

EXCLUSIVE

INSIDE GUANTANAMO



The armchairs have manacles, dinner is served via tube and there is a detention section so guarded its location is still top secret. Esquire becomes the first UK magazine to go inside the most notorious prison in the world

A special report by Alex Hannaford
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I AM STANDING waist-deep in a turquoise ocean, crushed coral underfoot, while an inquisitive iguana stares at me from a nearby rock. As wild tamarind trees blow on the windy cliff top everything seems normal. Except, perhaps, for the white radar beacons sitting on the hill behind me and the two men in full combat fatigues waiting in an air-conditioned van 30ft away.

I've come to Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, a place that has become synonymous with all that was wrong with the War On Terror and that remains the albatross around the neck of the US administration. President Obama vowed to close the detention centre in January, but today around 180 detainees, some of them British residents, languish in captivity, their "homes" encircled by cyclone fencing and razor wire. They've been here eight years and counting.

Esquire's Guantánamo journey began over half a year ago. The military couldn't tell me exactly what checks I went through, citing "operational security". It took three months of paperwork, police checks, liaising with the British consulate and being granted credentials from the US Foreign Press Centre for me to get the go-ahead and for Esquire to become the first British magazine to enter the world's most notorious prison facility.

On the wall behind a solitary check-in desk in the bowels of Fort Lauderdale airport, is a picture of a Caribbean island. Today, though, the flights aren't going to the Bahamas. Waiting for my 6am flight I meet a senior naval officer who tells me Gitmo is just like a small American town. "You even get Gitmo road rage," she says. "There's a 25mph speed limit and people get really annoyed at the jerk in front doing 21.

"Do you like diving?" she asks. "There's loads of that. There's a McDonald's. Oh and the paella is delicious at the Cuba Club."

I'm surprised our hand luggage isn't checked before I board the 30-seater plane.

All bags go through a scanner after we land, but when I suggest this is a security flaw I'm told "the Federal Aviation Authority makes the rules"; shocking, considering former Guantánamo military chief Col Bruce Vargo said a terrorist attack on Gitmo was something he thought about on a daily basis: "If you can fly a plane into the towers," he said, "you can attack Guantánamo."

MY FIRST GLIMPSE of the Bay is a surprise. It's small and mountainous and I can see a handful of people sunbathing as we come in to land on a thin strip of tarmac.

The following day, my photographer and I are picked up by our media handlers: Bobby Thomas, an army sergeant, and Sean Allen, a petty officer in the navy. We're driven a few miles to a checkpoint manned by some fearsome-looking soldiers, all sporting aviator sunglasses. The small section of Guantánamo that houses the notorious detention facilities accounts for just 15 per cent of the Bay.

Camp Delta is home to four of the seven detention camps. Our guide is Sgt Shad (like most of the guards here, he refuses to give his full name and won't be photographed). He leads us into the library — a small mobile office building. Rosario Rodríguez, a small Hispanic woman and the librarian here, tells me one of the most popular "loans" is Sharh Sahih Muslim, a collection of books about the Prophet Mohammed. Apparently Obama's books, *Dreams Of My Father* and *The Audacity Of Hope* are popular too. I ask if anyone has ever requested books about George W Bush. "No," she says, without smiling.

Aesop's Fables, *Watership Down*, *Star Wars*, and a complete set of Aristotle's Ethics are all here. I also spot the prisoner self-help book, *Chicken Soup For The Prisoner's Soul*. Flicking through *Surfer* magazine, I notice a woman standing on a beach has been completely scribbled out.



"SHAKE FOR BREAKFAST, ONE FOR LUNCH AND..." A NURSE SHOWS THE FORCE-FEEDING EQUIPMENT

In Al-Arabi magazine a woman in Islamic dress has her face and hands obscured. Rodríguez says detainees request that images of women be blacked out. I ask what else they have to censor. "Anything that talks about a soldier dying," Rodríguez says. "We don't want them harassing our guards."

We move through the maze of paths into Camp Four. A sign says: "Detainees in vicinity — maintain silence". We're shown a "classroom"; the tables are bolted to the floor. Next to each is a metal ring used to secure shackles to the detainees' ankles. Here they can learn English, life skills, CV-writing, hygiene and financial skills.

Then, through the doorway, I get my first glimpse of some of the people at the heart of this story. The first thing I notice is how powerfully built these men are — tall, broad shouldered, they stand in the sun wearing white prison-issue tops and trousers, chatting to one another. One stands with his hands on his hips, and then laughs before disappearing into the doorway of a cell. Behind them, a row of washing dries on a length of fence wire.

It's true that some detainees were picked up on the battlefields of Afghanistan, but a large number weren't. Back in early 2002, the coalition offered a \$5,000

Cells have a window, sink and a hook that bends to stop suicides

reward to anyone turning in members of the Taliban or Al-Qaeda. Consequently, a large number of innocent people were given up. Some ended up in Guantánamo.

Back inside the classroom, items provided to the detainees are laid out on a table: sleeping mats, prayer beads, flip-flops, vests and loose-fitting trousers. There's a table football game, but the plastic players have had their faces scraped off — a request from the detainees, apparently, who said they looked "too Western".

We're whisked around the corner to the hospital where we meet the senior nurse. "Eight years ago we were doing bullet surgeries and amputations," she says. "Now we treat people for diabetes, high cholesterol and sports injuries."

The long ward has beds separated by

curtains and steel rings bolted to the floor. The nurse has set up five cans of liquid nutritional supplement Ensure on a table. She picks up a yellow tube used to force-feed detainees on hunger strike. "It's lubricated and it goes into their nose," she explains. Less than 10 detainees are on hunger strike, she says, and apparently all take the Ensure "compliantly". "They don't struggle. Just being on hunger strike is their way of protesting. Why the various flavours? They burp and can taste it."

We're told to keep our voices down as there are detainees recovering in a nearby ward (the nurse won't say what is wrong with them, citing the Hippocratic Oath, though she hasn't named them — no official list of detainees has ever been made public). The intensive care ward really is particularly horrifying: two beds inside what look like enormous dog kennels.

GUANTANAMO BAY WAS leased by the US from Cuba in 1903 for use as a fuelling station. From the Seventies, it was used to house Haitian and Cuban refugees, then, in the Nineties it held those fleeing a Haitian coup but refused asylum in the US on the grounds they had HIV. Today around 6,000 people live and work on the

naval base. "As far as deployments go, this is pretty nice," one soldier tells me. "It's better than Iraq or Afghanistan."

But it's perhaps not been "better than Iraq or Afghanistan" for the detainees locked up here. While things have improved over the last eight years, this is still the same place where Britons Ruhul Ahmed, Asif Iqbal and Shafiq Rasul complained of sleep deprivation, rat-infested cages, blistering temperatures, painful cavity searches and physical abuse.

Camp X-Ray, where the first 20 detainees were taken in January 2002, has become synonymous with detainee abuse at Guantánamo. The image of Middle Eastern men — some barely in their teens — in orange jump suits, wearing goggles and ear defenders, shackled at their hands and feet and kneeling on asphalt is the picture that accompanies almost every article about this place. Naturally, the military is keen to prove that image is no longer relevant.

Camp X-Ray was closed in April 2002 but the US has been forced to leave it intact due to pending legal cases. It sits in a bowl between towering hills, not far from the coast. It's not big — just a series of pens with galvanised steel roofs, surrounded by razor wire and three levels of fencing. It's quiet and warm. Stand still for longer than a second and bugs bite your neck. Looking down from a nearby hill, I can see it's almost entirely overgrown; weeds reach waist height and the place is overrun with banana rats the size of kittens. You can still see the watchtowers and the bathroom blocks for

the guards (detainees stayed in their cages 24/7 unless wanted for interrogation).

I ask our media handler what he thinks when he looks at it. "Progress," he says. "How things have changed. We were forced to make a quick decision. It could have been a better one, but they knew they had to house these combatants somewhere."

TODAY, MOST DETAINEES are housed in camps modelled on US prisons. Camp Five is for the "non-compliant detainees" (who wear orange jumpsuits) and we're shown around by another officer. "They're strictly housed according to what they've done since they've been at Guantánamo Bay — not what they did on the outside," he says.

Cells have a window, a sink and clothing hooks that bend if weight is applied to them to prevent suicides. The last was a year ago when Yemeni prisoner Mohammad Ahmed Abdullah Saleh Al Hanashi hanged himself. He was the fifth detainee to take his own life.

All prisoners are now checked every one or three minutes depending on the risk they pose to themselves. Some are monitored constantly. If a detainee assaults a guard (usually by throwing faeces or urine), privileges are removed. The guards wear Perspex masks.

We're shown the "TV room" — a tiny cell with a La-Z-Boy-style chair in the middle and a television. "Only compliant detainees get to come in here," he says. "They are placed in humane restraints and we offer 15 different DVDs a week and we

have a satellite hook-up. They really like soccer. I believe they watch Al Jazeera too."

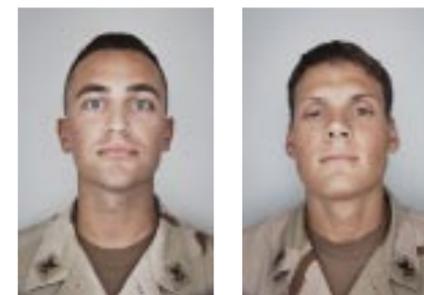
He leads us round the corner and shows us the shower. There is no privacy here — a guard stands at the glass door of the cubicle, and behind him is a control room. "We control how hot or cold the water is," he says. "If it got real hot and steamy we wouldn't be able to see them."

From behind a two-way mirror I see a detainee kneeling down in the outdoor recreation area, praying. He has long black hair and a full beard and I see him touch his forehead on the ground. To his right, in another cage, is a detainee in a wheelchair.

Next door at Camp Six we're shown a "pod" of communal cells where five detainees mill around. One is inscribing his name on a Tupperware box. "That's his lunch," a guard tells me. Another sits down at the back of the room, reading. "Their favourite drink is Pepsi," the guard tells me. "Monday is Pepsi day."

The officer in charge of Camp Six is a small African American in his forties. He says he had worked at Camp X-Ray and was re-assigned to Guantánamo last year. Few guards today worked here back then, and I ask him to tell me about X-Ray. "I have orders not to talk about it," he says. I push him but he won't budge. I'm later told there is no regulation that prevents anybody from talking about X-Ray. Apparently, "if he chose not to, then it was a personal choice".

Later that day I meet two Guantánamo guards. AC2 Golden and AC2 Roberts are both 23 years old but look younger. I ask



ADMIRAL COPEMAN BOTTOM LEFT AND GUARDS



RAT-RUN: OVERGROWN AND DESERTED, CAMP X-RAY IS LEFT TO DECAY

how Golden, a chisled-jawed Californian with perfect teeth, felt when he was assigned here. "I was nervous, like any other human being would be," he says. "But my family are supportive of me being in the military. They know I'm a good person and I'm going to be professional. My biggest problem is being away from them. You get island fever here."

Roberts, a young seaman with piercing eyes, says he knew the camp had a terrible image but he was largely ignorant of its past when he arrived. "I immediately called my mum," he says. "I didn't want them to think I'd do anything like that — it's not who I was raised to be. I said, 'I don't know what history you know about Guantánamo, but that's not what it is now.'"

Roberts says it's hard to remain neutral sometimes. "We still have our own troops and seamen in Afghanistan and Iraq, so sometimes it's hard for people — someone might have a brother who's serving there and may have adverse feelings to someone with brown skin."

Our media handler, Sean Allen, is a reservist in the navy and worked for a medical supply company in Florida before he got deployed to Guantánamo. His room on the base is tiny but immaculate.

There's a microwave, laptop, a flat-screen TV and a small double bed. He keeps his military-issue boots on top of a tall wardrobe. These small mobile cubicles with shared bathrooms are assigned to anyone below the rank of petty officer 1st class in the navy. The top brass enjoy ocean views from houses fringed by palms.

The few shops on the base sell all you could need. There's a supermarket with a meat and fish counter, beer and wine, household goods and vegetables. There are smaller convenience stores too and among the sun cream, toilet paper and postcards are M16 cleaning kits and an aisle stocked with Myoplex muscle-building powder.

Persuading a sceptical media that things have changed here is a tough assignment. And, generally, they do a fairly good job in damage limitation, particularly when even the President has acknowledged that this place has hurt US national security interests and become a "recruiting tool for Al-Qaeda". Most of the people I meet are assigned for between six months and a year so there is no "institutional memory". The problem, of course, is that the detainees were here in 2002. And for them, the days of forced interrogations and rough treatment surely seem like yesterday.

Each afternoon, our photographer has to endure all his pictures being scrutinised. You can't capture images of the radar beacons on the hills; faces of detainees (you can't photograph faces of anyone, in fact, unless they've given permission); unmanned watchtowers; two watchtowers together; a manned watchtower if the guard's face is showing. About 30 per cent of his images are deleted by military censors.

I'm introduced to Zak (he won't reveal his full name), a Jordanian who came to the US when he was 19. Now 52, he works as a cultural advisor to the military — first in Iraq, now here. His job, he says, is to act as a bridge between the two cultures: "I help people understand each other. I make everybody who deals with the detainees aware of their culture and religion."

I ask how the detainees relate to him as a Muslim. "I've been called a traitor and everything but I've shown them over the years I do not take anybody's side. I don't take the guards' side, I don't take the detainees' side."

I ask if he works in all the camps at Guantánamo Bay. "All," he says, "except..." "Camp Seven?" I ask. "Yes."



A GUARD SHOWS OFF THE RESTRAINING DEVICES



TABLE FOOTBALL PLAYERS HAVE HAD THEIR FACES SHAVED OFF; A REQUEST FROM DETAINEES WHO SAID THEY LOOKED TOO WESTERN



ILL-FEELING STILL LINGERS FROM CAMP X-RAY DAYS



HAVING A BUD, WATCHING THE GAME — GITMO STYLE



TOUGH LESSONS: THE COMMUNAL "CLASSROOM" AT CAMP DELTA DETENTION CENTRE. DETAINEES SIT ON PLASTIC CHAIRS AND ARE SHACKLED BY THEIR ANKLES

Two years ago the Associated Press revealed the existence of Camp Seven. "Somewhere amid the cactus-studded hills on this sprawling navy base," it said, "is a jailhouse so protected that its very location is top secret."

All that Guantánamo's commanders — and the White House — will admit is that Camp Seven exists and that it houses key Al-Qaeda members. I turn to Maria Blanchard, another public affairs officer assigned to help with our visit. I ask if we can visit Seven. "Out of the question," she says, adding that not even she or her commander have been there. I say that if the aim is to rectify the old image of Guantánamo, it all needs to be open to media scrutiny. How do I know that Camp Seven doesn't look like Camp X-Ray?

The one man who can tell me this is Rear Admiral Tom Copeman, commander of the Joint Task Force. I wait for him in the public affairs office where I spot a small fridge with a sticker proclaiming "Everybody loves Donald Rumsfeld". I'm not quite sure whether it's a joke.

Admiral Copeman landed the top job here last summer but he's already in line for a transfer. "I was a little surprised when I got the job," he admits. "I have no background in detainee operations. I'm a surface warfare officer in the navy and I didn't know much about the place."

On his desk is a book on the Geneva Convention — the US has been criticised for picking and choosing which bits to adhere to. I ask whether he had any reservations when he found out he was

A sticker on the fridge proclaims "Everybody loves Donald Rumsfeld"

moving to Gitmo. "I've been here for 10 months," he says, "and that image — with the abuse and orange jumpsuits — is very, very outdated. I don't know how to go about changing it. The detainees are treated well. But it's the 'poisoned well' analogy: once it's poisoned, no matter how many tests you show the people in the village that it's OK to drink, they'll be reticent."

I ask if mistakes were made. Admiral Copeman laughs. "That's fairly obvious."

I ask about the secrecy involving Camp Seven, but he says it's a policy that's come from the top. "It's for national security reasons," he says. "The Red Cross has access to it, but right now the classification guiding its location is secret."

Obama said last year that Gitmo would close this January. Did Copeman think he'd still be here? "We spent most of last summer and the early part of Fall very aggressively pursuing plans on what we would do after the last detainee left," he says. "I've read that the administration still desires to purchase a facility in Illinois [a former prison], which is unused, and at some point, with Congress's approval,

they'll move the operation from here to there. I can't predict what the timeline will be and I don't know what the resistance will be in Congress — there's an election coming up."

ON MY ARRIVAL home, I call Clive Stafford Smith, the UK-based director of the human rights group Reprieve, who has represented scores of detainees at Guantánamo. He says that in some ways things at the detention camp are worse than ever. "There is a lot of depression among the people we represent because they thought they'd be home by now. Obama promised to close it; now it's not going to close. It's so politicised," he says.

Stafford Smith says you can't hold people without any hope, indefinitely, in isolation. "This is the sort of treatment that drives people mad," he says, "and the physical conditions in Guantánamo are harsher than death row in most US states."

I tell him the Admiral claimed "advanced interrogation techniques" have only been approved for use on two people. "I don't buy that," he says. "In fact I don't know of any prisoner on whom they weren't used. Whether they still are using them against some prisoners I wouldn't know. But by and large they're not interrogating them any more because there's nothing left to learn. So why on Earth are they still holding them?"

It's a question the detainees would like an answer to as well. For now, it seems, they remain pawns in a political game; one they haven't a hope of winning. ☹