

Journalist Yvonne Ridley discusses new documentary film on Guantanamo prison: “Guantanamo: Inside the Wire”

By Yvonne Ridley

Guantanamo Bay is, without doubt, the world’s most notorious prison, which has left an indelible stain on the Bush administration.

One of the first acts of U.S. President Barack Obama was to order its closure and there is speculation that some of the detainees may now be offered asylum in Wales.



I am one of the few journalists to visit the sprawling naval base.

I traveled there with filmmaker David Miller, whose documentary “Guantanamo: Inside the Wire” is to be screened tomorrow.

I was invited by the U.S. military to Cuba to see the camp from the inside for myself... it was an offer I could not refuse.

The immediate reaction when I told people about my assignment was: Why on earth did they let you, of all people, in there?

A valid question, indeed. Why would the American military extend such an invite to an anti-war activist, peace campaigner, journalist, and vociferous critic of the War on Terror?

In truth I don’t have an answer, but I am eternally grateful that the Joint Task Force



did let me spend four days at their U.S. Naval Base and, more importantly, let me out again!

I suppose it all began last year when Birmingham neurologist Dr. David Nicholl expressed his concerns about the medical ethics and challenges faced by the doctors employed inside the prison during a discussion show I was presenting for Press TV.

As part of my research I telephoned the base and asked to speak to a senior doctor, but the press officer at JTF-GTMO said this was impossible. A heated conversation ensued as I dropped in the words “torture and water-boarding” and from there we moved to discuss the Hippocratic Oath and medical ethics.

Clearly irritated at my challenging questions, he then read out, in a very loud voice, the entire contents of the oath which is signed by every newly qualified doctor around the world.

After making it clear I was singularly unimpressed, he then barked the invite: “Well why don’t you come over and see the medical facilities for yourself and talk to the doctors?”

Once he made clear it was not going to be a one-way ticket and I could take a

cameraman, I agreed. And so, after five months of personal vetting, I and filmmaker David Miller boarded a pea-shooter of a plane run by Air Sunshine at Miami, destination Guantanamo.

We had read and filled in lots of forms before setting off, forms which would make any self-respecting journalist balk, but the option was simple -- no signature, no ticket.

By signing one particular document I guess we signed away all our rights to the contents of David's camera.

The first night we stayed in comfortable accommodation, segregated, on the naval base and then the next day we started our mission after being given more rules and regulations.

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I was told: The ground rules are established to ensure protected information such as classified information, intelligence collections capabilities, and sources and methods are not compromised and to protect the security of commission participants by preserving anonymity.

It was also made perfectly clear what would happen if the rules were breached: expulsion. In addition, disclosure of classified information could result in a criminal prosecution. Let's face it, David and I had no option but to comply.

We could not film or identify any staff without their permission—some of the guards genuinely believe Al-Qaeda will

track them down to their civilian homes and kill them and their families.

Security is as heightened as the paranoia, real or imagined, of all those serving at JTF-GTMO.

Section 8 of the media ground rules states:

The following media activities are prohibited and may be subject to embargo:

- I. No front facial shots of detainees may be taken at any time, even with the intent of distorting or hiding facial images during production and broadcast. Front facial shots at distances are prohibited. Photos of other features considered distinguishing that could lead to the identity of a detainee may be prohibited by the Public Affairs Officer on scene and embargoed if discovered during the security review.
- II. No audio, video recordings, photographs or other electronic images, or drawings, sketches or likenesses may be rendered of any detainee when that image or recording may reveal that detainee's identity or nationality. Identities and nationalities of any detainee will not be disclosed unless previously released by OASD (PA).

Each evening David Miller went through the agony of replaying every single frame that he had shot during the day to a civilian officer who would then censor the contents if he felt it breached the rules.

For someone who has filmed and worked in Iraq under the watchful Saddam regime and the ever-controlling states of Saudi Arabia and Syria, I have to say I had never before experienced this degree of scrutiny.

Nor did I have as many military minders as I did when I made my way around Guantanamo. It was a reflection, I believe, of the general state of paranoia which is evident across American society as a result of whipping up fear over George W. Bush's seemingly never-ending War on Terror, and I felt very sad that this fear was having such an impact in a country which used to boast about civil rights, freedoms, and liberties.

Hopefully, the new man in the White House will engage his people through empowerment and not use the politics of fear.

Of course, I know what you really want me to write about is what I saw inside the prison itself. Well, I can tell you that despite all the restrictions, I did get into Camp Delta and was given unprecedented access to camps 4, 5, and 6, the last two being part of the shining new, maximum security facility.

Our film goes out tomorrow, so I don't want to give too much away before it premieres, but we did see some detainees, and heard the painful cries of others in the so-called "non-compliant" wing.

We were not allowed to talk to or interview them, nor were we allowed to film their faces. Our media minder told us that the Department of Defense policies prohibit the

filming/recording of detainees in a way which would identify them.

Our mission is to ensure the detainee is protected under this policy, explained one of our minders.

Bizarrely, some of the most stringent security presented itself when we went to Camp Justice (trust me there is no irony when these names are created). At first we were told the area was off-limits and then we were allowed to film a tight shot of the sign but were forbidden from taking a camera, any camera, inside the court room where the military tribunals are taking place.

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This place is already defunct after the new U.S. president ended the military tribunals with immediate effect. Too late for the Yemeni Salim Hamdan, who has already been tried and sentenced for his role as Osama bin Laden's driver.

For two days we were shown around the detention facilities and in to the medical and library wings. One of the most popular books on loan is from the Harry Potter series and the National Geographic magazines are also highly prized.

The intellectual content of the detainees' library is a sharp contrast to the contents of the on-base shop, which offers such picture-led magazines and videos with titles including Hooters and Debbie Does Dallas. We were not allowed to film the reading material of the off-duty military.

As I walked through the old Camp X-Ray, I had to tear away at the creepers and leafy

tentacles which held the cages tightly closed—most are now overgrown with weeds and vines.

The only occupants are snakes and banana rats, so named because of the curious shaped droppings these large nocturnal rodents leave behind.

My minders told me that they are most keen the rest of the world forgets the images of orange-clad detainees being wheeled around the cages of Camp X-Ray to the interrogation block, which was open from January to April 2002.

I was assured all the children have long gone, but as Birmingham-based ex-detainee Moazzam Begg told me: “No Yvonne, some of the children are still there, but now they’ve grown up into young men like Omar Khadr.”

And they felt that by giving us access to the new prison nestling on the edge of a bay and surrounded by razor and barbed wire, that we would go away satisfied that the treatment of the detainees was humane and had improved.

I’m sorry, but what I saw did not make me rest easy at all. In some ways the supermax-style prison is grotesque and an affront to civilized society. Every part of the supermax cell is designed to dehumanize and degrade the occupant.

Although I’m not sure who is more humiliated in the non-compliant wing when asking for toilet roll—the guard who has to count out around eight sheets of tissue paper or the detainee who stands there and watches him do this.

I did get a chance to interview the medical staff and was slightly concerned to learn that more than two thirds of the detainees had

undergone colonoscopies—a medical procedure to examine the inside of the large colon and small bowel using a fiberoptic camera. It is a procedure used mainly on older patients which does not fit the profile of the detainees.

The doctor I spoke to vehemently denied that the detainees were being used as human guinea pigs to enhance their own medical CVs for when army personnel move to civvy street.

I requested an hour to sit down and interview the rear admiral who is in charge of the whole facility. The interview began quite well and he even offered me his pips and resignation if he thought anything untoward was going on during his watch.

But there were a few silences and uneasy pauses as my questions about human rights became more and more challenging. The session was brought to an abrupt end by an overly protective PR man as I got into the arena of the now defunct Camp Iguana where children as young as 12 were once held.

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My documentary covers the haunting case of Canadian citizen Omar, the last Westerner to remain in Gitmo. I defy anyone to watch the footage we later obtained which shows the child weeping over his blindness and injuries and crying for his mother during an interrogation.

Moazzam Begg is probably the best known prisoner to emerge from the cages of Cuba, but others have also chosen to break their

silence for the first time by talking to me on the record for the documentary. Their candid interviews are also included in our film, although some still insisted on remaining in the studio shadows.

Rear Admiral Mark Busby has now moved on from Guantanamo, promoted earlier this month in the last few days of the Bush administration.

The most striking thing which emerged during my interviews with ordinary soldiers right up to the boss man himself was their total commitment to the mission in Guantanamo. I'm curious about their gut reaction to Obama's swift decision.

They were clearly shocked, almost wounded, when I told them that politicians around the world were calling for its closure—including those sitting in the White House. It was as though they were wrapped in their own cocoon, sealed off and protected from world opinion.

“Honor bound to defend freedom. That is our mission and that is what we believe in,” said one lanky Marine as he stooped to hiss the words slowly in my ear when I questioned the point of the facility and its long-term future.

“Honor Bound” is embellished on virtually every notice board and signpost around Guantanamo Bay. It's on the coffee mug I was presented with—bought from the souvenir shop on the base where you can buy everything from a t-shirt to a baseball cap or key ring.

It is worth remembering that 95 percent of those held in Guantanamo were not picked up from a battlefield, but many were sold like slaves for bounties of \$5000; a fact acknowledged in Pakistani General Pervez Musharraf's autobiography *In The Line of Fire*.

Some notice boards carry a special “value word” which is changed every week. When I was there, the buzzword was: RESPECT. There are still more than 200 men languishing in the facility while hundreds more have passed through the facility, including children.

I know there has been talk that some of the detainees could be given a new home and fresh start in Wales as asylum seekers because it is not safe for them to return to their country of origin. There is a twist of irony that the U.S. has refused to return 16 Uyghurs to China over the issue of human rights.

More than 100 countries have been approached to try to find them a new home where they can resettle. Those countries that refused to accept detainees are now more open to requests from the Obama administration.

What I saw and what David Miller filmed in Guantanamo will haunt us both for the rest of our lives and our “Gitmo experience” lasted only four days, but there are other, more secret prisons around the world.

Lawyer Clive Stafford Smith, who we also feature, reckons there are still around 20,000 prisoners held in U.S. custody, beyond the rule of law, at various locations, including Bagram Air Base, where 680 prisoners are held without any due process.

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I hope that our film will move all of you who watch it, and if detainees are released to come and live near you, I also hope you will extend the hand of friendship and not point a finger of suspicion.

Yvonne Ridley is a patron of Cageprisoner and information on all political prisoners, especially those being held in Guantanamo, can be accessed on the organization's website www.cageprisoner.com.

Guantanamo: Inside the Wire premieres on the English language satellite news network Press TV (Sky channel 515) on Monday, February 2 at 9:35 am and 17:35 (gmt) and it can also be downloaded live on www.presstv.com.

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