

THE BEAT FROM HELL: CAROL ROSENBERG'S DECADE COVERING GITMO

For the record, Carol Rosenberg has been covering Gitmo for more than the decade that has elapsed since she arrived there on January 9, 2002 to cover the impending arrival of the first war on terror detainees. She filed this story on March 22, 1999 and another a month later for the Charlotte Observer, when she covered the de-mining of the island.

This is "Gitmo," 45 square miles of U.S.-controlled territory stranded in a time warp and shrinking in resources in the post-Cold War era. Two years ago, it had 6,000 residents, both military and civilian; it will have half that later this year.

Formally called the U.S. Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay, this hemisphere's last outpost against Communism also is a curious island of Americana on the eastern end of Cuba.

[snip]

Since [Base Commander Larry] Larson arrived two years ago from the Naval War College, the former test pilot has presided over a campaign of cutbacks and downsizing – in keeping with a military-wide austerity kick caused by the collapse of the Iron Curtain.

When he arrived, about 6,000 people – both civilian and military – lived and worked out of some 1,890 buildings, ranging from World War II vintage pump houses to bachelors' quarters. Their budget was \$41 million.

By October 1999, he plans to operate

only out of 900 buildings, to cut the budget to \$24 million and the population to about 2,500.

But it was 10 years ago today when Rosenberg first started covering the base's use as a prison for alleged terrorists. As I've heard others who have made the trip explain, Rosenberg is now the institutional memory of the place, often describing what a space was used for years before DOD's current press minders ever showed up. Or, as she described in a National Press Club speech last year, what the rules used to be for journalists and attorneys.

It's a place the Pentagon likes to call the most transparent detention center on Earth. Hundreds of reporters have visited there, they say, since the first al Qaida suspects arrived eight years ago.

They skip the part about how few go back more than once – stymied by the sheer frustration at the rules, the hoops, the time, and the costs of doing basic journalism. Being a court reporter. Writing a feature story. Conducting an interview.

[snip]

Guantanamo is a place where you get assigned seats in court, and if you're me you usually get one of the two or three seats that can't see the witness stand. Even if the media gallery is mostly empty.

It wasn't always that way. When the court opened in the summer of 2004, reporters were VIPs, afforded seats front and center – and during breaks the lawyers would lean over the bar and explain, amplify. We stayed in guest quarters.

Now, in court, according to the ground

rules, you can't talk to the lawyers, even during breaks. Even if they want to be quoted.

It's a place where for years a public affairs officer would scrupulously provide the number of captives being force-fed. This summer, it stopped. We never give out those figures, they said. I protest. I ask again earlier this month. How many of the 180 are being tube fed? Answer: About half of less than 10. Huh?

It's a place where one day in the cafeteria, your escorts harp on you to display your media badge. Then another tells you to put it away because it's creeping out the troops.

It's a place where they say you can never take pictures at McDonalds. But I have, with permission and an escort. Where they say no one has ever taken pictures in Khalid Sheik Mohammed's courtroom, the maximum-security bunker. But I have. They took me there, and approved the photograph.

Of course, for much of that decade, Rosenberg was one of the only ones—aside from the detainees, their attorneys, and those unlucky enough to get stationed there—paying attention. She's often been the one to report on hunger strikes and force feeding, one new Kafkaesque rules invented for the detainees, and most recently on the high cost of keeping detainees at Gitmo—a remarkable contrast to her reporting on the cost-cutting at Gitmo from 1999.

The Pentagon detention center that started out in January 2002 as a collection of crude open-air cells guarded by Marines in a muddy tent city is today arguably the most expensive prison on earth, costing taxpayers \$800,000 annually for each of the 171

captives by Obama administration reckoning.

That's more than 30 times the cost of keeping a captive on U.S. soil.

It's still funded as an open-ended battlefield necessity, although the last prisoner arrived in March 2008. But it functions more like a gated community in an American suburb than a forward-operating base in one of Afghanistan's violent provinces.

Congress, charged now with cutting \$1.5 trillion from the budget by Christmas, provided \$139 million to operate the center last year, and has made every effort to keep it open – even as a former deputy commander of the detention center calls it “expensive” and “inefficient.”

“It's a slow-motion Berlin Airlift – that's been going on for 10 years,” says retired Army Brig. Gen. Greg Zanetti, a West Point graduate who in 2008 was deputy commander at the detention center.

Not surprisingly, The Miami-Herald has long been one of the best resources on the prison (Rosenberg was posting links to court filings and other documents years before the rest of the traditional media was doing so).

For her trouble, DOD has twice tried to stop her reporting. In 2009, a Navy spokesperson at the base accused her of sexual harassment, a claim the Navy later dropped. And in 2010, DOD banned Rosenberg and three other journalists for publishing the already public name of Omar Khadr's interrogator, Joshua Claus. That ban, too, was later dropped.

As Rosenberg also noted at that press club speech, our government tried to make Gitmo “outside the rule of law.” They have also tried

to make it secret—or at least so difficult to cover that no one would make the effort.

Rosenberg has defied that goal for a decade now.

It's hard to think of many other journalists who have slogged through such a thankless beat for so long. It's hard, too, to think of many other beats that are more important to give such tireless coverage.

Update: Rosenberg tweeted a link to her first post-9/11 story from Gitmo.

When al Qaeda and Taliban prisoners arrive this week from Afghanistan, they'll hardly be trading their cave life for the creature comforts of the Caribbean.

Rather, this is what the Military Police have in store for them until they build a permanent prison facility:

Six-by-eight-foot cells made of chain-linked fencing that resemble open-air cages. Concrete slab floors with mats for beds and wooden roofs to keep out the rain. Guard dogs and Military Police — both men and women — monitoring the every move of members of a movement that once hid their women from public view. Halogen lights by night, no running water but a container for a toilet, a “culturally neutral diet” without meat — all out of view of the sparkling waters that feed the Straits of Florida.

And, just in case the al Qaeda and Taliban prisoners have visions of staging an uprising inside the compound called Camp X-Ray, Marines will patrol beyond several fences — armed to the teeth in the high grass beyond razor-sharp, concertina wire, beneath a brand-new American flag that was flapping in the breeze Wednesday.

“It will be humane. But we have no

intention of making it comfortable, ”
declared Marine Brig. Gen. Michael R.
Lehnert, commander of the prison project
who arrived over the weekend from Camp
Lejeune, N.C.