

Dress rehearsal for torture in Iraq

Former US soldier speaks on near-deadly beating at Guantanamo

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On Wednesday, ABC News interviewed Sean Baker, a former US Army Specialist First Class, who was nearly killed by his fellow soldiers during a training exercise at the Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, prison camp. The interview conducted by Brian Ross presented a chilling real-time counterpoint to Bush administration denials that it routinely ordered the torturing of prisoners. It revealed instead a compelling picture of training in the kinds of systematic violence and abuse being meted out to prisoners both at Guantanamo and at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

While the army maintains that Baker, 37, who was medically discharged after the incident, suffered only minor injuries, official medical records reveal that he suffered permanent brain damage that has led to a complex seizure disorder. The incident occurred in January 2003, many months before reports of the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib began to surface. In what was supposed to be a “role-playing” exercise designed to simulate the proper treatment of prisoners who refuse to cooperate, Baker donned the orange prison jumpsuit worn by alleged Taliban and Al Qaeda prisoners and was instructed to “be uncooperative.” According to Baker, he was told to crawl underneath his bunk and not respond to his captors.

Evidently, the military police involved in the exercise were led to believe he was a real prisoner and proceeded to beat and choke him. During the interview, Baker vividly described the intensity of the violence he was subjected to. “I could not breathe. So after a few seconds, I presume, I began to panic because I could not breathe, and I was just trying to get up and they just, you know, escalated the force. They just torqued it up. And from that point, the individual that was behind

me slammed my head against the steel floor a few times, several times. And split my head over the top and on top of my right eye.”

Baker explained that when he used the code word “red” to call for the termination of the exercise, his fellow soldiers did not respond. It was only when the beatings being administered caused the partial removal of the orange jumpsuit revealing his Army uniform underneath that the soldiers realized he was not an actual prisoner.

But Baker’s ordeal did not stop there. When he was removed from the cell, dogs of the prison canine unit, trained to attack anyone in an orange jumpsuit, began to attack Baker. “I moved out into the causeway and the canine unit was going wild...and someone screamed, yelled back and said, ‘Cut the suit off of him. Get that suit off him!’ ”

Sean Baker is a veteran of the first Gulf War and reenlisted after 9/11. He is currently living in Kentucky and cannot work. Moreover, he has yet to receive the disability payments promised him by the military. According to his attorney, Brian Simpson, the Army has justified the intensity of the abuse by maintaining that the training had to be as “realistic” as possible. “The way the military treated Sean is unconscionable,” Simpson in quoted in a recent *New York Times* article, “and the way they continue to treat him is even worse.... They’re blaming him for resisting, as if it was his fault for provoking a beating.”

In the interview Wednesday, Baker described the training as “excessive.” After more than a year since the incident, Army investigators interviewed Baker but initially claimed to have found no misconduct. The Army, however, now says it is reopening the

investigation but would not supply ABC with a copy of the report, maintaining that its policy is to treat prisoners “humanely.”



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