

# Guantanamo Bay Trip

## March 5, 2002

**5:15 a.m.** Got up early to get ready to go to Guantanamo Bay. I had to come into D.C. a day early for this trip, but I believe that it will be worth it. I've talked with a lot of students and district residents over the last few weeks and they are very interested in what is going on there, and in the war on terrorism in general

Unfortunately, there is also a lot of misinformation. Last week someone told me America was losing support in Britain because there was a notion among the British people that they were shouldering the burden of the war.

As the events of the last 36 hours have indicated, not only has America carried the major load for the last six months, we continue to do so. I hope our allies stand with us in the war against terrorism, but at times, this may become a lonely role.

Someone recently gave me a copy of a LBJ quote. It was something he apparently said after French President Charles de Gaulle demanded he remove all U.S. troops from French soil. LBJ's response, "Does that include all those American troops buried on French soil?"

**6:00 a.m.** I call home and Diane asks me to check on the living conditions of our troops at the base.

**6:15 a.m.** We load the van and leave for Andrews Air Force Base. It was cold and snowy when I left Grand Rapids Monday afternoon. It is 18 degrees as we load the van. It will be 80-plus at Gitmo, as it called by those stationed there.

**7:00 a.m.** We depart from Andrews. It will be a three hour and twenty minute flight. I brought along reading materials, ranging from today's newspapers to classified briefing materials. Today's news headlines provide a stark reminder of the true cost of freedom: "Seven U.S. Soldiers Die in Battle." I am saddened by the loss of our troops. Their sacrifice will not be in vain.

Among our briefing materials are outlines of the background and nationalities of the detainees. These are not POWs. They do not fall under the terms of the Geneva Convention, but we are providing them protections in line with Convention standards. We learn of the detainee's typical daily schedule and the materials they are given when they come to the base.

**10:00 a.m.** Cuba appears outside the window. I have never seen Cuba before. A few minutes later we land at Gitmo. It is about four hundred miles south of Miami. The temperature feels good. It is about 70 degrees and warms up during the day.

**10:30 a.m.** It takes a boat ride to get to the other side of the Bay.

**11:00 a.m.** We receive our first briefing on the situation at Gitmo. The difference between this war and other wars once again becomes clear. Who exactly are the detainees at Gitmo? They are not typical POWs. They don't wear uniforms and don't have dog tags. Many times it is difficult to determine exactly who they are and they come from many different countries. The bottom line, however, is these are dangerous individuals, all of whom are terrorist and criminals.

It is the responsibility of the Committee to perform oversight of the intelligence gathering process. Are we effectively, and on a timely basis, discovering necessary information? Are we doing all we can to protect our people and our national interests? It was a good and frank discussion.

There is a strong Michigan presence at the base. In particular, I was pleased to have a chance to talk to people with connections to the Holland and Manistee areas. As you talk to the people at who work at Gitmo you realize they are average Americans – people from our communities doing extraordinary service for our country.

Besides saying much of our discussion focused on sources and methodology, and our successes and disappointments, I cannot write more about our conversations.

**Noon.** We go to Camp X-Ray where about 300 detainees are being held. The ride doesn't take very long. X-Ray was built very quickly to house the terrorists we had captured; expanded and permanent facilities are under construction.

Upon arrival detainees receive showers and are given extensive physicals. The detainees are housed in individual cells constructed with chain link fence. The cells are built on top of cement slabs. This is not a country club prison. This is tough, but detainees receive essentials, including a sleeping mat.

Our troops live right next to the camp. They have to sleep in tents. It is hot, dry and dusty. Their conditions are not that much better than those of the detainees, except our troops have freedom.

Clearly the circumstances at the base, as in much of this war, are much different than anything we as a nation have ever experienced. Our troops at Gitmo are doing a great job.

**1:45 p.m.** Wheels up with arrival back in D.C. about 5:15 p.m. Congress has votes scheduled for 6 o'clock tonight.

### **Reflections on the ride home**

In the last six months I have witnessed the attack on Washington, visited the Pentagon the day after the attack, and visited Ground Zero in New York one week after the attack. I

have gone to the Middle East and now Gitmo. I have been to countless briefings and hearings. There are some observations that this most recent visit reinforces.

First, the threat to the U.S. is real, and we have to recognize it and take it seriously. Second, our frontline folks are awesome. Whether it is the rescue workers in New York, the construction contractors at the Pentagon, intelligence personnel in the Middle East or our troops in Gitmo, they are aggressively doing all they can to help America recover and defeat our enemies. Lastly, this war is different than anything we have ever faced. While there is no doubt we will win this war, we still need to learn and learn quickly as we move forward.

Almost every group the Subcommittee has held discussions with talks about how their agency needs to respond differently – and they are. Our efforts in the war on terrorism, and providing for the safety of our nation and citizens, will be a longer and more complicated endeavor than many would like to believe. If we stay focused we will get it done.