



EERIE PHOTOS REVEAL LIFE INSIDE GUANTANAMO BAY PRISON

By Nina Storchlic, November 8, 2017



“Guantánamo is the best posting a soldier can have,” a military escort told Debi Cornwall on her first trip to the infamous detention facility.

Cornwall, a New York-based photographer, had just stepped off a plane onto the Cuban coast and signed a dozen pages of regulations for photographing inside Guantánamo Bay, a U.S. military prison that's home to 41 men who are suspected of or charged with terrorism (only one of whom has been convicted of a crime).

These prohibited her from photographing faces, surveillance mechanisms, locks, and certain parts of the coastline. At the end of each day, guards took her camera's memory card and deleted any photos that broke these rules.

STEVEN
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GALLERY

During her three visits between 2014 and 2015 she only saw prisoners once, from behind a two-way mirror. She was told to tape over her camera sensor so it wouldn't be visible as she peered into a common space where they were having lunch.

To many Americans, the detention site is a hazy memory from the war on terror that only resurfaces in an election year. But Cornwall—who spent 12 years in the United States as a defense lawyer for prisoners—says Guantánamo shouldn't be so easily forgotten.

“As we continue to grieve 9/11, can we also look at what happened next?” Cornwall asks. “After 16 years, there are still 41 men held offshore without charge or criminal trial. They're being held in our name.”

The stark photographs in her new book, *Welcome to Camp America*, are now on display at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York City.

For her project, Cornwall first flew to meet Djamel Ameziane, a former detainee living freely in Algeria. She brought him painting supplies, and in turn he helped facilitate meetings with other ex-prisoners in nine countries.

Cornwall found these men struggling to rebuild their lives—they were unemployed, estranged from their families, and haunted by their experiences.

“It feels like our responsibility,” she says. “Our work is not done even when innocent men are cleared and freed.”

She juxtaposed the ex-prisoners' stories and pictures with the leisure rooms and activities used by soldiers at Guantánamo, and added redacted documents and testimony about what went on behind closed doors.

She also captured what she calls the “fun” side of the base—the soldiers' golf course, bowling alley, and pool; the coffee mugs, T-shirts, and souvenirs emblazoned with “Guantánamo Bay.”

The book is not meant to be an indictment of the American soldiers whose lives are also “defined by order and routine and extreme boredom,” she cautions.

“It's less about pointing fingers, and more about what we have in common with those who think differently or worship differently—those we're afraid of.”