

Death in Guantánamo: Suicide or Dryboarding?

On June 10, 2006 three Guantánamo prisoners were found dead in their cells. Two days later, a Department of Defense news release described these deaths as suicides. The news release quoted Camp Commander Harry Harris, who described these suicides as acts of *asymmetric warfare* meant to advance al Qaeda's cause in the war on terror.

The news release was categorical with regards to the self-inflicted nature of the deaths. And the Camp Commander was equally certain of their hostile intent. Yet, the news release was curiously guarded about the *manner* of these deaths—the three "appear" to have hanged themselves with nooses made of bed sheets and clothing, it said.

The deaths of these three individuals was the subject of an investigation by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (*NCIS*). The much awaited report of this investigation concluded that these deaths were indeed self-inflicted. Yet, a close reading of the heavily redacted material released by the *NCIS* raises more than a few questions, both for this and for other researchers, regarding the exact circumstances of these deaths—to wit:

- Why did the prisoners have their hands tied when they were found hanging in their cells? (NCIS185, NCIS950, NCIS1012, NCIS958, AUTO693-1)
- Is it possible to tie one's own hands?
- Why were the prisoners gagged with cloth? They were already going to kill themselves by silent suffocation through hanging; why suffocate themselves silently twice? (NCIS966, NCIS975, NCIS1073f, NCIS1079, NCIS1091)
- Why did all three prisoners have masks—or mask-like contraptions—on their faces as they hanged? (AUTO693-1, NCIS950, NCIS990f)
- Is it physically possible to hang yourself bound, masked, and gagged?
- Why was there a bloody T-shirt around the neck of one of the prisoners found hanging in his cell? (NCIS1113)
- *Rigor mortis* had begun to set in on the prisoners when they were discovered. Consequently, they had to have been hanging for two hours before they were discovered. According to Standard Operating Procedures, each of the prisoners had to be visually inspected every 10 minutes. That means 6 inspections per prisoner per hour, or 36 inspections overall. How could the guards have missed the hangings in 36 visual inspections? (NCIS1025, NCIS1070, NCIS1078f, AUTO693-8, AUTO588-7)
- Why were the neck organs (the larynx, the hyoid bone, and the thyroid cartilage) removed from one of the corpses? According to subsequent autopsies done privately, these would be essential in establishing whether or not hanging was the cause of death (AUT693-5)
- Why is there a page missing from a log book begun on the day the deaths were discovered and recording the entries and exits to the cell block where the suicides took place? (NCIS1354)

Incidentally, the information that the dead prisoners were gagged with rags came out before the *NCIS* report was even begun. This information was provided by Col. Michael Bumgarner, one of the Guantánamo commanders. Speaking to *The Charlotte Observer*, Col. Bumgarner said that the prisoners that had hanged themselves "each had a ball of cloth in their mouth either for choking or muffling their voices".

The deceased were known officially as Ali Abdullah Ahmed (ISN 693), Mana Shaman Allabardi al Tabi (ISN 588), and Yasser Talal al Zahrani (ISN 93). Their lifeless bodies were found hanging in cells A5, A12, A8, respectively, of Alpha Block, Camp 1, Camp Delta (NCIS938).

The Testimonies of Several Guards And One Commander

In January 2010, Scott Horton published an explosive article in *Harper's Magazine*. In it he told about Staff Sergeant Joseph Hickman, who was guarding the entrance to Camp Delta on the night of the deaths. Early that night, Sergeant Hickman saw a white van come and pick three prisoners from the Camp and drive them to a secretive facility within the Guantánamo Naval Base. Then, about an hour before the bodies were found hanging in their cells, the van returned and backed up to the entrance of the clinic as if to unload something. Hickman went to the clinic and a medical corpsman informed him that three dead prisoners had been delivered to the clinic. The corpsman furthermore told him that they had died because they had rags stuffed down their throats, and that one of them was severely bruised.

Specialist Tony Davila, also serving at Guantánamo at the time, was likewise told, according to *Harper's*, that the prisoners had died as the result of having rags stuffed down their throats.

The article in *Harper's Magazine* adds two critical questions to the nine raised thus far:

- Who were the three prisoners taken to the secret facility on the evening of the deaths?
- What happened to them there?

In addition to this, two Guantanamo guards other than the ones mentioned thus far told Horton that no prisoners were taken from the regular cell blocks to the clinic that night. And several guards confirmed to him also that Bumgarner had acknowledged the gagging early on. Indeed, according to *Harper's*, the Colonel called a meeting of personnel on the morning of the deaths; at that meeting, he is said to have told those in attendance that

you all know three prisoners in the Alpha Block at Camp 1 committed suicide during the night by swallowing rags, causing them to choke to death (*The Guantánamo Suicides*, §5)

"He also told them," Horton continued, "that the media would report something different. It would report that the three prisoners had committed suicide by hanging themselves in their cells. It was important, he said, that servicemen make no comments or suggestions that in any way undermined the official report. He reminded the soldiers and sailors that their phone and email communications were being monitored."

The Dryboarding Of Ali Almarri

Ali Saleh Almarri is a citizen of Qatar that entered lawfully the United States in September 2001. Ostensibly, he had come with his wife and five children to pursue graduate studies at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois—the same institution from which he had earned a Bachelor's degree in 1991. On December 12, 2001 Mr. Almarri was arrested by the FBI as an alleged material witness of the terrorist attacks of September 11 (*Complaint*, §§14-15).

Mr. Almarri was initially detained at the Peoria County Jail. From there he was transferred to the Metropolitan Correction Center in New York City, and then back to the Peoria County Jail in May 2003. By then, Mr. Almarri had been detained without charge for 17 months, most of which he had spent in solitary confinement (*Complaint*, §§15-16, 21).

On June 23, 2003, President Bush designated Mr. Almarri an *enemy combatant*, and had him transferred to the Consolidated Naval Brig in Charleston, South Carolina, the same prison that once housed alleged dirty-bomber Jose Padilla, former Guantánamo prisoner Yasser Hamdi, and former Guantánamo Chaplain James Yee. Mr. Almarri remained at the brig until February 2009. By then, he had been held for more than seven years—all without charge; all in virtual isolation (*Complaint*, §§25-26).

In 2009, President Obama transferred Mr. Almarri's case to the federal court system, where he pleaded guilty of supporting al-Qaeda and was sentenced to fifteen years. He is now held at the supermax prison in Florence, Colorado. Receiving a reduced sentence for time served and the harsh conditions of his confinement, he is due to be released in January 2015 (*Federal Bureau of Prisons Website*).

By December 2011, Mr. Almarri had spent ten years in custody. Of these years, the most brutal were the first year-and-a-half he spent at the Consolidated Naval Brig, from June 2003 to October 2004. There he was held *incommunicado*—meaning that he was denied any contact with the outside world, including his family, his lawyers, and even the International Committee of the Red Cross. His only

human contact then was with government officials during interrogation sessions. Or with guards when they delivered trays of food through a slot in his cell door, escorted him to shower, or took him to a concrete cage for "recreation" (*Memorandum*, p. 4).

During this period, Mr. Almarri was held in a 6-by-9-foot cell, denied basic necessities, including adequate clothing, recreation, and hygiene items such as a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and toilet paper. Sometimes the water to his cell was cut off for up to 20 days. If Mr. Almarri needed water to drink or to wash himself, he had to ring a buzzer. Brig staff would often fail to respond for several hours. Brig staff also interfered with Mr. Almarri's practice of his religion. A devout Muslim, he was denied water to purify himself, a prayer rug, and a *kofi* to cover his head during prayer. When he used his shirt as a substitute, he was punished by having his shirt removed. He was prohibited from knowing the time of day and the direction to Mecca, thus preventing him from properly fulfilling the Muslim requirement of praying five times a day. The only religious item he was permitted was a Koran—but it was sometimes taken away and desecrated (*Memorandum*, pp. 5-6).

While held *incommunicado*, Mr. Almarri was subjected to a brutal interrogation regime which included stress positions, prolonged exposures to cold temperatures, extreme sensory deprivation, and threats of violence or death to self or to others. Interrogators, for example, told Mr. Almarri that they would send him to Egypt or to Saudi Arabia to be tortured, sodomized, and forced to watch as his wife was raped in front of him. They also threatened to make him *disappear* so that no one would know where he was (*Memorandum*, pp. 4-5).

But of all the interrogation techniques that Mr. Almarri endured, there is one that is, potentially, of great importance for an accurate interpretation of the deaths at Guantánamo in 2006. Yet, it would have gone unnoticed were it not for a recent article by Tony Bartelme in the Charleston *Post and Courier*.

Indeed, on one occasion, interrogators decided to stuff Mr. Almarri's mouth with cloth and cover his mouth with heavy duct tape—a technique of *controlled suffocation* that Mr. Almarri's lawyer, Andrew Savage, has called *dryboarding*. Dryboarding is not just a criminal practice; it is a potentially lethal procedure as well. As he was being dryboarded, Mr. Almarri tried to relieve the pain caused by the duct tape by loosening the tape with his lips. He succeeded. Taking note of this, the interrogators taped his mouth again. But this time more tightly. At this point Mr. Almarri began to choke to death. Panicking, the interrogators acted quickly and removed the tape, thus managing, narrowly, to keep Mr. Almarri alive (*Memorandum*, p. 5).

This account of the events is apparently undisputed. Ms. Joanna Baltes, who appeared on behalf of the government in the sentencing of Mr. Almarri, seems to have acknowledged that this incident took place. She also recognized that this procedure was inconsistent with the Army Field Manual (*Sentencing*, pp. 259, 261). There are no signs, however, that anyone has been held accountable for carrying it out.

Video recordings of this incident exist, but have been repeatedly denied to Mr. Almarri's legal team on grounds of national security (*Sentencing*, p. 261; Andrew Savage, *personal communication*).

Suicide or Dryboarding?

The dryboarding of Mr. Almarri raises an unavoidable question: *Did the three individuals found hanging in Guantánamo die from dryboarding rather than by hanging?* If so, they would be cases, not of multiple suicide, but rather of torture leading to multiple loss of life.

Whether the Guantánamo prisoners died from hanging or from dryboarding is something for a thorough, independent, and transparent inquiry to determine—none of which the *NCIS* investigation was. For, if it had been thorough, it would have disposed of all the questions we raised above; if it had been independent, it would not have been carried out by the Navy, which runs the Guantanamo Naval Base; and if it had been transparent, it would not have censored more than half of its report.

Be that as it may, it is clear that dryboarding can dispose, singlehandedly, of all the questions we have raised thus far—especially the questions regarding the need for gagging with cloth and for using masks or mask-like contraptions. They would be nothing short of essential to the task at hand.

The dryboarding hypothesis would also explain the binding of the hands, the fact that no hanging was observed after 36 visual inspections, the removal of the organs of the neck, and the missing pages in the log book—the latter being attempts at destroying evidence of a crime. It would also void the need for dubious appeals to self-binding and hobbled hangings. Similarly, it would identify the prisoners taken from Camp Delta and reveal their fate.

And the violent conditions necessitated by dryboarding could account for the bruising and bloodied T-shirt. Even the guarded description of the manner of death in the early news release would make sense within a dryboarding scenario.

But there is more. Two of the documents in the *NCIS* report affirm that the rags in the mouths of the deceased were socks. One of

these socks was described as *white athletic*; the other as *white nylon* (NCIS1073f, NCIS1091). Interestingly, the cloth used in the dryboarding of Mr. Almarri was also a sock (Andrew Savage, *personal communication*).

The Guantánamo Testimonials Project calls for a thorough, independent, and transparent investigation into the June 10, 2006 deaths at Guantánamo and, more broadly, for a thorough, independent, and transparent inquiry into all the practices and policies of detention enacted since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

CSHRA Note

To view in full the documents cited in this report, [click here](#).

*This report appeared first in *Truthout* on November 3, 2011. The author wishes to thank Andrew Savage, Heather Hill, Candace Gorman, James Yee, Terry Mustafa Holdbrooks, and Brandon Neely for help writing this article, the contents of which are the sole responsibility of the author (Almerindo E. Ojeda).*

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This report was last revised on February 15, 2012.