

# An American POW In America

**Torture Didn't Begin In Abu Ghraib. Try a Marine Brig 30 years ago.**

Al McKee

US Marine Corp brig. Corpus Christi, Texas, 1964. "ON THE WALL! GET ON THE WALL, PRIDNER!" I had just been marched inside the sally port by two armed MP's. The heavy barred gate slammed shut. My partner, Duke, was right behind me, flanked by two more MP's.

"YOU DEAF, PRIDNER! I SAID—GET ON THE WALL!" Yellow handprints, greatly spaced, were spray-painted on the wall. Corresponding footprints, also widely-spaced, below me on the spit-shined sally port deck. I stared at the yellow prints on the deck. My face was rammed into the concrete bulkhead by one of the brig guards.

"CAN'T HEAR YOU, MAGGOT! ON THE FUCKING WALL!" I turned and spit part of my front tooth at one of the guards. White, blood-flecked, contrasting nicely with the sharply creased olive-green fatigue shirt: it stuck right underneath black stenciled letters—PFC Sanchez.

I saw the first one coming in a blur; then I was billy-clubbed to the deck. "YOU GOT BLOOD ON MY SHIRT, MAGGOT! I'M GONNA..."

"TENHUT!" A Marine Corps captain walked into the sally port. "What's going on here, private."

"Sir! This pridner's being uncooperative, sir! He...he spit on me, sir!" The captain looked at me lying there in my blue Navy Uniform of the Day. There's this cryptic rivalry between the marines and the navy. All naval personnel sentenced to brig time were turned over to the nurturing care of their jar-head brothers-in-arms.

"Very well, private. Carry on." The sally port gate slid open. The captain, proud and erect, strode forth into the blazing Texas sun.

I was jerked to my feet and slammed, once again, against the cement wall. My feet were kicked into the footprints, my hands slapped upon the hand-prints. I was spread. Sanchez shook me down, Marine Corps style, paying particular attention to my genitalia.

I leaned, spread-eagle, against the wall watching drops of my blood mess up their obsessively scrubbed and waxed sally port deck. "This way, pridner." A tall black guard, Lance Corporal Connley, pushed me into a long narrow hallway off the sally port.

When we got back to the barracks, the MP's were waiting for Duke and me. We were cuffed and taken to the brig before our court-martial. It was illegal to imprison military personnel before they're sentenced, but when you're under the thumb of the UCMJ (Uniform code of Military Justice), as they say, "Your ass is grass and I'm the lawn mower."

In our case, someone in the Legal Department was afraid that Duke or I would harm the third party involved if we found out he'd received immunity from the Admiral, and was going to testify against us. The three of us were stationed at the Naval Air Base in Beeville, Texas, just north of Corpus Christi. We had weekend passes.

"Let's go to Houston an' roll somebody," said Shorty, the third party. So, we did.

Two Houston detectives apprehended us at the bus station as we tried to make a speedy getaway on a southbound Greyhound. Our victim was well-known to them. They were visibly pleased we had ruffled the composure of his life. He decided not to press charges.

“You guys can go now,” one of the detectives told us. “How ‘bout pickin’ another town to visit in our fine state of Texas next time you get a pass.” We readily agreed. “Oh, there’s just one little thing...if I don’t report this to your commanding officer, I could get fired.”

The Navy charged us with attempted homicide, armed robbery, grand theft auto, and conspiracy. We were written-up for a General Court-martial—the highest.

Duke and I gave only name, rank and serial number at the inquest. Shorty caved in and agreed to sell us out. He was given his choice of duty anywhere outside the U.S.A.

## **Decades of verbal whittling**

“HALT!” Lance Corporal Connley stood beside me. We were in front of a closed door. “Stand at attention, pridner!” The Marine Corps had a knack for slaughtering the English language. I liked the way the word “prisoner” shot out the corner of his mouth, reshaped by decades of boot camp D.I. verbal whittling—“pridner.”

To my left, farther down the hall, a group of guards had someone jacked-up against the bulkhead. Another prisoner, another American serviceman. It looked like he’d been scalped, his skinned head a patchwork of bloody flaps. One of the guards held a silver Zippo lighter in front of his face. I saw the spark of the flintwheel. Two of the guards grabbed the prisoner’s head as the hand with the Zippo guided the flame to the soft skin underneath the man’s chin. He took it as long as he could: bug-eyed, squirming, kicking. Then, he started to scream.

Connley opened the door. A man sat ramrod straight behind a desk. A plaque read: WARDEN.

Sergeant Wright. Summer khaki flawless—not a wrinkle—looking remarkably like Jack Webb from the old T.V. series “Dragnet.” His eyes sparkled with Section Eight delight. I had the feeling he was ready to have some fun. His right hand came up, palm out, as if he was about to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

“Wrong, pridner.”

“How many fingers do you see, pridner?” I knew this one; a trick question. If I said five, I lost. If I said four, I lost. “Four,” I said. Lance Corporal Connley grabbed my hand and pinned it to the desk top. Sergeant Wright slowly opened a drawer and brought out a shiny chrome industrial stapler, probably a Black and Decker.

“Wrong, pridner.” He pressed the stapler to the tip of my thumb. “That’s not a thumb, that’s a finger.” He shot a 3/4 inch staple flush into my thumb. “Get this maggot out of my office, Lance Corporal.” Connley gazed down at me and smiled.

“You ain’t gonna make it outa here alive, boy.”

That was approximately my first twenty minutes inside a Marine Corps brig 40 years ago. I was 18 years old. For a while, I believed Lance Corporal Connley.

I remember Segregation—the blackout cells: steel pits with a bucket for a toilet, 14 days of bread and water, listening to men caged on either side of me beg the trustees for a razor blade. The UCMJ stated that no one could be confined to a Segregation unit for more than seven days. When my first week was up, the steel door opened. The light I so desperately craved sent me scurrying to the rear of the cell like a crippled sewer rat.

“GET UP! GET UP, YOU FILTHY MAGGOT! TIME’S UP! HERE! HIT THE SHOWERS!” I was handed a scrub brush and a bar of orange soap.

If you did your seven days without causing too much dissension, you’d be returned to general population. After I’d showered, I was informed that according to the rules of the UCMJ, I had been properly released from my sentence to Segregation. When they dragged me to my cell, and ever-so-gently escorted me back inside.

## **Violent and suicidal**

“You need another seven days, maggot! You have severe adjustment problems.” Some nights, I awoke flying through the air. Certain guards would wait until everyone was asleep, then they’d drag out the fire hoses. A fire hose fact: if you get hit full-blast with that jet stream of high-pressure water, you will be moved.

The routine changed with the weather. Count: three times a day, outside, on the red lines, in the concrete yard. In the heat of a Texas summer, we had to wear wool clothing and leather bombardier jackets with fur collars. Men withered and fell like dead plants. Wintertime on the red lines was done bare-chested, barefooted; the only article of clothing allowed was our skivvies.

One form of torture would be dropped and replaced with something new and innovative. But the Zippo lighters remained a constant past-time of the guards.

Theory among the prisoners was that these jarheads were so unbalanced the Marine Corps refused to send them to Vietnam. So, they were relegated to brig duty. But I was just as psychopathic, violent, and suicidal as the men who guarded me. They were my only sane qualities. I embraced them; they kept me alive.

Fourteen months later, the sally port gate opened and Duke and I walked out into the blazing Texas sun. We were lucky. Some others weren't. I suppose their next-of-kin received a letter from the Navy department that went something like this: "We regret to inform you..."

When I saw the photographs on TV of the Iraq prisoner abuse scandal, I thought, "Ah, yes." Abu Ghraib—an isolated incident? Or business-as-usual?

# fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #372, Spring 2006

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