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'WELCOME TO CAMP AMERICA': INTIMATE PHOTOS OF GUANTANAMO BAY ILLUSTRATE THE CONTROVERSIAL BASE THAT'S 'SO MUCH FUN' FOR DEPLOYED U.S. MILITARY

By Anna Hopkins, November 9, 2017



- Guantanamo Bay detention center is currently home to at least 41 prisoners, and hundreds of US Military
- Photographer Debi Cornwall was allowed to photograph the prison and document the lives of those officials
- In an attempt to make the base more livable, a golf course, bowling alley, and music room have been built
- Cornwall also tracked down a number of former prisoners who had been cleared of any wrongdoing
- Many were unable to return home and were shipped to another country where they've attempted to settle

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

The Guantanamo Bay detention center is a household name in America - but few can imagine what life is like for those who have spent the bulk of their lives there.

After rampant allegations of abuse and torture, a high-profile appeal to close the prison was issued, but to no avail. Forty-one people are still being held at Guantanamo on suspicion of terrorism, and the base is staffed by hundreds of US military officials who are not allowed to leave its grounds.

New York-based photographer Debi Cornwall was allowed rare permission to visit the base. She walked its grounds under the watchful eye of an omnipotent military escort, and has spent the last three years attempting to capture what modern life is like for those who reside on the island.

‘What I’m really asking is: what do we have in common?’ Cornwall told DailyMail.com. ‘If we can step back and ask about the human experience in a space where no one has chosen to live, we might be surprised.’

For the military personnel and their families who have been stationed in Guantanamo Bay, the experience is one unlike any other. It is unique compared to any other US Naval base in the world, because agents aren’t permitted to leave the base and travel around within Cuba.

Because of their geographical limitations, a great deal of effort has been put into building recreational areas for the guards and staff who live in the bay.

They’ve erected a kiddie pool for officers’ children to splash around in the hot Cuban weather, private beaches, a golf course, a bowling alley, and even a recreational room complete with musical instruments for off-duty agents to ‘rock out,’ according to photographer Debi Cornwall.

‘There are two very different things going on at Guantanamo Bay,’ Cornwall explained. ‘There are the prisons, which are now synonymous with Guantanamo in the public consciousness, and then there is life on the other side for naval personnel stationed there.’

‘For them, the focus is on the fun. As my military escort said when I first arrived: “Gitmo is the best posting a soldier could have, there’s so much fun here.”’ she continued.

Throughout the three trips Cornwall took to Guantanamo Bay in 2014 and 2015, she was constantly escorted by a member of the military. This was one of the many rules and precautions, comprising 12 pages in total, that were conditional of her visits.

The purpose of the rules, Cornwall was told, was to ensure operational security. She wasn't allowed to take pictures of any locks or surveillance equipment, certain areas of the coastline, and defensive structures from any distance that might reveal their infrastructure to the public eye.

The most important rule, she found, was to protect the identity of the staff at the base. She was not allowed to photograph the faces of anyone within Guantanamo Bay – even images revealing the slightest bit of a profile were prohibited. Every day, the entirety of her images were reviewed by military personnel, and any pictures she had that broke the rules were immediately deleted.

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GALLERY

When Cornwall wanted to bring a film camera for her third and final visit – her hopes were shot down out of concern that officers wouldn't adequately be able to review the pictures before she left the base.

But Cornwall had a solution: she created a makeshift darkroom in the bathroom of the hotel she stayed in while at Guantanamo Bay, and developed all her pictures with her military escort in the room with her. This was no easy feat – she hand-carried dry chemical material with her on the flight to Cuba, processed and hung the film to dry in her tiny bathroom, then digitized the photos on a scanner she had mailed down from the United States.

She did this all with her military escort by her side, of course, which was the only circumstance in which the US Government would allow her to use the film camera.

Although efforts have been exerted to make Guantanamo more enjoyable for those stationed there, Cornwall said their lives are still characterized by monotony.

'I'm grateful to each of my military escorts for their professionalism, their patience with me and for sharing a glimpse into their lives with me,' she said.

'What emerged for me from that was again the point of human connection. Despite the obvious unmistakable imbalance of power between the guards and the guarded, there is one thing they have in common: which is that no matter which side of the wire they live on, their lives at Guantanamo are defined by routine, by order, and by extreme boredom.'

Cornwall's photography, which recently debuted at the Stephen Kasher Gallery in New York City, is grouped into three parts: Gitmo at Home/Gitmo at Play, Gitmo on Sale, and Beyond Gitmo.

The first two chronicle the perplexing aspects of life for non-prisoners on the island – and even include shots of items available at the Guantanamo Bay gift shop, such as a Fidel Castro bobble-head doll. Gitmo at Home/ Gitmo at Play captures the day-to-day life, and Beyond Gitmo explores the lives of former prisoners who were cleared of any wrongdoing and were shipping to other countries to restart their lives.