

Real Stories from the BTIF

By Colonel John F. Garrity

The Bagram Theater Internment Facility (BTIF), located at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, houses a number of Operation Enduring Freedom detainees. America's best hope for stemming the tide of terrorism resides with the BTIF.

Task Force Protector—a joint task force built around Headquarters, 16th Military Police Brigade (Airborne)—is comprised of Regular and Reserve Component forces from the Army, Navy, and Air Force. These personnel provide custody, control, and care of detainees while maintaining dignity and respect for the enemy. And they do so much more!

During the past 106 days that I have been in command of this task force, I have come to realize that the greatest weapon we have in the counterinsurgency (COIN) “inside the wire” fight is the professional U.S. service member. These great, young Americans stand inches away from men who have killed U.S., coalition, and Afghan forces; some, if given a chance, would kill again. Yet every day, U.S. patriots ranging in age from 18 to 57 approach their tasks with an eye toward changing the minds of Taliban, al-Qaida, Haqqani, and many other insurgent groups. And they conduct the COIN inside the wire mission with passion and professionalism. In short, they provide a daily example of what “right” looks like. Their concern and compassion for those in their custody does not coincide with the teachings of radical Islam and others with negative influence over their followers. I would like to share some vignettes, which illustrate the character of the U.S. guard force:

One of the BTIF detainees (a 42-year-old man who had been in custody since late November 2008) was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer and recommended for a compassionate release so that he might spend his remaining days with his family. The commanding general approved the release and ordered that the detainee be returned to his village in Afghanistan. In the time leading up to his release, the detainee was held in the medical segregation area of the BTIF so that he could remain under observation and receive constant medical care. The night before his release, he requested the opportunity to say goodbye to his fellow detainees, since he did not believe that he would ever see them again. His request was granted, and he spent more than an hour walking from cell to cell informing his fellow detainees of the compassion of their American captors. He implored the detainees to follow the rules of the guard force, exercise good behavior, and use their time in the BTIF to improve themselves through education classes. The U.S. guard force did not ask the dying man to do this—he made these incredible pleas of his own volition.

One night when I was conducting my routine check of the BTIF, I entered the segregation area where detainees are kept apart from the general population due to discipline issues or their negative influence on other detainees. The young U.S. Army specialist who was serving as the segregation cell guard responsible for eight individual cells had his back turned toward me and did not see me enter. I stood in the cell block, watching and listening for a few minutes as this National Guardsman from Missouri sang to one of the detainees in Pashto—the detainee's native language. The guard and the detainee sang to each other through the metal door until the detainee fell asleep. When the guard finished, he turned and saw his brigade commander standing there. He apologized for not noticing me, but I dismissed his apology. I asked him where he learned to speak Pashto, and he explained that he had learned it from the detainee to whom he had been singing. He went on to relate that he serenades the detainee every night to help the detainee fall asleep in his cell.

Each week, the commander of the BTIF (a female lieutenant colonel with the National Guard) meets with detainee leaders in an overflow cell, where prayer rugs and pillows cover the floor. The detainee leaders are unshackled, and they sit on the floor with their legs crossed. This shura¹ meeting begins with a prayer led by one of the detainee mullahs.² Next, the BTIF commander provides information, which is translated by a contracted linguist who works at the facility. For the next hour, detainees discuss issues concerning their detention with the woman who serves as the warden of the facility. They request that certain detainees be moved

to or from a particular communal cell or ask for additional items for their cells. The BTIF commander reminds attendees that she expects all detainees to follow the rules of “her house” and that good behavior is rewarded. The meeting concludes with a review of the issues covered and a promise to reconvene the following week. When asked how she manages to be so patient, given all the requests and complaints about trivial matters, the commander smiles and says, “I am the mother of sons and grandchildren. I just treat [the detainees] like my kids, and we get along great.”

There is a preventive medicine class available to BTIF detainees who express an interest in learning skills that they can use to aid themselves, their families, and their villages. The course, which is presented by Task Force Med (the medical group assigned to Task Force Protector), consists of fourteen sessions held in an overflow cell. At the most recent graduation ceremony, seven detainees attentively listened while the brigade surgeon delivered his remarks, praising the detainees for their commitment to transforming themselves into a resource for their cells and villages. He informed them that they were now qualified to serve as teachers, able to help others learn the skills that they had developed. I noticed that many of the detainees welled up with tears when the interpreter translated these remarks. Teaching is considered to be an honorable profession in their culture. The detainees smiled as they moved in procession to receive their diplomas. And they praised their instructors for being such great teachers. The detainee class leader delivered brief remarks, thanking the staff and acknowledging his pride in being a teacher. The ceremony ended with a group photo of the detainees proudly displaying their diplomas.

During one of my many walks through the BTIF to check on detainees and the guard force, I spent some time with a California National Guardsman assigned to the 670th Military Police Company. The guardsman was speaking with detainees who were gathered in their cells, explaining the reason for a delay in receiving water bottles. The guardsman spoke in Pashto without the assistance of an interpreter. I later asked him if he was fluent in the language, and he replied, “Not yet, sir, but I’m getting pretty close.” When I asked him where he learned how to speak Pashto, he told me that he had taught himself the language while he was serving a 2-month assignment as a guard with his squad at a field detention site in Logar Province, Afghanistan. He went on to explain that he realized someone needed to be able to speak the language to ensure that the detainees understood the rules within the temporary holding facility, so he took the task upon himself. Due to his new talent, he is an incredible asset to the guard force.

These vignettes illustrate the guard force members’ professionalism and dedication to a strategically important detainee operations mission. The guards treat every detainee with dignity and respect, regardless of how the detainees treat them. When a detainee throws urine, feces, semen, or the like onto a member of the guard force, that Soldier, Sailor, or Airman is replaced by his relief. Without cursing or striking out at the detainee, the guard then demonstrates his strength to the detainees by cleaning up, changing his uniform, returning to his post, and completing a derogatory report, capturing the incident so that it becomes a part of that detainee’s internment record.

Within a few weeks, the BTIF detainees will be transferred to the new \$60 million U.S. Theater Internment Facility–Afghanistan (USTIF-A), known informally as the Detention Facility in Parwan. While the new cells, education rooms, expanded recreation and shower areas, vocational and technical training buildings, and two farms will offer more opportunities for COIN inside the wire, the professionalism of the guard force will not change. The same BTIF guards will be working inside a state-of-the-art theater internment facility, and they will continue to treat detainees with dignity and respect. It is the young American warrior serving as a role model who will eventually convince those in detention that deeds are much stronger than words and will change the behavior and ideology of detainees.

There is a small sign that hangs above the door of the Detainee Assessment Branch office which reads, “Turning Taliban into productive citizens of Afghanistan one detainee at a time.” I could not say it better myself.

Editor’s update. On 21 December 2009, the BTIF was closed and all detainees were transferred to the new Detention Facility in Parwan.

Endnotes:

¹*Shura* is one of the four cardinal principles of the Islamic perspective on socio-political organization.

²*Mullahs* are Muslim men who have been educated in Islamic theology and sacred law.

Colonel Garrity is the commander of the 16th Military Police Brigade (Airborne) and Task Force Protector. He holds a bachelor’s degree in zoology from the University of Vermont and a master’s degree in national security and strategic studies from the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island.