

PROLOGUE

Detainee 002 blindly stumbled from the belly of the plane into the Cuban sun. Blacked-out goggles covered his eyes to prevent him from harming the two crew-cut marines gripping his five-foot-four frame. He was a high-risk prisoner, like all the others on this flight. A blue surgical mask covered his mouth, and gloves were taped to his hands. Headphones muffled his hearing. Over an orange jumpsuit, he wore what the prisoners called a ‘three-piece suit’—a metal belt with chains attached to leg irons and handcuffs. It made Detainee 002 walk awkwardly as the marines led him down the plane’s rear hatch. The hold reeked of urine, human excrement and body odour. Shackled to the floor and unable to get to the toilet, some of the other accused terrorists had soiled themselves on the 24-hour flight from Afghanistan.¹

With his sight blocked and hearing muted, the intense heat gave Detainee 002 his first hint that he was at his destination. The sun rarely allowed the US military base at Guantanamo Bay to cool below 32°C, even in winter, and the prisoners roasted inside their jumpsuits and restraints.

Marines in Humvees surrounded the enormous grey plane and its valuable human cargo. Some were armed with rocket-launchers and others with machine guns. One manned a grenade-launcher. Camouflaged snipers blended into the surrounding hills, and the dull chop of helicopter blades sliced through the air. A gunner hung from a Navy chopper, his sights trained on the prisoners as they shuffled out one by one.

It was January 2002, four months after the September 11 terrorist attacks. The soldiers on guard at Guantanamo Bay Airport for the maximum-security prisoner transfer from Afghanistan were on extreme alert. They believed the men filing off the plane were conspirators in September 11. The base was humming with jittery energy.

The soldiers’ bosses back at the Department of Defense in Washington DC were depicting the first planes to Guantanamo as the

terrorist equivalents of *Con Air*. In the film, a gang of rapists, serial killers and paedophiles burst out of their shackles mid-prison transfer and take over their plane. The Pentagon was not risking that on these flights. Guards on the C-17 Globemaster aircraft outnumbered the prisoners two to one.² According to the Bush administration, these were ruthless killers ready to slaughter an American at the first opportunity. No feat was too evil, no plan too fiendish. ‘These are people that would gnaw hydraulic lines in the back of a C-17 to bring it down,’ the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, informed a Pentagon briefing the day the first plane arrived. ‘These are very, very dangerous people and that’s how they’re being treated.’³ A reporter asked for detail on the hydraulic-cable incident. ‘That was hyperbole,’ the general revised.

Just like the soldiers who eyed their every move, the accused terrorists were nervy and tense. Some believed that transfer to the island prison meant they would never be released.⁴ Others had never set foot on a plane before and thought that when the noisy machine landed, they would be executed.⁵

Detainee 002 shuffled along the tarmac to a white bus, bound for his new home, Camp X-ray. He saw nothing through his goggles as the bus first drove onto a ferry that crossed Guantanamo Bay itself and then chugged up a dusty road towards Camp X-ray’s perimeter. It entered the camp through a 12-foot-high steel fence crowned with barbed wire. Marines armed with M16s and binoculars watched every move from a wooden guard tower with an American flag flapping overhead.⁶ The bus finally rattled to a stop near a dozen rows of metal cages. The doors hissed open, and guards led the detainees off one by one, ordering them to kneel on the ground just outside their new cells.

Marines slashed the gloves from Detainee 002 and then pulled off his face mask and goggles. David Hicks, aliases Abu Muslim al Austraili and Muhammed Dawood,⁷ saw his new home for the first time. The cages had wooden roofs. But the steel-mesh walls were going to offer little protection from the wind, rain and ferocious heat. Soldiers pulled Hicks to his feet and led him to a cell roughly the dimensions of a

king-sized bed. There was a thin foam mat on a concrete floor and a bucket. When he needed to empty this toilet, military police would shackle him and lead him to the latrine. In the following days, the white-skinned Australian was given his ‘comfort items’—two bath towels, one for the shower and the other for use as a prayer mat, a sheet, a thin blanket, toothpaste and brush, a prayer cap, soap, shampoo, a fresh orange jumpsuit and a pair of thongs.⁸

The detainees were not allowed to talk to the inmates in the adjoining cages. Within a few weeks of arrival, the military distributed Korans and the prisoners were allowed to practise their religion. Five times a day, the call to prayer echoed through the desolate camp. Former detainees say the loudspeaker broadcast other messages too. ‘Cooperate and you can go home,’ one voice boomed; another stated, ‘We know who is telling the truth and who is lying and we can tell. Tell the truth.’⁹

The boredom was stultifying. There was nothing to do—no sense of time, no distractions, nothing to offer any hope that this was not to be for life. Meals broke the monotony, although they were tasteless and often small.¹⁰ Guards gave the prisoners military-style ‘ready-to-eat’ meal packs (MREs), with the heating elements removed. A typical meal was a vacuum-packed vegetable and pasta dish, peanuts, a granola bar and a box of Fruit Loops.¹¹

The name ‘Camp X-ray’ conveyed the sense of exposure Hicks was experiencing. Halogen floodlights blazed twenty-four hours a day, and a soldier passed by once every minute.¹² The wire walls offered no privacy. Nor did they do much to keep the Guantanamo wildlife at bay; it was not uncommon to see an iguana, a banana rat or a scorpion. Hicks, a former kangaroo skinner and rodeo rider, quickly learnt to stave off boredom with mindless distractions such as catching mice and stringing them up in his cell. Sometimes he caught three or four a night, entertaining the other prisoners with his skill.¹³

On that first night, as the lights shone into his face and the army boots crunched past constantly, before his comfort items had arrived and before he became the ‘Mouse Hunter’, Hicks had nothing to occupy him but his thoughts. His own questionable choices and

PROLOGUE

decisions had led him to Camp X-ray. He had been stripped of his possessions, his dignity and his legal rights, and he was now a number, not a name. To the guards at Guantanamo Bay, he was not merely David Hicks. He was Detainee 002.

What the prisoner did not realise, as he lay alone in that cell in Guantanamo Bay, was that he was no longer the nobody he had been his whole life, the short man always craving attention. Instead, he was on the front line of an experiment that would capture the world's attention and pit him against the most powerful man in the world, the President of the United States of America.