



U.S. Department of Defense photo

Preparing for a Leadership Position at Gitmo

Lieutenant Commander Brian Sims
United States Navy

“Sir . . . this is the Watch Supervisor in the Central Control Room,” said an urgent voice on the other line, “We have a problem . . .”

Of course we have a problem, thought Travis. We always have problems here. And every time you call me you give me another one. But instead of complaining to the guard who was only doing his job, Travis asked, “Is it a big one?”

“There’s a fight in Delta Block, sir,” said the Watch Supervisor as he scanned the security monitors. “Looks like 3 or 4 detainees . . . and a couple trying to break it up.”

At the time, U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Travis Bryson was serving as the Officer in Charge of Camp 6 while assigned on an Individual Augmentee (IA) to Joint Task Force Guantanamo – or *Gitmo*. “We have a problem,” was an everyday expression used by both the guard force and the detainees to declare the obvious, so Travis asked the size to gauge his so-what factor. A *big* problem indicated that

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something was about to go down, or was in progress . . . as was the case this day, three months into a year-long assignment.

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To understand his perspective for dealing with “the fight,” let’s back up a few months to when Travis received notification of this deployment.

“I’m going where?” asked Travis, shocked at what he was hearing.

“To Gitmo,” said his boss, Captain Morricks, who was short and compact like a clenched fist, “to be the Officer-in-Charge of a Detention Camp.”

“You realize I’m a Surface Warfare Officer, right, sir?” said Travis, as if his boss made a mistake. “I know about ships and long and arduous deployments at sea, but I know nothing about detention operations, or of the occupants at Gitmo—”

His boss cut in and told him what they both already knew—that the detainees were members of al-Qaeda, the Taliban and battlefield pickups from Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that among the most notorious were Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11; Abu Zubaydah, a senior al-Qaeda leader; and al-Nashiri, the USS COLE Bomber. .

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So how did Travis prepare for this job? In addition to the standard pre-deployment curriculum (man, train, and equip) provided by the military, he had to mentally prepare to operate in an environment outside of his cultural norm.

As an avid reader of fiction, and occasionally nonfiction, he turned to biographies, classical literature, and among other writing, sacred scriptures. During this “prep time,” he read several books and would continue to do so throughout deployment, reading a book a week that year; but the ones that influenced him most concerning Gitmo were Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*, Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, and the *Qur’an*.

In the dust-jacket-cover summary, and in retrospect to Travis’ deployment, Nelson Mandela’s autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* provided him with a tremendously useful inside-the-wire perspective. Mandela, who was arguably the most famous political prisoner of the twentieth century, revealed tactics-techniques-and-procedures used during prisoner-guard interactions—such as protests, hunger strikes, suicide, and escape attempts—to achieve personal or political objectives, including obtaining the media’s attention.

In a sense, *Long Walk to Freedom* was a playbook Travis studied from, and he shared these insights with those he worked with and those he worked for, including his immediate superiors, the Joint Detention Group and Joint Task Force Commanders. The commanders acknowledged it as an interesting technique, because they, like most military commanders, read more along the lines of military non-fiction. Over the course of the year at Gitmo, Travis constantly revisited Chapter 66. Mandela states, “The most important person in any prisoner’s life is not the minister of justice, not the commissioner of prisons, not even the head of prison, but the warder in one’s section.”¹ For this reason, like a football coach’s playbook, Travis kept *Long Walk to Freedom* on the sidelines with him, although Gitmo was no game.

For clarification, Travis didn't draw any comparison between Mandela's legitimate fight against apartheid and a terrorist's illegitimate fight against innocent civilians who didn't adhere to the terrorist's extremist ideologies. However, there were detention similarities, for instance, between Robben Island Prison (where Mandela spent 18 of 27 years of imprisonment) and Gitmo (where some detainees have been for over a decade), such as their isolated locations: both facilities are on remote islands away from the authorities incarcerating them.

In contrast to Mandela's biography, the classical literature of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* provided Travis with the sense of the alienation from humanity suspected criminals bring upon themselves, and the psychological anguish of inner struggle that burdens them upon the discovery and prosecution. Likewise, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* provided Travis with a mysterious sense of the gloomy disorientation that an extrajudicial detainee could possibly experience, which included a profound sense of an unaware society, an invisible law, and untouchable court.

Lastly, the sacred scripture of the *Qur'an* was the most revealing to Travis. It provided him with the foundation of the Islamic narrative, and holistically speaking, a realization of the longevity of religious narratives, which in general have outlasted major empires throughout history. It's hard to think about the Roman Empire without the impact of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although there are many religions of the world to consider, for Travis (especially pertaining to the detainees at Gitmo), reading the *Qur'an* was important to him, and in a sense, it was like reading, purely in a manner of speaking, Book III of *The World's Oldest Religious Trilogy: The Hebrew Bible, Christian Bible, and Qur'an*. Depicted below, and let me say again, purely in a manner of speaking to illustrate a point, are the numeric book titles associated with the respective sacred scriptures, its Prophet, and religion.

The World's Oldest Religious Trilogy:

- Book I: The Hebrew Bible – Moses – Judaism
- Book II: The Christian Bible – Jesus – Christianity
- Book III: The Qur'an – Muhammad – Islam

Although Judaism, Christianity, and Islam may not be in agreement whatsoever, as a division of study in comparative religions, their Abrahamic monotheistic narratives have unequivocally provided the foundation for not only their own religious and cultural narratives, but also for many other religious and cultural narratives throughout the world, all of which are dependent, if you think about it, upon one event: Moses meeting God. And likewise, this event comes down to essentially one question: Did Moses receive divine guidance—starting with the Ten Commandments—for all humanity to follow?

As the fields of study of religion, science, and philosophy continuously seek these answers and vie for the preeminence of information pertaining to the who, what, why, where, when, and how of our existence, do we take at face value the narrative of an intangible being, God, providing a tangible being, say Moses, Jesus or Muhammad, the blue prints of the universe? And if so, whose interpretation do we follow . . . if any?

Regardless of our answer, today, thousands of years after Moses' Genesis account, many religious narratives are enabled by, and directly connected to, the account of Moses meeting God. And even though scholars dispute the authorship of many sacred scriptures, and governments and their people and their militaries discount their significance, those religious observances instituted by Moses are still the central pillar for many religious and cultural narratives today. In peacetime, and more importantly in wartime, millions put their heart, soul, strength and mind into their faith. Thus, Travis

thought that to attempt to understand any cultural narrative, especially in the greater Middle East where the preponderance of Gitmo detainees were from, without a fundamental understanding of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, was a pointless endeavor, because religion was the elephant in the room. Coincidentally, as a young adult, he had read the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, so it was quite natural for him to read the Qur'an to prepare for this assignment.

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So how did all that reading help? We will see, but first a quick orientation.

During his first week as the OIC, Travis had plenty of engagements with detainees, including a meet and greet with the Block Leaders, which, in his case, was like an orientation of who-is-who; for the detainees, however, this was a reoccurring event. They've seen plenty of OIC's over the years. Travis was just another face.

It's important to distinguish that a Block Leader was a representative or spokesman of the block, but not always the true leader. True leaders, sometimes called "shot callers," made themselves known at their choosing. When they did, building a rapport based on mutual trust was crucial. When a situation developed, its outcome was based in large part on that rapport. If rapport was good, it prevented further escalation and aided reconciliation; if bad, it meant tuning the OIC out. No communication was bad, and in some cases, led to the removal of a camp OIC—the detainees weren't going anywhere.

Other leaders with a high degree of influence were the religious leaders, who occasionally carried more weight than shot callers, especially if it were a religious matter that could affect everyone. Some of the religious leaders were Imam's (prayer leaders) before they were captured, while others became the religious leader due to their moral character, respect and piety status among the detainees. Accordingly, a religious leader who became a shot caller was a force to be reckoned with. He had the physical (tangible) and spiritual (intangible) backing of the detainees.

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Before the block leader meeting, Travis and a Navy guard walked around the rotunda observing the physical security of the blocks. As they approached Delta Block a detainee yelled out,

"O—I—C!"

The Navy guard looked at Travis.

Again, "O—I—C!" yelled the detainee.

"That's you, sir," said the Navy guard.

"Right . . . still getting used to it," said Travis.

And once more, "O—I—C," yelled the detainee. "Come here!"

The detainee, in wrist-ankle-waist shackles, escorted by four Army guards, was returning from a routine interview. Not in a sense of how earlier interrogations might have been conducted to obtain actionable intelligence, but a rewards-based interview that kept the camps manageable.

"Hello," said Travis.

“Are you the new Camp 6 OIC?”

“Yes,” said Travis, involuntarily tapping his “Camp 6 OIC” name badge.

“Oh, I see . . .” said the detainee, nodding in recognition. “We need to talk.”

As soon as the Army guards secured the detainee inside Delta block, Travis greeted him formally. Standing in front of the sally port gate, Travis reached his arm through an opening called the food tray slot, extending his hand to formally introduce himself. The detainee looked at Travis’ hand momentarily and then reached for it. Travis grasped it firmly in a polite handshake. The Navy guard and linguist watched curiously, as if thinking, *Why are you shaking hands with the enemy?*

While Travis talked to the detainee, several other detainees in the block came toward the gate to investigate.

“So you’re the new OIC,” said another detainee.

“I am,” said Travis, while extending his hand to him as well.

“That’s good,” stated the detainee as they shook hands. Then inquisitively, “What do you know about detention operations—have you been to Afghanistan or Pakistan?”

Sensing that the detainee was looking for specific information—because the question he was really asking was, *Are you one of the guys that put me here?*—Travis responded cautiously, “As a sailor, I’m usually deployed at sea.”

“So, what do you know about our religion and Muhammad its Prophet?” asked the same detainee.

Perceiving this was a serious question that could “make or break” him as the OIC, Travis answered carefully, as if it were rehearsed: “I can tell you that I’m a person of the book, and that I enjoy reading all kinds of literature.”

Now interested, a few of the detainees listened attentively to what the OIC was saying, because they were familiar with the phrase, “Person of the book.”

“That’s good, but have you read the Qur’an,” said another detainee.

“Yes. . . I read it before coming here.”

“Just because of us?”

“Partially,” admitted Travis. “But also I wanted to understand the complete Abrahamic narrative. I read the Hebrew and Christian Bibles a few years ago, so I felt compelled to read the Qur’an. I did this mainly for personal interest, but also because these three narratives influence so much of the world—as you know—especially where you’re from.”

“What did you think of the Qur’an?” said the detainee who initially said, “We need to talk.”

“I admit, I read it as literature, from a narrative point of view. To me, probably because the Hebrew and Christian Bibles are longer, certain events were explained in greater detail in them; whereas the Qur’an, probably because it’s shorter, summarized similar events.”

A couple of the detainees nodded, so Travis continued.

“I suppose I understood the Qur’an better because I had read the Hebrew and Christian Bibles beforehand and was familiar with the stories about Moses, Abraham and Jesus.”

A couple others nodded.

“I suppose if I had read the Qur’an first, I would be interested in reading the other two. This might sound strange, but it’s like watching a movie trilogy. If I watch one, I like to watch them all. If I were to watch the last one first, without understanding the first two, I would be curious about the first two. But that’s just me.”

“Are you a Christian?” said the same detainee.

“Let’s just say that I’m interested in understanding all cultures and faiths. I don’t know enough to conclude who is right or wrong. Nor do I want to put myself in that position. As a matter of personal choice, I even read about evolution, and enjoyed reading Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. For me, it’s quite the journey just understanding how everyone believes and perceives the world. Einstein and Hawking are among my favorites as well.”

“You’re not like other OIC’s—which is not necessarily a good or bad thing.”

“I just got here, so I’m still learning.”

Travis understood that a person of faith feels a sense of obligation to share their faith with others, so he had prepared for this engagement. Religion, after all, was the elephant in the room.

Then without warning, a detainee yelled out,

“We’ve been here almost ten damn years . . . without trial . . . without rights.”

Travis looked in his direction.

“Where is our justice? Can you even comprehend this . . . 10 DAMN YEARS.”

While waiting for the OIC’s reaction, the detainee stared at him and heard a mumbled response, “No, I can’t.” Then the detainee said, “So then, what are *you* going to do about this, OIC?”

Travis shrugged his shoulders. Although he read *Long Walk to Freedom*, he had no immediate response. He had never been incarcerated. Books had provided him with a framework, but this was a real question from a real detainee, which momentarily, was outside of Travis’ magnitude of comprehension.

The detainee echoed himself, “What are you going to do OIC?”

“I don’t have an answer for you, but it sounds like a Department of Justice question to me – that’s outside of my lane.”

“Well, as the OIC, you’re OUR voice, so get used to it, and get us the answer. Nothing else matters.”

The Navy guard knew what was coming next—not just the block leader meeting, but also the grievance from this particular detainee—so he told Travis that it was time to go. Travis acknowledged him, and then talked to another detainee for a brief moment. The detainee who said “You’re OUR voice” had walked away, and the detainee who said “We need to talk” was shackled and escorted out of the block. As he was taken, he said, “We’ll talk more later on, OIC.”

Although somewhat relieved to walk away from this question and answer session, Travis felt perplexed, as if he were removed from an unresolved situation. Furthermore, he thought, the Block Leader meeting would be seven times this magnitude, each representative or spokesman demanding, “You’re OUR voice, so get us the answer.”

Upon arriving at the Block Leader meeting, there were seven detainees seated with their ankles shackled to the deck. Among them were a couple true leaders. Instantly Travis recognized a voice:

“How are you adjusting, OIC?” said the detainee who said, “We need to talk.”

“I’m still learning,” said Travis with a half-smile upon recognizing him.

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“The Fight” would not be for a couple of months, and by then, Travis would be even more prepared, in part because of the reading he did beforehand, but even more so because of the application of that reading and the rapport he built with the Block Leaders who were crucial links in defusing most situations.

In all, it was a tremendously challenging year for Travis, who had little time to reflect on his job as the Camp 6 OIC, or on the incalculable value that reading literature had played, until his return flight home with another book in his hand.

At the arrival section of the airport, a blue car with a “C-O-E-X-I-S-T” bumper sticker stopped at the curb. Travis, sitting on his sea bag full of books, stared at it. And, as he contemplated its significance and a year of working outside his cultural norm, a horn honked. He looked at his family waving from a charcoal-gray sports utility vehicle.

¹ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: the autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 365.