

Guantánamo Bay, The World's Oyster

Moazzam Begg

From *Welcome to Camp America: Inside Guantánamo Bay* (Radius Books, 2017)

Solitary confinement in Guantánamo Bay is absolute. No calendars, clocks or watches. No television, no radio, no newspapers. No visits, no meaningful communication with family or the outside world. For the first 32 months of my imprisonment there weren't even any legal visits. No window in my six-by-eight-foot cell.

It's surprising what the human body and mind can endure. Locked in my cage over 23 hours a day with nothing but time on my hands, I tried everything I could not to dwell on thoughts about my family, my children growing up without their father. Even now, after so many years, reliving that thought is too painful to recall completely. Instead, using the few pieces of paper I was allowed, I'd write lists of words from languages I knew, books I wanted to read, films I wanted to see and places I wanted to visit. As the days turned into weeks, months and years, my fear and terror developed into acceptance and, occasionally, resistance.

Once or twice, though, it was too much. One day, I as I paced the length of my cell—three steps forward, three steps back—the word “animal” began resounding in my head. It got louder and louder until it overwhelmed me. I had always made a point of being calm, compliant, polite, patient and well behaved. But after almost two years in solitary confinement, I was holding in so much pain, regret, fear, anger and hurt that the dam just burst that day. I exploded, screaming, swearing, crying, punching and kicking. I challenged the guards to enter my cell. I told them they were evil, demanded to know how they could live with themselves. I called them cowards, kidnappers and torturers. They seemed genuinely confused and didn't know what to do. So they called in for “Hitchcock,” the code for psychiatrists.

One eventually did come, after I had calmed down. She sat in front of my cell, in her military uniform, and asked me if I had ever thought of harming myself, if I had ever considered removing my trousers and threading my bed sheet through them to make a noose to hang myself in the corner of the cell.

I hadn't, until she suggested it.

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During the first few months in Guantánamo I was only allowed out of my cell for fifteen minutes twice weekly in the “recreation yard.” The “yard” was really more of a pen, a 15x15-foot area surrounded by a high chain-link fence inside Camp Echo, the main isolation complex, which was completely sealed off with steel fencing.

The process was always the same. Guards radioed infantry to send a patrol with heavily armed soldiers and vehicles to Camp Echo. I was shackled with a “three-piece suit” that connected my wrists, my waist and my ankles through a series of chains and cuffs. Only then was my cell door opened. With two soldiers holding me, I was escorted out of my cell and on for the slow walk to the rec yard, a very short distance away. A third soldier always remained several paces behind, with his handgun drawn and pointed towards me. I was only taken into the rec pen itself once Military Working Dog (MWD) team arrived to monitor me as long as I was there. Twice a week, I was treated as a far more important person than I've ever been in my life. It made me feel special.

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Once inside the rec pen I had several options. I could pace (or run) clockwise, I could pace (or run) anti-clockwise, or I could just sit (or stand) for the duration. If I felt particularly rebellious I could climb to the top of the cage and peer over the outer perimeter and catch a glimpse of the shimmering blue sea and the occasional oil tanker or cruise ship in the distance. Sometimes I'd see turkey vultures perched on posts of the cage fences, with their wings spread as they cooled themselves in the morning breeze. In those moments I'd imagine sailing or flying away too, but just looking up was painful.

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Whilst I can never forget the abuse U.S. personnel carried out against the “brothers” and me, others did show some empathy and humanity. Kim was one of the few interrogators who didn't treat me as an enemy and expressed what felt like genuine concern about my welfare. One day, she came to tell me about something quite marvelous that was happening in the Cuban sky. Though I was not scheduled to visit the rec yard, she persuaded the guards to allow me outside for a few moments, shackled, of course, so that I could see a perfect circular rainbow that had formed around the sun. For a brief moment, guards, interrogators and prisoners gazed up in unison. None of us had ever seen anything like it. Then I was marched back to my cell.

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I didn't really know it then, but in Guantánamo I became an activist with a voice. Much of my work over the years has taken me to meet or talk with former prisoners who were either returned to their country of origin or resettled in countries where they had little or no connection. In many of these cases, men once deemed by the Bush administration as the “worst of the worst,” were sent to countries where they have no friends or relatives and don't speak the language. I've tried to assist Uighurs from China who were sent to Albania, Bermuda, El Salvador and Palau, to help find a way to meet their families or get them prosthetic limbs for legs amputated in Guantánamo. I've tried to help a wheelchair-bound Syrian sent to Uruguay who has been unable to reunite with his family, refugees of the Syrian uprising. I visited an Egyptian sent to Slovakia and couldn't understand why he wouldn't help me carry the bags of gifts I had sent from England until I realized, while performing prayer right next to him, that his leg was plastic – it too had been amputated in Guantánamo. I've spoken with and campaigned for Chadian, Afghan and Canadian children who emerged from Guantanamo as exemplary men. And I've seen my British friend reunited with his teenage daughter and sons after fourteen years.

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My only experience of America was in military custody. I was held for a total of three years, only two of which were in Guantánamo. It has now been over twelve years since I returned home. I've been writing and speaking most of that time about my experience in U.S. military custody – in Kandahar, Bagram and Guantánamo. But compared to many prisoners held there for over a decade, I feel relatively blessed and almost unqualified to comment.

*Birmingham, England
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