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Guantanamo guard converts to Islam, demands release of detainees

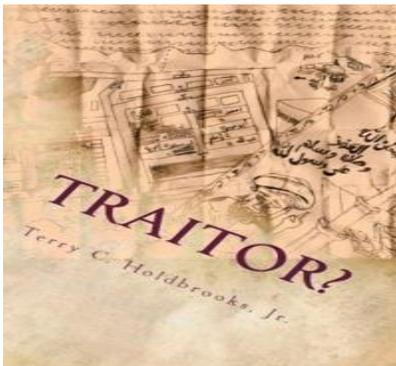
Terry Holdbrooks was deployed to the Guantanamo Bay detention center to guard detainees. The Phoenix, Ariz., resident has become a devout Muslim and an unlikely advocate for the prisoners' rights.

BY CAROL KURUVILLA

MAY 29, 2013



Terry Holdbrooks converted to Islam in December 2003 after speaking with the prisoners he was guarding at Guantanamo Bay.



TERRY HOLDBROOKS

Terry Holdbrooks self-published a book about his conversion to Islam and about the atrocities he witnessed as a guard at Guantanamo.

Death threats are just another part of life for Terry Holdbrooks Jr.

The ex-U.S. Army employee converted to Islam in 2003, inspired by the faith of the Guantanamo detainees he was charged with watching. Since then, he says he has lost his friends, received violent threats, and been labeled a “race traitor” online.

But he hasn’t gone quietly. The 29-year-old has done his fair share of media and has even signed on for a job as a speaker for the Muslim Legal Fund of America. Now the devout Muslim is

racking up frequent flyer miles and touring the country with what he calls the “truth about Gitmo.”

“Gitmo was supposed to be a cushy deployment since we were just going to babysit detainees,” Holdbrooks said. “But it changed me.”

The Phoenix, Ariz., resident spent the year between 2003 and 2004 guarding U.S. military prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He was often given the job of escorting detainees to interrogation rooms. He says he witnessed atrocities committed by his fellow American soldiers that he never thought were possible.

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Speaking on the phone to the Daily News, Holdbrooks rattled off the grim list.

“I saw people put in stress positions for eight hours until they defecated themselves,” he said. “Then the guards would come in and emasculate them.”

He said he saw prisoners shackled to the ground with the air conditioner set high, then doused with cold water. He said that menstrual blood was smeared on their faces and that they were forced to hear the same music on repeat for hours.



Roughly 100 prisoners at the facility are reportedly on a hunger strike to protest their indefinite detentions.

“Gitmo is 100 percent antithetical to the basis of our legal system,” he said. “That’s not the America I signed up to defend.”

While preparing for deployment, Holdbrooks said the Army trained him to think of the prisoners as the “worst of the worst” and “lower than humans.”

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“They said these were Al Quaida and Taliban, people who hate America and hate freedom,” Holdbrooks said.

But at least 86 of the 166 men currently held in the detention center have been cleared for release. Some have been held for years without formal charges. They are unable to transfer out because of restrictions in their home countries and laws passed by Congress, according to Human Rights Watch.

Despite the trying situations, Holdbrooks noticed that the men he talked to clung to their faith. He wondered how they could believe that there was a god who cared about them.

“I had all the freedom in the world,” he recalls. “But I was waking up unhappy while these men were in cages, smiling and praying five times a day.”

As a teenager, Holdbrooks had searched for truths in several different religions. He came to Guantanamo convinced that all monotheistic religions were evil.

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Holdbrooks (not pictured) said he was often responsible for leading detainees to interrogation rooms.

But over the course of several months, as Holdbrooks started speaking to the detainees and reading the Quran, he began to find some truth in Islam.

“The Quran is the simplest book in the world to read. It doesn’t have magic. It doesn’t contradict itself,” Holdbrooks said. “It’s simply an instruction manual for living.”

The faith lives of the detainees seemed to be proof that the instruction manual could work.

Holdbrooks took the leap in December 2003. In the presence of the prisoners, he read out a statement of faith that confirmed him as a Muslim.

His life changed drastically when he came back to America. He said he spent years trying to drink away memories of Guantanamo. He was honorably discharged from the Army in October 2005 for “generalized personality disorder.”

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Then, Holdbrooks decided to renew his commitment to Islam. He stopped drinking, smoking, and doing drugs. He put a stop to promiscuity and profanity. He found discipline in prayer.

And he started speaking out.

“Islam teaches you that if you see an injustice in the world, you should do anything within your power to stop it,” Holdbrooks said.



The Guantanamo Bay detention center is located on the southeastern coast of Cuba.

Wary of misinterpretation, Holdbrooks makes sure to speak to reporters and his lecture audiences with precision. He clarifies everything he says, knowing all the while every public appearance

will result in some sort of condemnation. Still, he pores through the hundreds of crude Internet comments to see if someone has heard his message.

“The people who write these negative comments think they’re Islamic scholars,” Holdbrooks said. “But they’re actually making massive generalized statements about something they have no idea about.”

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His agenda isn’t to promote religion, he said. Instead, he’s thinking about the human rights of people like Shaker Aamer, a detainee who turned into his mentor. Aamer, the last British resident at Guantanamo, has been detained for 11 years. He has never been charged for a crime and has been cleared for release twice, the BBC reports.

Aamer is now one of the prisoners participating in a massive hunger strike behind bars.

“These things aren’t America,” Holdbrooks said. “It would be wrong if I sat by and let Gitmo continue to exist or let people think that Islam is America’s greatest enemy.”