

Former Guantánamo guard details prisoner abuse

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In testimony given in December to a US human rights organization, former Army Spc. Brandon Neely, previously a guard at Guantánamo, detailed the torture and abuse that he witnessed or personally participated in at the notorious US military prison.

Neely's account makes clear that the inhuman abuse he saw was an integral and tacitly accepted part of the day-to-day routine at the prison. The testimony stands as yet another indictment of the entire US political and military leadership responsible for the camp's establishment and continued operations.

Neely delivered his testimony on December 4, 2008, to the Center for the Study of Human Rights in the Americas (CSHRA), a research center at the University of California, Davis. CSHRA is conducting long-term research into the effects of the US war on terror on human rights in the Americas. Neely's contribution is part of their Guantánamo Testimonials Project.

For six months in 2002, starting in early January, Neely worked as a guard at camps "X-Ray" and "Delta" at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base as part of a military police company.

Neely's extensive account of his experiences is revealing in its detail. He witnessed both physical and psychological prisoner abuse, and admits he is now ashamed of the treatment he gave prisoners. More importantly, his account makes clear that US military policies and decisions, combined with government rhetoric amplified by the media, directly facilitated this abuse.

Neely recalled how the September 11 events were exploited by the military in the wake of the terrorist attacks to shape the mind-set of soldiers and guards. Stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, he was called to the platoon office after watching the events unfolding on television: "Once we arrived we were told to grab our Kevlars and our gear and grab our M4 rifles and M9mm out of the armory, and that the United States was under attack by terrorists."

He added, "Once I found out that the United States had been attacked by terrorists I was ready for revenge. I was angry. I was ready to go to war. Someone or something had attacked my country, and I believed people needed to be held responsible for this." He told CSHRA, "I was ready to seek my own personal revenge on these people in whatever manner I could."

Immediately prior to being sent to Guantánamo, Neely and his unit were told that they would be dealing with violent and dangerous people, who were responsible for the terrorist attacks. As he put it, "I just kept thinking about what we were told all day—that we were going to come face to face with some of the worst people the world had to offer, and that these were the people who had attacked and killed so many people in our country."

Notably, Neely's unit was told that they would be "starting and running a detainee facility, not an EPW (or Enemy Prisoner of War) camp." As he told CSHRA, "We were told that a detainee camp had never been ran before, and that this would be the first time in history this had taken place

since these people would not fall under the Geneva Convention." His unit apparently received no special training for the mission, and had only basic training in setting up, but not running, prisoner of war camps.

Soldiers received a briefing upon arrival in Cuba that led them to believe that the prisoners had already been determined to be guilty of terrorist acts. Neely states, "The only thing I can recall being told about the detainees that would arrive was that they were captured fighting the Americans in Afghanistan. And that they were known terrorists. And that many of them helped in the planning of the 9/11 attacks. We would be coming face-to-face with the worst people the world had to offer. Our mission would be to guard these terrorists so the United States could get more info on attacks and, possibly, stop more terrorist attacks.

"As far as the Geneva Conventions," Neely added, "we touched very shortly on that in training. Most of what people knew about them was from their own readings." In regard to the prisoners, Neely emphasizes that he "was told on numerous occasions they did not fall under the Geneva Convention."

Soldiers in Neely's company apparently were not housed in the barracks at the naval base, but in tents near the detention facilities. Neely said the soldiers were told they "could only live one step above the detainees." It would seem this policy was intended to further prejudice the guards against the prisoners, causing them to identify the prisoners with their own poor conditions. For Neely, at least, these conditions appear to have had the opposite effect.

Also contributing to Neely's decision later to speak out against the conditions at Guantánamo were his interactions with some of the prisoners, especially those who could speak English, one of whom was the Australian David Hicks. As Neely put it, "He just reminded me of a guy I would have just gone out and had a beer with.... He was a normal guy like me. And not much older. He would sit there, crack a joke, and make small talk. Just like any other normal person would. During these times is when I really started to look at the detainees as real people and not just monsters, as I had been told they were. This man had a family and people that loved him as I had. And we both missed them greatly, and we both wanted to return back to our families as soon as we could."

Neely would return to this theme later in his testimony: "I know that being in the position I was in as an active duty military police officer guarding the MOST dangerous men in the world that I was not supposed to really interact with the detainees. But it's hard. Especially when you realize that some of these guys are no different than yourself. The military trains you not to think and just to react and not feel any compassion for anyone or anybody. And do what you are told. No questions asked."

Another military police company escorted the prisoners to their interrogation sessions, and Neely did not directly witness any instances of torture committed during these interrogations. Some prisoners were also held in isolation cells in the Navy brig at the base, rather than in the main detention facilities. This may have been done to conceal the illegal detention of child prisoners. Neely told CSHRA, "No one actually ever

said there were children being held there. There was just a lot of talk from the people who worked at the Brig that some of the detainees looked really young...."

One of the duties of Neely's unit was to escort prisoners to the medical facilities, where they were at times subjected to abuse. On one occasion, he took a prisoner to what was supposed to be a physical therapy session for treatment of a wound incurred during the prisoner's capture. A .50 caliber round had injured the man's bicep, and his transport to Cuba in shackles and restraints had resulted in the bicep healing to the forearm.

According to Neely, "The medic stopped massaging and started to stretch the detainee's arm down a little at a time. You could tell this was very painful and uncomfortable for him. The medic said, 'You really want to watch him scream.' Then he stretched the arm all the way down until it was straight out on the bed. The detainee started screaming loud and crying. The medic finally put his arm back up and did it again. And then he said he was finished with the physical therapy. The whole time the medic just laughed at what he was doing."

Another type of abuse by medical staff occurred during the processing of newly arrived prisoners. There, in a holding tent, the prisoners would be subjected to a violent rectal examination by a doctor, ostensibly "to check for any kind of weapons that could be hidden there." Neely said that this was "not done in a gentle manner," and that even when he was not a direct witness, but still close enough to the tent, he could "hear the detainees scream and cry out during the exam."

He described in detail an incident concerning a prisoner who refused to drink the Ensure liquid dietary supplement he was given due to being underweight and malnourished as a result of his capture and subsequent custody. This prisoner apparently did not want to drink the beverage because he thought he was being poisoned. After the prisoner was physically restrained, a medic attempted to pour the Ensure down his throat. When he still refused, the medic motioned for Neely to stand to his side, after which the medic punched the prisoner twice in the face. Neely told CSHRA that the prisoner "was then hog-tied" and that "he laid in this position for a couple hours." Neely realized after the incident that he had been moved in order to block the view from the guard tower.

A more common sort of physical abuse was that done by the IRF, or Internal Reaction Force, which would be called in whenever a prisoner was deemed to have broken a rule, or was not following instructions. Other accounts of conditions at Guantánamo state that the IRF is often called for minor infractions. The IRF calls for a five-person team of MPs (military police) to subdue, restrain and handcuff or hog-tie the prisoner. One MP is assigned to each limb, with the first MP to enter the cage given a shield and "instructed...to hit the detainees as hard as possible."

Neely reported an incident of abuse in which he personally involved. Escorting an older prisoner to his cage for the first time, he and his partner ordered the man to his knees. At this point, the prisoner began to get "really tense and started to pull away." With handcuffs partly off, the prisoner jerked towards Neely, at which point Neely says that he "threw the detainee to the ground and was on top of him holding his face to the cement floor." After this, the IRF team was called, and the man was left hog-tied for several hours. Neely said that another prisoner would later tell him the man "thought he was going to be executed," as he "had seen some of his friends and family members executed on their knees."

The prisoners were also routinely subjected to physical and verbal abuse. On this matter, Neely's testimony included the following: "Upon arrival, detainees were screamed at throughout the whole process. They were told to shut up, walk faster, and what not. Some guards would call them 'Sand Niggers.' I never heard that phrase until I was at Guantánamo. Detainees would be told that their country had been nuked and nothing was left, and that their families were dead. I know of some guards even telling detainees they could be executed at any time. This all was being said on the blocks by fellow MPs."

In his testimony, Neely explained why he felt compelled to speak out against the conditions at Guantánamo: "I want it to be told no matter how it makes me look. I believe it's very important people know what happened there. I am sure there were (and are) a lot of detainees in Guantánamo that are guilty of something. But, on the other hand, there are a lot that are not guilty of nothing at all other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And no one, guilty or innocent, should be treated in the manner they have been."

On Obama's decision to close the prison camp at Guantánamo, Neely commented: "That's great, but what are WE as the United States of America, the people who kidnapped and tortured these people, going to do for them? Just send them home like nothing happened? We started this mess and it's time we attempt to help this people move on with their lives. The sad part of this all is the people who are responsible, former President George Bush and former Vice President Dick Cheney will never be held accountable for the decisions they made. It's the detainees and the guards like myself that will have to live every day with what they went through, saw and did while there."

There is no reason to believe there has been a let-up of the torture and brutality described in Brandon Neely's testimony. In fact, according to a lawyer who represents detainees, abuse at Guantánamo has worsened sharply since Barack Obama took office. Ahmed Ghappour said prison guards apparently want to "get their kicks in" before the camp is closed.

Ghappour told Reuters of reported beatings, dislocation of limbs, spraying of pepper spray into closed cells, applying pepper spray to toilet paper and force-feeding detainees on hunger strike.

The Pentagon has responded that while it had received renewed reports of prisoner abuse at Guantánamo during a recent review of conditions, it had concluded that all prisoners were being kept in accordance with the Geneva Conventions.

Neely's complete testimony can be read [here](#).



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