

“Suicide Letter”

Patricia A. Bronte

My colleague Jeff Colman and I were the only detainee lawyers on Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in the early morning hours of Saturday, June 10, 2006, when three prisoners died. Friday morning had begun as a typical day at Guantánamo. Jeff, our translators and I arrived at Camp Echo (where all prisoner-attorney meetings occurred) with high hopes that the military guards would forego the word-by-word review of our notes and legal papers that we had experienced on Thursday. I also hoped that the thirty-second video from my client’s family—which I had submitted to military authorities for clearance two months earlier—would finally be cleared so that my client could “see and hear” his family members for the first time in four and a half years. Jeff hoped that his client would be allowed to see the photograph of his three children—one of whom was born after he was imprisoned. Jeff and I both hoped to make the most of the five hours we would be permitted to speak with our clients that day.

As usual, our hopes were partially realized. The review of our papers took about ten minutes instead of forty-five. I learned that the authorities had misplaced the video, so I supplied the extra copy I had prepared in anticipation of this eventuality. After being told that Jeff should have submitted the photograph in advance of his visit (like I had done with the video), he was finally told in the afternoon that the photograph had already been cleared and given to his client the night before. Our visiting time was reduced by one and a half hours because—as we learned the next day—Bill O’Reilly was touring the base.

I spent much of the day coaxing the authorities to review and clear the video. As I explained to the military lawyer, my twenty-four-year-old client was very depressed, and I had promised him during my April visit that he would be able to see the video. At the end

of the day, I was told that the video was in the wrong format and, therefore, there was no way my client would be able to see it. They had finally located the original video, but it was also in the wrong format.

Concerned about my client, I slept poorly that night. The next morning, Jeff and I were told that we would not be allowed to visit our clients because something had happened, and the camp was entirely shut down. The military lawyer said he could not say more, and we should watch CNN. At eleven a.m., we heard that three prisoners had committed suicide. We were assured that the two clients we had planned to visit that day were not involved, but we were not told whether our four other clients—including the depressed client I had seen on Friday—were alive. We did not receive that reassurance until Middle Eastern media outlets released the names of the dead men.

Rear Admiral Harry Harris flatly stated that the suicides were an “act of war.” If committing suicide after four and a half years of captivity is an “act of war” against the U.S., then I suppose any of the Guantánamo prisoners could be considered our enemies.

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