will all claim torture and human rights violations. They have been schooled on counter-interrogation techniques, on how to construct and maintain a cover story, and other subterfuges to fool or deflect interrogators.

Some detainees, including one classified as a “high value intelligence source” that I was able to observe, take pride in discussing their activities and capabilities with interrogators. The man I saw brags about Americans he has killed, other Muslims he has terrorized, attacks he has planned and carried out, and what he will do to the Americans if he has a chance. He is a leader, and affirms his high rank within the al-Qaeda chain. He has started or ended riotous behavior by fellow prisoners on more than one occasion.

With twisted irony, this individual condemns prisoners who maintain silence for being “ashamed” of their past. “They ought to proclaim their feats as proof of their commitment to the cause of Islam,” he tells interrogators, while munching continuously from a box of doughnuts provided by the interrogator. Why the doughnuts? “He throws his food at the guards,” General Hood says, “so he loves to eat the doughnuts during the interrogation sessions.”

### **Too hard? Or too soft?**

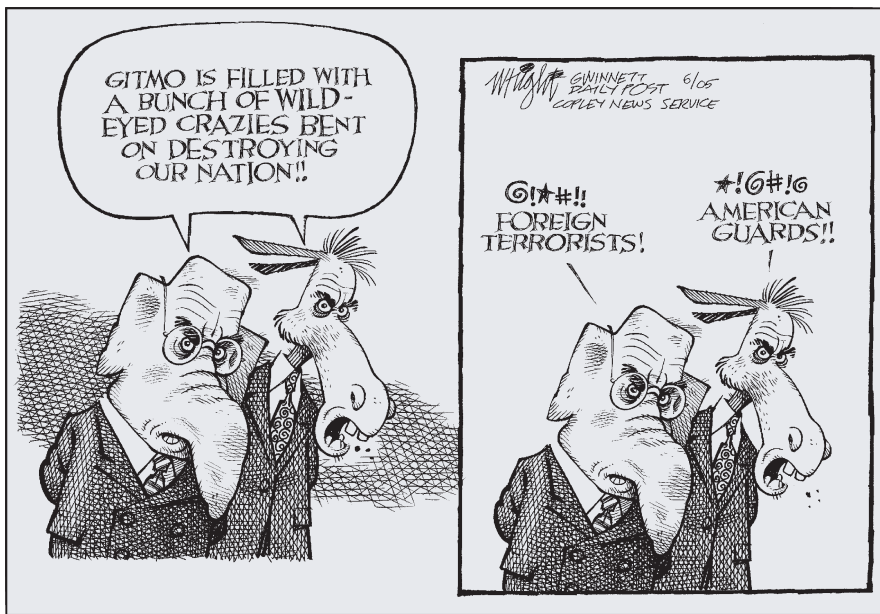
We asked Hood if he was possibly being too lenient with these men. “This system of rapport-building works,” Hood assures us. In support of the soft-handed approach, he cites an extraordinary amount of actionable intelligence that continues to flow out of the interrogation rooms of Gitmo.

His revelation was a surprise to me. During my own career in the U.S. Army Special Forces, I had been taught that intelligence, like bread, gets stale quickly. That may be true for tactical intelligence of the sort I used in the field. Strategic intelligence, the kind that we continue to collect at Gitmo, however, seems to have a much longer shelf life. Today’s interrogators are succeeding at mapping out the complex organizational and financial structure of al-Qaeda in increasing detail, thereby uncovering networks that need to be attacked and dismantled. They are uncovering new “sleeper” cells. They are learning of temporarily shelved plans for new terrorist attacks, some of which have subsequently been thwarted by law enforcement authorities in America and Europe.

Another surprise for me was learning that many of the U.S. interrogators are women. We have all heard the salacious stories about using women to tease or embarrass the detainees. I saw a different reality. The camp behavioral expert, a female Ph.D. who has more than two years of experience at Gitmo, informed me that female interrogators have been very effective.

“We assume the role of sister or mother,” she explained, “something that is quite acceptable and natural in their culture.”





## Gitmo guards in the crosshairs

Many readers will have heard stories about detainees sleeping in air-conditioned berths, while the American troops guarding them sweated in tents. You may have heard that American soldiers were eating MREs while the terrorists dined on three “hots” daily, providing about 2,600 calories of carefully varied food. Those stories were correct.

Conditions for camp guards have been improved dramatically, however. I ate heartily with the soldiers and sailors working the camps (the Navy supplies a large number of experienced Masters at Arms), and learned how they feel about their mission. Universally, they are proud of their work, although somewhat disappointed that the American public is not more aware of the difficulties

She dresses demurely for her sessions. “I wear long sleeves, an ankle-length dress, and little makeup.” The interrogation room she enters is sparsely furnished with leg cuffs to secure the prisoner, a one-way mirror, cameras, and a distress button to summon help if needed.

“We review what we know of their backgrounds, try lots of approaches, and work on them to find something that they can relate to. Once we can get them to relate on a common item, even something irrelevant and mundane, then we can begin to probe.” It is a long, complex process requiring great patience, and more than a little human empathy. It categorically rejects the use of drugs, coercion, or duress.

Intelligence gleaned from Gitmo is blended with information from other sources to connect dots. We learned that one non-cooperative detainee had his cover penetrated just last month by having his photo identified by a freshly captured fighter in Afghanistan. Once confronted with his real identity, he began to talk.

It is important to keep in mind that these men, while exceedingly dangerous and even pathological in their desire to kill Westerners, are generally well-educated and broadly traveled. Several detainees have advanced degrees in law, engineering, and medicine from American and European schools like the University of London. Others are highly skilled technical experts with advanced training and knowledge of electronics and demolitions. (Some of these are contributing to our knowledge of al-Qaeda bombs found in Iraq.) Many of these men occupied the top al-Qaeda echelons, and met frequently with bin Laden.

A lot of these men came from middle-class or wealthy families. They come from 17 different countries, but a great many are Saudi Arabian. They are not driven by poverty, unemployment, or class deprivation. They are motivated by a virulent form of Islam that promotes jihad and death to Western civilization. They will kill Americans—including women and children—without conscience, for they are convinced that restoration of the Islamic caliphate is their sole mission on this Earth.

they undergo to keep us safe.

One young woman at my table, an Army private first class, was asked what she thought about rhetoric in the American media, and from the mouths of elected officials like Senators Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Ted Kennedy (D-MA), describing our service members at Guantanamo as “Nazis.” Frowning, she answered, “It hurts my feelings to hear that junk. We try to do as good a job as possible down here. These detainees are dangerous. They try to kill us every time we get close to them, and would certainly kill Americans if released.”

I asked her if morale was affected by such political statements. “I’ll tell you this,” she replied, breaking into a grin. “Every time we get called those names we decide we’re going to show ’em. We focus on our mission and work harder.”

Guards pull several days of duty inside the wire, and are then rotated out. They need the relief from the intense pressure inside. But the time outside is not R&R; training continues on a constant basis. Gitmo has some of the most detailed and comprehensive procedural rules in the military. Supervision is constant, random inspections are common, all supervisors in the chain of command are held responsible for the actions of subordinates, and soldiers are schooled to report infractions.

The American servicemembers at Guantanamo do not have the satisfaction of tossing a grenade or shooting back at the terrorists in their midst. They will not be recognized when awards for valor are bestowed. In the face of vile abuse they must respond with supreme restraint, aware that even the slightest infraction will draw the fury and condemnation of hyperbolic politicians and reporters who loathe our military and want nothing more than to embarrass and damage American interests in this war.

For defense against irresponsible and slanderous charges, these men and women rely on ordinary Americans—those of us who rest at home in the shadow of safety they cast.

