

## Southtown Article #24 Abu Ghraib

When people hear the words Abu Ghraib, I imagine almost everyone thinks of the scandal involving American soldiers mistreating Iraqi prisoners. The maltreatment was famously captured on photographs that soon became a worldwide story.

Abu Ghraib, however, has been famous or rather infamous among Iraqis for many, many years. It was a complex of four prisons housing criminals, foreigners and political prisoners.

It is located about 30 minutes outside of Baghdad. It now houses in separate facilities both detainees captured by Coalition forces and convicts found guilty by the Iraqi court system. Within the same fortress like structure hundreds of American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines also live. I lived there for about two weeks this September, covering for a chaplain who was on leave.

The first thing you notice is how hostile the environment is. Unlike many other camps, civilian workers and military personnel must wear their Kevlar helmets and body armor every time they step outside. Since the camp is located in between two major highways, it is often attacked by people firing mortars from their vehicles. This is known as the “shoot and scoot” method of attack.

But it doesn't take long to notice something else about the place. It is a place of gloom and despair. One soldier who was a doctor stationed at the hospital there told me he was convinced it was an evil place.

Countless thousands of prisoners were tortured and killed within the confines of Abu Ghraib prison. One day a handful of soldiers and me took a tour of the Iraqi prison. Our guide led us to the top floor of the prison block. The stairwell led to a long corridor. During Sadaam's time, about 5,000 people were housed in that hallway. There was one bathroom. Prisoners slept, defecated, and ate all within that area. There hardly would have been room to move or lay down. During the summers as the temperature reached 120 degrees, the stench and disease, we were told, were beyond description. Iraqi guards to this day will not venture into that corridor at night. They are convinced it is haunted by those whose lives ended in that nightmare of a hallway.

During the regime of Sadaam Hussein, despite the fantastic numbers of people arrested, they never suffered from over crowding. When there was no more room, prisoners were randomly chosen and shot on sight.

But the starkest reminder of evil of Sadaam Hussein's regime was the “Death House.” Inside the nondescript structure were a number of cells and a gallows. The walls of the cells are covered in writing and scratches indicating the number of days a prisoner was confined. One room was covered in white tile. It doesn't take much of an imagination to realize that interrogations took place there. Blood could easily be washed from the walls.

The gallows are what shocked me. These were not some rickety structures thrown together to end the lives of a few unfortunates. It was a specifically designed instrument of death made of concrete and steel. It was made for high volume work and it was made to last. In fact, there are documents recording 10,000 hangings but that figure is probably well short of the deaths that actually took place there.

I've been to Auschwitz in Poland. I recognized the same merciless efficiency in the gas chambers and ovens as I did in the gallows. One ramp led to the condemned men's station. The ramp at the other end of the room led to place where the bodies were released from the ropes. Two massive steel loops protruded from ceiling directly above the trap door. From their size, it was clear they could hold thousands of pounds apiece. The trap doors themselves were made from thick steel. In between the two trap doors was the station where the executioner stood. Two large levers operated the doors.

We operated the mechanism. The doors flew open and slammed against the concrete below. I suspect that sound was heard a fraction of a second before the men's necks were snapped.

Our guide told us prisoners were brought to the room to witness the two at a time executions. After the men dropped from the rope, the prisoners watching were made to unfasten their bodies and remove them. Then they reset the heavy trap doors. Then it was their turn. If a prisoner refused to do this. There was a hook in the ceiling above them. They were hung by their arms and beaten until almost dead. The guide pointed out, however, that their legs were not touched so that they could still march up the ramp to be hanged after they had seen all the other condemned men die that day.

In a strange way, I felt a certain kinship with the American soldiers of World War II who entered the concentration camps. Their liberation of the camps ensured that the evil destruction of Hitler's regime would continue no longer. Regardless of where one stands on the question of the justice of this war, American and Coalition soldiers put an end to the torture and rampant executions of Sadaam Hussein's regime.

I do not think it is wise or fair to use the same word, torture, to describe how prisoners were treated by Sadaam Hussein and how prisoners were treated by American soldiers. While reprehensible, I am not able to equate stacking naked prisoners in a pyramid and photographing with the torture others endured at Abu Ghraib.

There are plans to level the whole complex in the coming months. The Iraqi government seems eager to destroy this infamous stain on the collective conscience of the Iraqi people. I'm sure nothing would be more welcome by the American government or military than to leave no trace behind of this haunted place. But I for one, hope it does not come to pass. I hope at least part of it will remain standing. I hope people for generations will take tours of the prison and death house. And I hope that they too are scandalized by the inhumane treatment, torture and murder that were part of daily life here. If that happens, maybe history will not repeat itself.

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