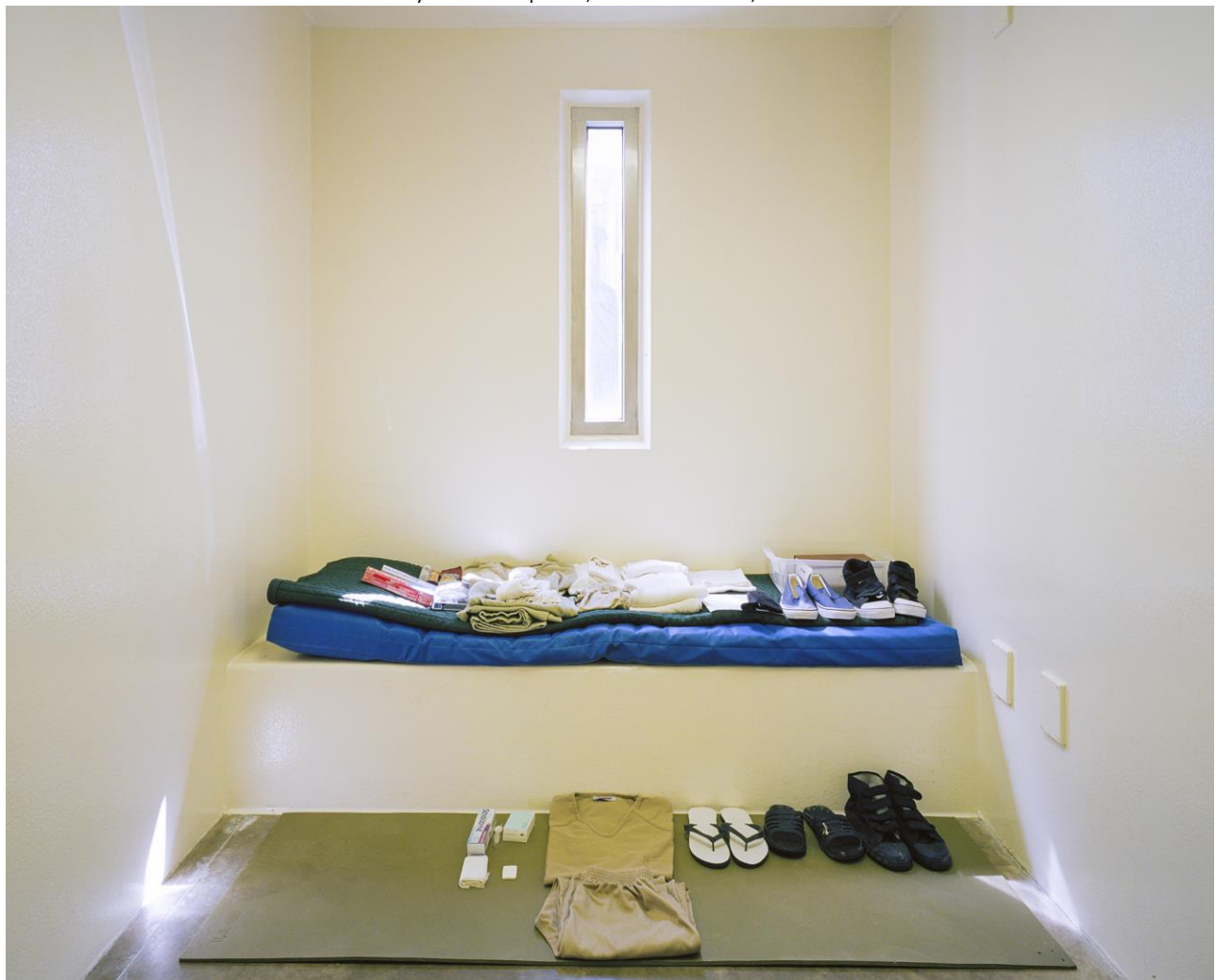


Daily Mail.com

BEYOND GITMO: THE LONELY EXISTENCE OF FORMER
GUANTANAMO BAY PRISONERS WHO HAVE BEEN RELEASED AND
SHIPPED TO REBUILD THEIR LIVES IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES
WITHOUT A PHONE, BANK ACCOUNT OR DRIVER'S LICENSE

By Anna Hopkins, November 13, 2017



- Guantanamo Bay detention center is currently home to at least 41 prisoners, and hundreds of US Military
- Photographer Debi Cornwall tracked down 14 former prisoners to discuss their lives since they were freed
- The men were found to be innocent of any wrong-doing against the United States, but were unable to return home after being released from Guantanamo after spending more than a decade there in some cases
- The experience of these men has been extremely lonely, Cornwall told the DailyMail.com

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

- Her exhibition, *Beyond Gitmo*, is on display at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York City

The reality of life after Guantanamo Bay for former prisoners is revealed in a new photography exhibition.

New-York based photographer Debi Cornwall visited the Guantanamo Bay detention center over the course of two years, chronicling the day-to-day life of military personnel stationed there. Afterwards, she tracked down some of the men spread across nine countries who had been released to discuss their adjustment to life after Gitmo.

Their experiences were wide and varied, and for the most part, extremely lonely.

Cornwall told DailyMail.com: 'There's a range of emotion – and this is one of the questions I've been consumed with throughout my professional career: what are the ingredients of resilience?

'How does someone survive this sort of trauma?'

Five of the men, of Chinese and Uzbek descent, were transferred to Albania after their release. The Chinese men who were held at Gitmo were Uighurs – indigenous Muslims – who faced retribution from their native people were they to return to their home country.

'Although they were cleared of any wrongdoing against the US, China would consider them to be treasonous separatists as practicing Muslims,' Cornwall explained.

'There were a total of 22 housed in Guantanamo and they've been shipped all over the world - from El Salvador and Palau to places like Albania where I photographed a number of them.'

After being sent to Albania, all five of the men she spoke with were granted asylum, which should have granted them the right to a national identification card. However – none of the men were permitted the ID card, likely due to the reputation they carried as former Guantanamo prisoners.

'In Albania, if you don't have a national ID card, you're basically a non-person. You cannot legally register for a driver's license, a car, a bank account, or a cell phone. Essentially you live under the table,' Cornwall continued.

More of the former detainees, who were from Yemen and Tunisia, weren't allowed to go to their home countries because the political situation was deemed too dangerous.

'Many of the men released from Guantanamo, they don't have court declarations of innocence – there was no formal process for them. There was no court proceeding,' Cornwall said.

'So when they return home they're sort of branded for the rest of their lives from Guantanamo, and in our consciousness, is synonymous with: "you're a terrorist" even if that's not true. And for men who couldn't go home who were transferred to third countries, they are trying to rebuild lives in countries where they don't know anybody or even speak the language.'

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

Although the 'no-face' rule did not apply to those who have been released from Guantanamo, Cornwall decided to incorporate it into her photographs of the former inmates to illustrate the disorientation experienced by these men. She collaborated with her subjects to decide on an environment that would be most meaningful for them to be photographed in.

One person who particularly impacted her, Hussein, was originally from Yemen - but was sent to Slovakia after being held at Guantanamo for 12 years.

Slovakia is the only country in Europe that has no mosques. As a practicing Muslim, when it is time for him to pray, Hussein has nowhere to go. He is pictured kneeling for midday prayer with his hands on bare rocks, alone in a field with a solitary tree.

'There's a range of responses from confusion and frustration and anger to grace and forgiveness. It really depends on the circumstances each man is facing, his family and social networks, and personality,' Cornwall said.

'I find that released men who have a sense of humor often are quite resilient. Everyone has a sense of humor, but those who can relate to what they've been through with a measure of dark humor are also doing better. Those who have returned to strong family systems or been able to marry and start their own family – that seems to help.'

It is Ms Cornwall's hope that in showing the photographs of what she saw at Guantanamo Bay and in sharing the stories of the men who were detained there despite their innocence, she can encourage a greater discussion about the United States justice system.

'My focus is more on posing the question that may disrupt an assumption no matter what you think of Guantanamo than the answer you come to. I think by posing the question - what do we have in common – there are new conversations and new relationships that can arise,' she said.

Since the exhibition has debuted, it appears that opposing viewpoints have begun to come together in a more cohesive way. At the Steven Kessler Gallery, where Ms Cornwall's photos are being shown, there was a recent panel comprised of a former Guantanamo prison interrogator, former inmate who appeared via Skype from Mauritania, an attorney, and Cornwall herself.

It is her belief that it was the first time in history that an open discussion between such a combination of people had taken place.

'To have that range of people with first-hand experience at Guantanamo gave rise to a powerful conversation, and it was different in kind than a conversation that is solely about terrorism or solely about human rights,' Cornwall said.

'As an artist, being able to facilitate that different conversation felt very meaningful.'