

Bradley Manning speaks on abuse

Naomi Spencer
1 December 2012

In his second day testifying at Fort Meade, Maryland, accused Army whistleblower Bradley Manning spoke Friday of his months-long solitary confinement in a US military prison. The 24-year-old private's statements, largely in response to hours of questioning by the prosecution, resumed from Thursday night's hearing, where his lawyer, David Coombs, asked him to explain the early days of his detention.

Manning was arrested May 26, 2010, accused of leaking hundreds of thousands of classified military and government documents while working as an intelligence analyst in Iraq. Thousands of the documents revealed war crimes, corruption and diplomatic double-dealing on the part of the US government. These files were subsequently published by whistleblower organization WikiLeaks.

He has been imprisoned without conviction for 918 days. The defense has argued that the long delay in a court martial trial and abuses to which Manning has been subjected amount to "unlawful pretrial punishment" and grounds for a substantial reduction or waiving of sentencing. Denise Lind, the military judge overseeing the pretrial hearings, has rejected these arguments but informally agreed to accept a separate proposal by the defense in which Manning would plead guilty to specific lesser charges to reduce sentences. Under the agreement, if the government accepts—a decision military law experts have said is not guaranteed—Manning would still face 16 years in prison.

Manning's testimony, the first public statements he has made in more than two years, provides insight into the brutality of the US military prisons. Moreover, testimony of his guards and doctors makes clear that his mistreatment was intimately directed by the Pentagon with an eye toward destroying him psychologically. The Obama administration intends to use the Manning case as a precedent in its offensive against government whistleblowers, as well as a wedge to pursue the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Manning's alert bearing in court this week is testament to his determination and courage throughout his ordeal.

For two months, he was held in atrocious conditions in a tiny cage within a tent at Camp Arifjan, an Army base in Kuwait. He was subjected to isolation, denied access to a phone to contact his family in America, and other privations. Guards woke him at 10:00 at night and ordered lights out at 2:00 in the afternoon, a pattern intended to leave him sleep-deprived and disoriented. "My nights blended into my days and my days into

nights," Manning told the court Thursday.

He recounted fainting from the heat and dehydration, having his cell torn apart several times a day in a guard "shakedown" and suffering psychological deterioration. "I just thought I was going to die in that cage," Manning said. "And that's how I saw it—an animal cage."

After a month of such torment, he suffered a breakdown, talking to himself, bashing his head against his cell, and fashioning a noose out of bedding. "I didn't want to die but I wanted to get out of the cage," Manning said he told a psychiatrist. "I conveyed to him that if I could be successful in committing suicide, I would." He was prescribed antidepressants which, he said, leveled him out emotionally to the point that he felt whatever happened to him he would "ride it out."

On the night of July 29, the young soldier was strapped into a full restraint and put aboard a chartered commercial plane bound for an untold destination. Manning recounted the dread with which he considered being sent to Guantanamo, Djibouti, or elsewhere where he knew detainees were tortured and disappeared. After hours in the air, during which he was kept by the restraints in an uncomfortable, rigid position, the captain announced they were landing in Mannheim, Germany. Once there, Manning was unloaded, still in restraints, and left like cargo to sit for a plane bound for the US. Once again, he was not told of the destination.

When an announcement came over the intercom that the plane was landing at Baltimore International Airport, Manning said he felt a sense of relief. "I didn't think I was going to set foot on American soil for a long time," he testified. He was transferred through customs and bundled into a rental car to be delivered to the Quantico Marine Brig in Virginia. By the time he arrived, he had been awake for "over 24 hours."

Manning related being optimistic upon entering the brig. "It wasn't the ideal environment in Quantico," he testified, evincing laughter in the courtroom. "But it had air conditioning, solid floors, hot and cold running water. It was great to be on continental United States soil again."

This sentiment was rapidly quashed. Engaging in what Manning described as a "shark attack," the Quantico intake guards ordered him about in unfamiliar Marine jargon. "They were trying to show you they were in charge," he said. "'Face the bulkhead!' they ordered, but I didn't know what a

bulkhead was. Everything I did was wrong, because I didn't know." He was strip-searched, then taken to a "dark room next door," where he was questioned about his emotional state, personal background and other information.

Brig officers demanded he fill out paperwork admitting he presented suicide risk. A key prosecution argument is that the severe treatment was necessary for Manning's protection. This argument has been repeated in virtually all the US news outlets—most relying on wire reports instead of sending reporters to the courtroom.

According to Kevin Gosztola of *Firedoglake.com*, one of the few journalists who has attended the court proceedings, Manning testified that guards were coercive, and "told him he had to write something down" about planning suicide. After responding twice that he was not suicidal, Manning wrote, "Always planning, never acting." This statement was subsequently used to justify placing Manning on the "prevention of injury" order that included solitary confinement and other extreme measures.

He was put on suicide watch during an "indoctrination period," and was classified as a "maximum custody" detainee. By any measure, the treatment he received constituted torture. Amnesty International, the UN's special rapporteur on torture, and US legal scholars condemned the conditions.

Manning's cell was a 6-by-8 foot rectangle containing a toilet, a sink and a cot. During a demonstration in court Thursday evening, Coombs laid down tape to scale on the floor and asked Manning to recreate his routines. There was very little room to walk between the cot and the plumbing. Manning commented that he was fortunate he was not a larger man.

Brig officers checked on him every five minutes of the day, asking him if he was "O.K." Manning was required to respond in the affirmative. His toilet was in full view of the guard's observation booth. He was not allowed to have toilet paper. At night he slept with a guard's light shining in his face. If he rolled over, he was ordered awake.

Manning was denied visits by relatives and friends and kept segregated from other prisoners. For only 20 minutes a day, he was permitted to leave his cell for "sunshine call," wearing leg restraints and shackles. Even in his cell, he was not permitted to lean against the walls, or sit with his legs crossed. At no point between the hours of 5 a.m. and 10 p.m. was he allowed to lie down. At one point, guards took away his glasses, without which he was unable to read or even see the guards clearly.

Left with little to do for months on end, "I would try to keep myself occupied. Try to think of something to do," Manning testified. "Normally sit on rack, sir. Sometimes they would allow me to have my legs up on rack in an Indian-style position" if he received authorization to do so.

The winter months were the hardest for him, given the short daylight hours. There was no natural light in his cell. "I'm not a great fan of winter, it's the solstice and it's dark," Manning said. "I'm a fan of sunshine."

"If you took your head and put it on the cell door and looked through the crack, you could see down the hall the reflection of the window," Manning said. "There was a skylight. You could see the reflection of the reflection of it if you angled your face on the door of the cell."

He took to dancing in his cell, which was not classified as exercise under Marine regulations, or playing with his reflection in the wall-mounted mirror. Quantico commanders characterized these activities as "erratic" behavior, and tightened the restrictions imposed on the young man.

In March 2011, after eight months of isolation, he appealed to one staff member to help him be removed from prevention of injury watch. "I wanted to convey the fact that I'd been on the [watch] for a long time. I'm not doing anything to harm myself. I'm not throwing myself against walls, or jumping up or down, or putting my head in the toilet," he said. Manning recounted that he told the officer, "If I was a danger to myself I would act out more." For example, he said, "if I really wanted to hurt myself I could use things now: underwear, flip-flops, they could potentially be used as something to harm oneself."

This argument was immediately turned inside out by the brig commanders, who overrode at least 16 recommendations by staff psychiatrists to lessen Manning's restrictions. That night, guards ordered him to strip naked. The next morning he was made to stand at parade rest, still naked, before guards for inspection. After ordering the confiscation of his underwear, officers on staff mocked him.

The government's lead prosecutor, Army Captain Ashden Fein, spent considerable time Friday pursuing a line of questioning that would help paint the conditions as less harsh than the defense has claimed. Fein asked questions related to the books Manning had been permitted to read, and a procedure through which he could submit complaints. But, as the *Guardian's* Ed Pilkington commented during a break in the hearing from Fort Meade, "Manning frequently corrected the prosecution's version of events." Fein referred to the skylight and windows outside Manning's cell. Manning clarified: "Further down the hallway, yes sir."

The prosecutor read off a series of reports signed by Manning declaring that he regarded his treatment by brig guards as "excellent" and he had "no issues" to raise. The "voluntary statements" were not voluntary, Manning responded. Officers would approach him and state, "Here is a voluntary statement. Sign this." The guards, Manning added, never recorded his repeated complaints about being held under prevention of injury watch.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact