

Soldier beaten at Guantanamo in interrogation training

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29 May 2004

In an incident that confirms the routine torture and brutalization of prisoners in the US detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, a former soldier there has revealed that he was savagely beaten and suffered brain damage when he posed as a prisoner as part of a training exercise.

Spc. Sean Baker was then a member of the 438th Military Police Company of the Kentucky National Guard. He told a local television station in Lexington, Kentucky, this week that he had been ordered to wear a prison uniform to play the role of an uncooperative detainee for a training exercise in January 2003.

The four MPs in the training session, from the 303rd Military Police Company based in Jackson, Michigan, did not know the man in their custody was not really a prisoner. When Baker began resisting their orders and hid under his bunk, they beat and choked him and slammed his head against the floor.

The four guards were practicing the techniques employed by the Emergency Response Force (ERF) at Camp Delta, the most brutal of the Guantanamo facilities. Released prisoners have told harrowing stories about violent abuse by the ERF, which was called in to administer violent punishment for prisoners who resisted interrogation. The unit's acronym became a verb in the parlance of the camp, as prisoners were threatened with "ERFing" if they did not cooperate.

Previous training exercises had involved volunteers who kept their military uniforms on and were known by the ERF to be role-playing. Baker said his lieutenant told him to put on the orange jumpsuit to make the training "more realistic." He said he later learned that the officer had not told the ERF members that it was a drill. They thought he was an actual prisoner, so they treated him accordingly.

In an interview with the local television station,

Baker said he had initially been reluctant to put the orange prison suit over his military uniform, but his lieutenant "told me to trust him, that nothing would happen and that I'd be fine." The officer gave him a code word which would be the signal to end the exercise if his safety was in question.

The four MPs burst into his cell in riot gear, pulled him out from beneath the bunk, and began assaulting him, twisting his legs, hitting and choking him. "Unfortunately one of the individuals got up on my back from behind and put pressure down on me while I was face down," Baker said.

"Then he—the same individual—reached around and began to choke me and press my head down against the steel floor. After several seconds, 20 to 30 seconds, it seemed like an eternity because I couldn't breath. When I couldn't breath, I began to panic and I gave the code word I was supposed to give to stop the exercise, which was 'red.'"

The beating did not stop. "That individual slammed my head against the floor and continued to choke me," he said. "Somehow I got enough air, I muttered out, 'I'm a U.S. soldier, I'm a U.S. soldier.'" Even these words—in Kentucky-accented English—failed to stop the attack, until his attackers ripped apart the orange jumpsuit and saw that Baker was wearing parts of his military uniform underneath.

Baker was treated at the Guantanamo infirmary for cuts and bruises, given a brain scan, and pronounced fit for duty. But a few months later he was sent to Walter Reed Medical Center near Washington DC for a medical consultation. He was treated repeatedly at Walter Reed in the course of the next year, and was hospitalized for two months for seizures, before being medically discharged from the military last month.

He is now unemployed, disabled and suffering

flashbacks of the attack. He is taking several medications to control seizures which still occur frequently. “It all stems from the training incident,” Baker said. “The seizures are the result of the brain injury.”

Baker showed the press the report of a military physical evaluation board stating that he suffers from mood and seizure disorders caused by a traumatic brain injury he sustained while “playing (the) role of (a) detainee who (was) non-cooperative and was being extracted from (a) detention cell in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Soldier is mentally competent.”

Captain David Page, a Guard spokesman, declined to discuss Baker’s case with the Associated Press, saying only, “There was a training accident, after which he was medically discharged.”

The Pentagon even denied there was any connection between the Guantanamo assault and Baker’s condition, with a spokeswoman for the Southern Command claiming that his hospitalization at Walter Reed was for an unrelated condition.

The spokeswoman said that an inquiry at Guantanamo had determined that Baker’s injuries were a “foreseeable consequence” of the exercise, not the result of misconduct by the soldiers involved. Military officials refused to discuss the details of the case, citing Baker’s own right to privacy as the reason for the cover-up.

Baker, now 37, enlisted in the Kentucky National Guard in 1989, serving in the Persian Gulf War, and left the military in 1997, only to reenlist after the September 11 terrorist attacks. “All I wanted to be is a soldier,” he told WLEX television, “I want to hold them accountable. I feel like I’ve been betrayed by my own troops because I would never have done to any detainee ... what happened to me. I don’t want this to happen to anyone else, what I’m living with daily.”

According to a report in the local press in Baker’s home town, Georgetown, Kentucky, he met with a Lexington attorney May 26 to discuss a possible lawsuit against the military.

Renee Baker, the injured soldier’s wife, said those who beat him should be held accountable. “It’s just not fair how they did it,” she told the press. “That’s my only beef about it. He would never say anything bad about the military. He loves it through and through, and he’s still a soldier. He always will be a soldier, but they

should help him.”

Baker told WLEX that he didn’t witness other incidents of brutality at Guantanamo. “I didn’t witness any other abuse other than the abuse I witnessed firsthand, which is what happened to me,” Baker said. “I consider what happened to me abuse. I will call it ‘excessive use of force’.”



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