

How US hid the suicide secrets of Guantanamo

By [David Rose](#)

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After three inmates killed themselves, the Pentagon declared the suicides an act of 'asymmetric warfare', banned the media and went on a PR offensive. But as despair grows within the camp, so too does outrage mount at its brutal and secretive regime.

In Guantanamo Bay's Alpha Block, the night was like any other: sweltering and seemingly endless. Although the temperature was down to the high 70s outside, the block's steel roof and walls were radiating heat, and in the two facing rows of 24 cells it felt little cooler than it had at midday. 'The nights are worse than the days,' the British former prisoner Shafiq Rasul recalled yesterday. 'You hear the rats running and scratching. The bugs go mad and there's no air. Especially where that block is: there's no breeze whatsoever.' According to Guantanamo's rules, a six-person team of military police should have been patrolling constantly, and as usual the bright neon lights stayed on. A guard should have passed each detainee's cell every 30 seconds. 'From the landing, you can see right into every cell,' said Rasul. 'They don't have doors, just gates made from wide-spaced mesh. There's no privacy. If you hang up a towel because you want to go to the toilet, they make you take it down.'

The high degree of surveillance has foiled dozens of previous attempts by prisoners to take their own lives. 'It happened in front of me several times. The soldiers would see what was happening and they were in the cell in seconds,' Rasul said. But somehow, in circumstances that the Pentagon has succeeded in keeping totally obscure, late on Friday, 9 June, three detainees, all weak and emaciated after months on hunger strike and being force-fed, managed to tease bedsheets through their cells' mesh walls, tie them into nooses and hang themselves. With the cells little taller than the height of a man, they stood no chance of breaking their necks: the only way they could die was slowly, by hypoxia.

'That would take at least four or five minutes, probably longer,' said Dr David Nicholl, consultant neurologist at Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth Hospital, who has been co-ordinating international opposition to Guantanamo by physicians. 'It's very difficult to see how, if the landing was being properly patrolled, they could have managed to accomplish it.' Accomplish it, however, they did. And virtually simultaneously. A little before midnight the bodies of Manei Shaman Turki al-Habadi, 30, and Yasser Talal al-Zahrani, 21, both from Saudi Arabia, and of a Yemeni, Ali Abdullah Ahmed, 29, were found on Alpha Block. How long they had been like that, the Pentagon will not disclose. Their mouths were stuffed with cloth, apparently to muffle any cries.

As often before in its four-and-a-half-year propaganda war over Guantanamo, the US military and its masters in Washington decided that the best means of defence to what looked - at best - like a case of criminal negligence was to go on the offensive. The dead men, said Guantanamo's commander, Navy Rear Admiral Harry Harris, when the news broke last Saturday, had 'no regard for human life, neither ours nor their own. They are smart,

they are creative, they are committed. I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetric warfare against us.'

Colleen Graffy, a senior State Department official who recently visited London to make the case for Guantanamo with the UK media, called the suicides a 'good PR move' and 'a tactic to further the jihadi cause'. The US government tried to distance itself from Graffy's remarks. But early on Sunday The Observer talked to the camp's top Washington spin doctor, Lieutenant Commander Jeffrey Gordon, an official in Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's office and the Pentagon's chief press officer. According to Gordon, whatever the outcome of the investigation now being conducted by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, there was no need to regret the deaths. All three men, Gordon said, had been dedicated terrorists: 'These guys were fanatics like the Nazis, Hitlerites, or the Ku Klux Klan, the people they tried at Nuremberg.'

He went on to make specific allegations against each: Ahmed had been a 'mid-to-high-level al-Qaeda operative' with key links to Abu Zubaydah, an al-Qaeda leader captured in 2002; Habadi had been a 'militant recruiter' who worked with a second tier group called Jama'at Tabligh, and knew of operations in Qatar and Pakistan. As for Zahrani, he was a 'frontline Taliban fighter' who had played a prominent part in the November 2001 prison uprising in Mazar-e-Sharif, in which a CIA man died. All this may be true. On the other hand, they had not been charged with anything. Questionable as it often is and consisting of statements made after torture or coercion, the Pentagon has disseminated some evidence against more than 300 Guantanamo detainees, in federal court filings and at internal camp boards that reviewed their detention. Against the three suicides, it has presented nothing. Meanwhile, the information available suggests that the explanation of the deaths rejected by Harris - that the men tried to kill themselves through despair and succeeded through the incompetence of his staff - remains more plausible.

Rasul said: 'I was shocked by what happened, though not surprised, because I saw it almost happen so often. It was always scary: I would see people deteriorating mentally in front of my eyes until they tried to take their own lives, and you always thought: "That could be me". There were even times when I thought about it myself, but I wanted to be strong for my family. When I did, believe me, it wasn't because I was trying to hurt the United States, but on days when I'd just been told I'd never see England again, and that I was a terrorist, and when I denied it they wouldn't listen.'

The suicides triggered new calls to close Guantanamo, from the Lord Chancellor, Lord Falconer, the European Union and others. But the Pentagon will go to considerable lengths to block any independent scrutiny of what happened. News of the suicides broke while I was flying to Washington from London, in order to travel to Guantanamo on a military flight next day and cover a military commission tribunal. A message on my mobile phone - from a fellow reporter, not the Pentagon - said that both had been cancelled. Thus I made the first of many calls to Jeffrey Gordon. At first, he could not have been more helpful. To enter Guantanamo, he said, one needed an 'area clearance', and because mine had been issued for the tribunal it was no longer valid. However, the press office at Guantanamo or Southern Command in Miami might be able to issue a new one, Gordon said. Clearance was not, he pointed out, the only problem. Now that the military plane had been cancelled, the only way to reach Guantanamo was on scheduled 18-seat flights from Florida and Kingston, Jamaica. They tended to be fully booked well in advance.

I teamed up with another British journalist, David Jones of the Daily Mail, to organise clearance and investigate flights. By the end of Sunday, we thought we were on our way. Jones found a private charter firm willing to fly us to the camp from Kingston. Guantanamo's head of public affairs, Commander Robert Durand, explained in an email he was seeking authorisation from Harris. 'He's a pretty open sort of guy,' Durand said, 'and I can't see any reason for not granting you clearance since you were coming already.' At 7.30pm one of Durand's staff phoned to say there were new clearances. He faxed them a few minutes later.

Next day Jones and I got up at 4am to fly to Miami, where we checked with Guantanamo one last time that everything was in order and got on a plane to Kingston. There, at check-in for our private flight, the manager was apologetic. 'Guys, I'm so sorry. Jeffrey Gordon called me from the Pentagon five minutes ago. Your clearances have been revoked.' Over the next 48 hours, I had several heated conversations and email exchanges with Gordon. At first he was apologetic: the new clearances had been 'a mistake' and he would try to get us a refund on the plane costs. Later he became more aggressive: forgetting that he had advised me to approach Durand at Guantanamo, he claimed that we tried to 'get round' the Pentagon by obtaining clearance from a clerk. His last email stated that our conduct had been 'ethically questionable, at best'. It was left to Durand to shed a little light. For the time being, he said, his ability to issue clearances had been removed and assumed by Rumsfeld's office alone.

Meanwhile, three US reporters at the base were ordered to leave. According to a Pentagon spokesman quoted by the US media, the reason was that two barred British reporters - us - had threatened to sue if the Americans were allowed to stay. This was, of course, untrue. Closing Guantanamo to the media meant there were no reporters there as the Naval Criminal Investigative Service team went about its work; none when pathologists conducted post mortem examinations; and none last Friday when, after a Muslim ceremony conducted by a military chaplain, the first body - Ahmed's - was prepared to be flown home. It was also impossible to gauge the impact of the deaths on the 460 inmates.

Yet our bizarre experience raises a fundamental question: when it comes to Guantanamo, can the world believe a single word that Gordon and his numerous cohorts say? There is, to say the least, an alternative explanation for the three Guantanamo deaths. Since early 2003, when the Red Cross issued the first of many reports stating that inmates were experiencing high levels of depression, there has been mounting evidence that detention there has wrought havoc on some prisoners' mental health. It is not so surprising: most prisoners get just two 30-minute periods out of their cells - the size of a double bed - each week, except when being interrogated. Some have endured this since 2002, and have no idea when, if ever, they may leave.

By the time of my own visit in October 2003, a fifth of them were on Prozac and there had been so many suicide attempts - 40 by August 2003 - that the Pentagon had reclassified hangings as 'manipulative self-injurious behaviours'. Cannily, perhaps, it has refused to give exact statistics on how many SIBs have occurred, claiming that since the reclassification there have been (until last week) only two genuine attempted suicides. Tarek Dergoul, another freed British former detainee, knew two of the dead men well. 'I was next to or opposite Manei [Habadi] for weeks, maybe months,' he said, 'and like me his morale was high. He was always up for a protest: a hunger strike or a non-co-operation strike. He used to recite poetry, not just Arabic, but English - he knew chunks of Macbeth and he taught me how to read the Koran correctly. When you go through that sort of experience with someone, you really get to know them. I just can't believe he would take his own life. He

would have had to be really desperate.’ Likewise, Dergoul said, Zahrani was ‘a person everyone loved. It’s offensive to me to say he could have killed himself.’ Apart from anything else, all three men would have been deeply aware of Islam’s prohibition of suicide.

However, the men may well have been so desperate that they ignored the prohibition – even if, as seems likely, they co-ordinated their deaths in the hope of increasing their political impact. Many lawyers who have visited clients at Guantanamo have spoken eloquently of their despair: this year a prisoner tried to kill himself in front of his US attorney, somehow managing to open his veins, covering himself in blood, as the lawyer watched in horror, unable – because of the screen that separated them – to intervene. Dergoul also suggested how the three may have been able to kill themselves undetected. Sometimes, he said, instead of patrolling the guards ‘used to sit in their room at the end. It’s a long walk from end to end of the block and some nights they didn’t feel like it: they’d sit in their room, smoking and playing cards. You’d need toilet paper or something and you’d yell “MP, MP!” But they wouldn’t come – it could be as long as an hour.’

One might, just about, imagine such a scene in a British prison. One can also envisage what might happen if three men committed suicide on the same landing at the same time: public inquiries, sackings, outrage. All three had been on hunger strike, with few breaks, since the middle of last summer. This meant that, four times a day, they were strapped down in restraining chairs so that they could not move their limbs and force-fed through nasal tubes, inserted and removed each time – a process the Pentagon’s own court documents state causes bleeding and nausea. It is not hard to see why that may have made them depressed. According to newly declassified testimony by another prisoner shortly before the suicides, a guard recently told him: ‘They have lost hope in life. They have no hope in their eyes. They are ghosts and they want to die. No food will keep them alive right now.’ This prisoner, the former British resident Shaker Aamer, told his lawyer, Clive Stafford Smith, that the three dead men and other hunger strikers were so ill whenever their feeds contained protein that it went ‘right through them’ causing severe diarrhoea.

Last week Rumsfeld got what he wanted: the removal of media scrutiny from Guantanamo’s deepest crisis. Potentially embarrassing, perhaps very damaging, headlines have been averted, and tomorrow, with the most sensitive tasks in the wake of the deaths complete, Guantanamo’s public affairs office will resume its chaperoned tours. But the bigger costs of shutting out the daylight are making themselves felt. On BBC1’s Question Time last week, Falconer called the camp ‘intolerable and wrong’, adding that it acted as a recruiting agent for those who would attack all our values. Proving his point next day, some former Guantanamo detainees suggested the three dead men had been murdered, a claim echoed by their families and the government of Yemen next day. The Pentagon response to the suicides was characterised by panic, smears and blatant obstruction. One might be forgiven for thinking that its vehement denials lacked a little weight.

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