

By Peter Jan Honigsberg

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"The first day I was at Guantanamo, they put me in a little cage. There was a toilet hole and I thought this is the bathroom and they will then take me to my cell. Later, they brought me food. 'Why food?' I thought, 'This is a bathroom.' Only the next day did I realize this was my cell where I was to stay." -- Ayub Muhammed

On August 22, 2009, the Witness to Guantanamo Project completed its first round of 16 in-depth filmed interviews of former Guantanamo detainees in five countries: Albania, Bosnia, France, Germany and England. Each in-depth interview was 2+ hours in length. Three men did not want their faces shown. We hope to film hundreds of interviews of former Guantanamo detainees. We are determined to document the systematic human rights abuses and rule of law violations at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The empirical evidence we gathered during this journey confirmed information found in the recently released CIA Inspector General's Report and memos regarding CIA's strategies and techniques of torturing and otherwise mistreating detainees.

It was very difficult to hear each man's story. The narratives were mesmerizing, powerful, compelling, unnerving and heartbreaking.

The CIA's intention to create a climate of "learned helplessness," that is, of shattering the men's spirits, emerged throughout the interviews. For example, the guards and interrogators did their best to try to break a detainee who was a fourth level black belt karate expert and another detainee who was a former boxer. The US personnel forced a hose down the throat of the karate expert and poured water into the hose. They hung the former boxer by his wrists for five days. On the other hand, a detainee who "went with the flow" and was not a "physical threat," had a relatively easier experience. He had already learned the value of "helplessness."

The complicity of the medical profession was a reoccurring theme. The boxer who was hung by his wrists for five days was let down periodically to be examined by a doctor. Then he was hoisted up again. He passed out on the third day, but they continued to hoist him up for two more days. Two other men described how they were interrogated during surgery. Each man was under a local anesthetic. Any detainee who wanted medical care needed to go through his interrogator. One man refused to ask for dental work because he did not want to ask a favor from his interrogator. Some prisoners who expected to have cavities filled, had their teeth pulled instead.

While brutal treatment was always intense at Bagram and Kandahar air bases, Guantanamo was described by many of the men as a "psychological prison." Some men were held in isolation for nearly the full time that they were at Guantanamo -- over four years in isolation for one man. Initially, prisoners were placed in isolation for five days. But, when the military learned that people could easily tolerate the relatively short periods of isolation, the military increased the length to weeks, months and even years. One man, who was afraid of isolation and willing to say anything that the interrogators wanted to hear, was advised by other inmates that isolation became less frightening with each return visit.

The prisoners responded to the treatment that they received in different ways. Some resisted. One beat up a guard, others spit at guards. Still others threw feces. One prisoner told us that when he was treated unfairly he resisted in order to make himself feel better. There was a community of spirit among some prisoners. If one person was mistreated, others would refuse to eat or strike in support of him. Several detainees used the word "solidarity" to describe their relationship with other prisoners.

Some men endured detainment in Guantanamo by reflecting on their families, their religion, stories in the Koran, and the value of patience. Others accepted their "fate," believing that they could not change it. Still others relied on "hope," expecting that they would ultimately be released because they knew they were innocent.

When we asked people to describe their worst experiences, we were surprised by several of the responses. Two people told us that their worst experience was observing others beaten while they could do nothing about it. Another person's worst experience was the unknowing of what would happen in the future. A Uyghur described his feeling of betrayal by the United States. The Americans had assured him that any information he gave to U.S. officials would not be passed on to the Chinese. When he was later interviewed by Chinese officials in Guantanamo, the Chinese diplomats repeated to him all that he had told the Americans.

The men did not only lose years of their lives while being held in Guantanamo. Their lives going forward are also, for many, similarly lost. Many of the detainees told us that they have been unable to obtain employment. Once a prospective employer hears that the men are former detainees, the opportunity for employment disappears. In addition to not finding work, the Uyghurs in Albania are also facing the prospect of losing their homes. Albania, with a grant from the U.S., has been paying their rents for the past two years. However, the payments are up in October, and it is not clear whether Albania will continue to pay their rents. If not, the Uyghurs may be out on the street or back at the refugee center.

The men agreed to be interviewed for different reasons. The reasons included speaking for history (that is, assisting us in creating an archive) and hoping that others who are still in Guantanamo will soon be released. One man participated because he wanted to "plant a tree for the next generation." He also told me that "the world is one hand with many fingers."

If there is a term that best describes the experience of interviewing these men, it is witnessing their humanity. Guantanamo is about people. Their humanity is what I will remember best.

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