

Guantanamo: a personal perspective

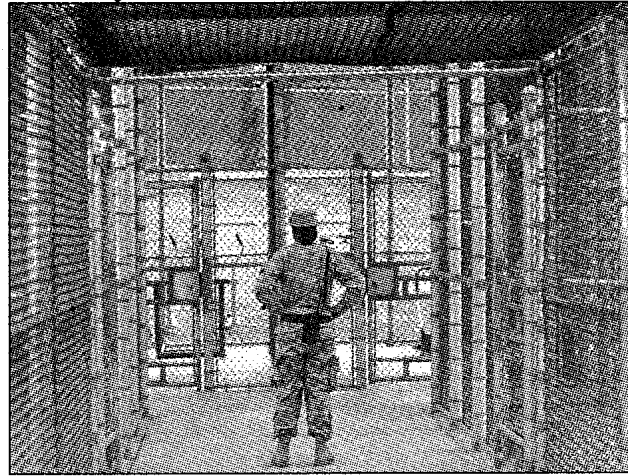
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I never thought that the Naval Base at Guantanamo, Cuba would some day be synonymous with torture and imprisonment. To me, it would always symbolize the place that had ample supply of Corn Flakes when none was available at grocery stores. For a seven-year-old child, Guantanamo had just about everything, including large amounts of chewing gum. Why were we able to visit the base, when it was off limits to most Cubans? My uncle, Second Lieutenant Roberto Fresneda, was the XO of the U.S.S. Escape, a repair ship stationed at the Guantanamo Base. We were fortunate to be able to visit him when his ship was in town. How did this segment of Cuban soil come to mirror a typical American city?

The Guantanamo site was acquired by lease from the Cuban government on July 2, 1903, following the end of the 1898 war, which ceded the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico to the United States. It was agreed that the U.S. would pay an annual rental fee of \$2,000. The area of the base completely encircles the bay and contains approximately 36,000 acres, of which 13,400 acres are land and the remainder water and salt flats. The greater part of the water is navigable, forming an excellent land-locked harbor, with depths ranging up to 60 feet.

During the periods between the First and the Second World War, the base was used primarily for winter maneuvers, having been relegated to practically inactive status. Initial developments in the bay area consisted solely of an air station. The Second World War, however, precipitated a huge investment. By 1944, Guantanamo had been developed into a major naval operating base; equipped with ship-repair facilities, fuel depot, supply depot, and other related activities. It became a



AP/Brennan Linsley

A guard watches over detainees, not pictured, in the exercise area at Camp 5 maximum-security facility at Guantanamo Bay U.S. Naval Base, Cuba.

self-contained base for a force of 2,000 men.

The base moorings could accommodate 17 destroyers, 10 cruisers, and 3 battleships. Three 4,500-foot runways were built on 450 acres of land leased from the Guantanamo Sugar Company. In order to supply the required 2,000,000 gallons of water per day, a pumping plant was installed at the Yateras River, which pumped water through 50,000 feet of 14-inch main to two treatment plants on the station. Midway along the pipeline a 500,000-gallon concrete reservoir was built for reserve water storage and as a fire precaution; three steel tanks, with a combined capacity of 2,000,000 gallons for treated water, were built on the station. Also constructed was an underground hospital — a bomb-proof struc-

ture — comprising four concrete arch-type units built into a hillside. It was fitted with 92 beds and complete hospital equipment, including two stand-by power plants for light and forced ventilation.

Of course, these details were lost to a seven-year-old child, impressed by the uniforms, the orderly conduct at the base, and the touring of my uncle's ship. Returning from the base to our home in Santiago was an ordeal, as my Dad's old Studebaker would constantly get stuck in the mud laden roads. I did not understand at the time that the soldiers at the park where I used to play, and that gave me bullets as souvenirs, would make my uncle's visit to our home in Santiago, and to his mother's home, very uncomfortable. In order to avoid trouble with the local authorities, Navy personnel were therefore instructed not to wear their uniform when leaving the base. Unknown to me, a subtle indoctrination program had begun at our Jesuit school — Dolores. It, however, became obvious to my parents, and particularly to my American born grandmother, when I asked her why Americans were bad. Not long afterwards, the U.S. Consulate in Santiago recommended that all Americans leave Cuba. As my grandmother was born in Brooklyn, sailors from the Guantanamo Naval Base escorted her to the Base where, after a brief stay, she boarded a military transport to Miami. My grandfather, having been born in Cuba, had to leave on a civilian transport.

I have returned to Cuba since this time, but never to Guantanamo. My Dad's Studebaker, the muddy road leading to the base, my uncle, and his boat are long gone. I plan to return to Santiago and possibly take a look at the Naval Base. As neither my uncle nor his boat are there, I will not be let in. In any case, I would rather remember the Base from the memories of a seven year old child, than from the stark reality of what it has become.