

HOW WE SURVIVED JAIL HELL

by David Rose

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For two years the Tipton Three have been silent prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. Now, in this remarkable interview with David Rose, they describe for the first time the extraordinary story of their journey from the West Midlands to Camp Delta

'When I woke up I didn't know where I was. I'd lost consciousness at the side of the container, but when I woke up I was in the middle - lying on top of dead bodies, breathing the stench of their blood and urine.

'They'd herded maybe 300 of us into each container, the type you get on ordinary lorries, packed in so tightly our knees were against our chests, and almost immediately we started to suffocate. We lived because someone made holes with a machine gun, though they were shooting low and still more died from the bullets. When we got out, about 20 in each container were still alive.'

In a safe house in southern England at the weekend, Asif Iqbal was describing his survival, together with his friends Ruhul Ahmed and Shafiq Rasul, after a massacre by US-backed Northern Alliance forces in Afghanistan - the start of a 26-month nightmare which ended last week with their release from the American detention camp at Guantanamo Bay.

Their faces gaunt with accumulated stress and exhaustion, they spoke softly, still stunned by the change in their circumstances: 'I just can't believe we're sitting here,' Ahmed says. 'This time last week, we were in the cages at Guantanamo.'

The horror of their story needs no embellishment. One day, perhaps, there will be an inquiry into Guantanamo. Until then, some of their allegations - which, it can be assumed, America is likely to deny - cannot be corroborated. However, many of the experiences they describe, including gunpoint interrogations in Afghanistan and random brutality both there and in Guantanamo, have been related in identical terms by other freed detainees. Last October I spent four days at Guantanamo. Much of what the three men say about the regime and the camp's physical conditions I either saw or heard from US officials.

Having escaped the truck container massacre, they endured near-starvation in a jail run by the Afghan warlord, General Dostum. When the Red Cross appeared and promised to make contact with the British Embassy in Islamabad they thought they were going home. Instead, with the apparent agreement of British officials, they were handed over to the Americans, first for weeks of physical abuse at a detention camp in Kandahar, followed by more than two years in the desolation of Guantanamo.

Month after month they were interrogated, for 12 hours or more at a time, by American security agencies and, repeatedly, by MI5 - in all, they say, they endured 200 sessions each. But when they re-emerged to freedom on Wednesday after two final days of questioning at Paddington Green police station, every apparent shred of evidence had melted away. Iqbal, Rasul and Ahmed, together with the other early

arrivals at Guantanamo, had been described by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as 'the hardest of the hard core', lethal terrorists 'involved in an effort to kill thousands of Americans'. Even last week the British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, was claiming America had been justified in holding them.

Yet despite the denial of legal rights or due process, the authorities on both sides of the Atlantic have been forced to accept what the three men said all along - that they were never members of the Taliban, al-Qaeda or any other militant group. The Americans had justified their detention by claiming they were 'enemy combatants', but they were never armed and did not fight.

'They formally told us we were going home last Sunday [several weeks after this news was relayed to the media],' Rasul said. 'We had a final meeting with the FBI, and they tried to get us to sign a piece of paper which said something like I was admitting I'd had links with terrorism, and that if I ever did anything like this again the US could arrest me.' Like the other two detainees freed last week, Tarek Dergoul and Jamal al-Harith, they refused.

'They took us to the airport in chains,' said Rasul, 'and when we got there this huge plane was surrounded by armed men. As we walked towards the steps they had guns trained on us. This military police guy hands us over to the British, takes off our shackles and tells the Brit he can put on the handcuffs. But the British policemen say, "no, no, there's no need for handcuffs". We walk up the steps and they're not even touching me.

'For the first time in two years I'm walking somewhere without being frogmarched. We get to the door and someone says: "Good morning. Welcome aboard." '

Capture

Rasul, 26, Ahmed, 22, and Iqbal, 22, were boyhood friends from the Midlands town of Tipton. In September 2001 they travelled to Pakistan ahead of the marriage Iqbal's parents had arranged for him to a woman in Faisalabad. Ahmed was to be best man; Rasul hoped to do a computer course after the wedding.

The three were in no sense fundamentalists: their brand of Islam, they say, was never that of the Taliban. But like many young Muslims in Pakistan they crossed the border into Afghanistan in October 2001, as it became clear that, in the wake of the 11 September attacks on America, one of the poorest countries in the world was about to be attacked. They had no intention of joining the fighting, they insist, but only of giving humanitarian aid. In England, none of them was rich, but in Asia, the little money they had could go a long way. For a short time they used the savings accumulated for their trip to buy food and medical supplies for Afghan villagers.

But in Taliban-led Afghanistan one aspect of their appearance made them dangerously visible - they had no beards. Travelling through a bombed landscape, they tried to escape in a taxi. But instead of reaching safety they were driven further into danger - to the city of Kunduz, which was promptly surrounded and bombarded by Dostum's troops. Aware that a bloodbath was imminent, they tried to leave on a convoy of trucks but their own vehicle was shelled, killing almost everyone on board.

'We were trapped,' says Iqbal. 'There was nothing we could do but give ourselves up. They took our money, our shoes, all our warm clothes, and put us in lines.'

They were part of a vast column of prisoners, around 35,000, says Rasul: 'You'd look down the slope and there were lines and lines of people, as far as the eye could see. We went through the mountains and the open desert. There were these massive ditches full of bodies. We thought this was the end. We thought they were going to kill us all.' Many of the prisoners were wounded and died by the wayside.

After two days they ended up outside Shebargan prison and crammed into the containers - it was night, says Iqbal, and the massacre began under the glare of spotlights which the three men claim were operated by American special forces. 'The last thing I remember is that it got really hot, and everyone started screaming and banging. It was like someone had lit a fire beneath the containers. You could feel the moisture running off your body, and people were ripping off their clothes.'

When he came to, Iqbal had not drunk for more than two days. Maddened by thirst, he wiped the streaming walls with a cloth, and sucked out the moisture, until he realised he was drinking the bodily fluids of the massacred prisoners. 'We were like zombies,' Iqbal says. 'We stank, we were covered in blood and the smell of death.'

Freed from the trucks which had become mass graves, they were taken into Shebargan prison, where they were held in appalling conditions for the next month. Much was open to the elements, and to make room inside its bare communal cells the prisoners lay down in four-hour shifts. They were fed a quarter of a naan bread a day, with a small cup of water: sometimes, says Rasul, there were fights over the rations. Often snow blew into the buildings.

Rasul says: 'There were people with horrific injuries - limbs that had been shot off and nothing was done. I'll never forget one Arab who was missing half his jaw. For 10 days until his death he was screaming and crying continuously, begging to be killed.'

A few days earlier Taliban prisoners had organised the uprising against their captors at Qala-i-Jhangi Fort at Mazar-e-Sharif, and western reporters paid a visit to Shebargan. They seemed blind to the misery there, Rasul says. 'All they seemed to be interested in was if any of us knew the American Taliban John Walker Lindh.'

After 10 days the Red Cross arrived, bringing some improvement and an increase in the water supply. But by now all three were malnourished and suffering from amoebic dysentery. Ahmed says: 'We were covered with lice. All day long you were scratching, scratching. I was bleeding from my chest, my head.' Iqbal adds: 'We lost so much weight that if I stood up I could carry water in the gap between my collar bones and my flesh.'

Prisoners died daily: of the 35,000 originally marched through the desert, only 4,500 were still alive, the three men estimate. All this time they could see American troops 50 metres from their prison wing on the other side of the gates.

Beatings

After a month of this living hell, on 27 or 28 December, the Red Cross spoke to the three and promised they would contact the British Embassy in Islamabad and ask them to intervene on their behalf and notify their families that they were alive. Rasul's brother, Habib, says he had contacted the Foreign Office at the end of November and asked for help in tracing his missing brother.

In fact, very soon, the three would meet British officials. But Habib would be told nothing until February 8 - three weeks after his brother's arrival in Guantanamo.

Two days after the three talked to the Red Cross, Dostum's troops put them in chains, marched them through the main gate and handed them over to American special forces. Ahmed says: 'They put something like a sandbag over my head so you could see nothing. Then we got thrown on to a truck. They taped the sacks at the bottom of our necks, making it difficult to breathe.'

The Americans took them to Shebargan airport, where they were beaten, then loaded on a plane. 'I wanted to use the toilet,' Rasul says. 'Someone smacked me on the back of my head with his gun. I started peeing myself.'

Trussed like chickens, their chains replaced by plastic ties, they were flown to the US detention centre at Kandahar. The weather was freezing. Wearing only thin salwar kameez, with no socks or shoes, they were tied together with a rope and led into the camp, where they waited to be processed.

In the very different setting of a sitting room in suburban England, Iqbal demonstrates how they were made to kneel bent double, with their foreheads touching the ground: 'If your head wasn't touching the floor or you let it rise up a little they put their boots on the back of your neck and forced it down. We were kept like that for two or three hours.'

Rasul adds: 'I lifted up my head slightly because I was really in pain. The sergeant came up behind me, kicked my legs from underneath me, then knelt on my back. They took me outside and searched me while one man was sitting on me, kicking and punching.'

All this time they were still wearing their hoods. Then one soldier took a Stanley knife and cut off their clothes. Naked and freezing, they were made to squat while the soldiers searched their bodily cavities and photographed them. At last, they say, they were frog-marched through a barbed wire maze and put into a half-open tent where they were told to dress in blue prison overalls.

They had not washed since the container massacre a month earlier. There, Iqbal had sustained a ricochet wound to the elbow. Displaying an ugly purple scar, he explains that by the time he reached Kandahar, it had become infected. It was late at night by the time they had been processed, but next morning, they say, they were taken straight to their first interrogation. Rasul says: 'A special forces guy sat there holding a gun to my temple, a 9mm pistol. He said if I made any movement he'd blow my head off.'

Each endured several such sessions at Kandahar: each time, they say, they were questioned on their knees, in chains, always at gunpoint. Often they were kicked or beaten. (Other released detainees have described Kandahar in similar terms.)

Not all their interrogators were American. Iqbal and Rasul also describe an English officer in a maroon beret who said he was a member of the SAS. 'He had a posh English accent,' Rasul says. 'He mentioned the names of British prisons like Belmarsh and said we'd end up there.' Iqbal says the SAS officer told him: 'Don't worry, you won't be beaten today because you're with me.'

Ahmed says he was also questioned by an officer from MI5 and another Englishman who said he was from the British Embassy. 'All the time I was kneeling with a guy standing on the backs of my legs and another holding a gun to my head. The MI5 man says: "I'm from the UK, I'm from MI5, and I've got some questions for you." He says he was called Dave. He told me: "We've got your names, we've got your passports, we know you've been funded by an extremist group and we know you've been to this mosque in Birmingham. We've got photos of you." None of this was true.

'The second occasion was on the morning I left - they said I was going home. In fact I was on my way to Cuba.'

As Muslims, they were shocked when in repeated 'shakedown' searches of the sleeping tents, copies of the Koran would be trampled on by soldiers and, on one occasion, thrown into a toilet bucket. Throughout their stay at Kandahar the guards carried out head-counts every hour at night to keep the prisoners awake.

Rasul says: 'You'd just be dozing off and then you were made to get up, and that's the way it was all the way to morning.'

To Cuba

At 3AM on 13 January 2002, Rasul was moved to a new tent with Iqbal. Next morning their numbers were called out and they were made to sit while soldiers chained them tightly, sat them in a tent and attached another chain to a hook on the floor. 'These guys came in with clippers,' Rasul says, 'they shaved my hair and my beard; they cut all my clothes off and threw this medication over me, to kill the lice. Then they unlocked me from the floor and led me into another tent naked where they forced me to squat again and did another intimate cavity search.'

Instead of the blue overalls they were dressed in orange jumpsuits, chained and cuffed and made to wear thick gloves taped to their sleeves. Then, says Rasul: 'They made us sit outside on the gravel while they processed everyone. We had no water all day, but towards the end they gave us an MRE [a ready-to-eat US army meal] but no spoon. I had to try and trough it like an animal.'

The restraint device they were now forced to wear would become extremely familiar for the next 26 months - the 'three-piece suit', a body belt with a metal chain leading down to leg-irons with hand-shackles attached to it. Rasul says: 'I told the guard they'd put it on much too tight and he said: "You'll live." '

Before boarding a military aircraft they were dressed in earmuffs, goggles and surgical masks. Inside, they were chained to the floor with no backrests, and even when they requested the toilet, they were not released from their chains. 'Basically people wet their pants. You were pissing all over your legs.'

'The only thing that relieved the sensory deprivation and occupied me for the 22-hour flight was that I was in serious pain,' Rasul says. 'The guards told me to go to sleep but the belt was digging into me - when I finally got to Cuba I was bleeding. I lost feeling in my hands for the next six months.'

Rasul and Iqbal were on the second flight to the new Camp X-ray - the first had been three days earlier. (The Australian David Hicks and another British prisoner, Feroz Abbasi, were on that first flight.) Ahmed followed on 10 February on the fifth flight from Kandahar to Guantanamo Bay. 'When I got there,' he says, 'I was half dead. We had a two-hour stopover somewhere in Turkey. As we were being frog-marched from one plane to another, one of the guards stamped on the metal body bar of my three-piece suit so the leg-irons bit deeply into the flesh of my ankles.'

But Ahmed, at least, had been told where he was going. When Rasul and Iqbal landed they had no idea where they were: 'All I knew was that I was somewhere with intense heat,' Rasul says. 'An American voice shouted: "I am Sergeant so-and-so, US Marine Corps, you are arriving at your final destination." '

The Guantanamo airstrip lies a three-mile ferry journey across the bay from the detention facilities, a journey the prisoners made in a school bus. Iqbal says: 'The boat was moving in the swell, making the bus rock and the American guy says: "Stop moving." I couldn't stop, so he hit me.' Rasul made the mistake of telling a guard he was English. 'Traitor,' he yelled. Later, when Ahmed took the ferry, he heard a guard whispering: "This motherfucker speaks English." Repeatedly the guard kicked his leg: 'I couldn't move it for days, it was so badly bruised.'

At last they arrived at Camp X-ray, and became part of the group of orange-jumpsuited prisoners kneeling in the dust, still shackled and blindfolded, whose images went round the world. Rasul says: 'They made us kneel in that awkward way, and every time you moved, someone would kick you.'

'The sun was beating down and the sweat was pouring into my eyes. I shouted for a doctor, someone poured water into my eyes and then I heard it again: "Traitor, traitor." ' Rasul was the last one processed, and by the time he got to his cage it was dark. First he was stripped naked and, still wearing his goggles and chains, he was given a piece of soap and told to shower for the first time since his capture. 'I looked around and I thought what the hell is this place?'

Iqbal recalls the moment his goggles were finally removed: 'I look up and I see all these other people who hadn't yet been processed in orange suits and goggles and I think I'm hallucinating.' Two days after arriving in Guantanamo Bay, with his family still desperate for information as to his whereabouts, Rasul was taken in his three-piece metal suit to an interrogation tent. 'I walk in and this guy says: "I'm from the Foreign Office, I've come from the British Embassy in America, and here is one of my

colleagues who's from the embassy as well." Later he added his colleague was actually from MI5.'

Rasul asked where he was and the British officials replied: 'We can't disclose that information.' His family heard nothing for another three weeks. It would be many months before the British Government - which, in public, was voicing deep concerns about the lack of legal process at Guantanamo, and claiming it was trying to exert diplomatic pressure - would confirm that its own Security Service had connived from the outset.

Camp X-ray

In the early days at Camp X-ray, the conditions of detention were extreme.

The detainees were forbidden from talking to the person in the next cell and, Rasul recalls, fed tiny portions of food: 'They'd give you this big plate with a tiny pile of rice and a few beans. It was nouvelle cuisine, American-style. You were given less than 10 minutes to eat and if you hadn't finished the Marines would just take your plate away.' After a few more days Rasul was questioned again by MI5. The officer asked how he was. 'I started crying, saying I can't believe I'm here. He says: "I don't want to know how you are emotionally, I'm only interested in your physical state."' '

After about a week the prisoners were allowed to speak to detainees in adjacent cells, and a few weeks later still were given copies of the Koran, a prayer mat, blankets and towels. Yet all witnessed or experienced brutality, especially from Guantanamo's own riot squad, the Extreme Reaction Force. Its acronym has led to a new verb peculiar to Guantanamo detainees: 'ERF-ing.' To be ERFed, says Rasul, means to be slammed on the floor by a soldier wielding a riot shield, pinned to the ground and assaulted.

Iqbal and Rasul were at opposite ends of the same block and were forbidden from talking to each other. There was almost nothing to do. 'Time speeds up,' Rasul says. 'You just stare and the hours go clicking by. You'd look at people and see they'd lost it. There was nothing in their eyes any more. They didn't talk.'

As the weeks of detention became months they would sometimes see psychiatrists. The response to any complaint was always the same: an offer to administer Prozac. (On my visit to Guantanamo, the camp medical staff told me that at least a fifth of the detainees were taking anti-depressants.)

It was almost impossible to master the rules and know how to avoid punishment. There was only one rule that mattered, Rasul says: 'You have to obey whatever US government personnel tell you to do.'

In mid-2002 the prisoners were moved from the open cages with mesh walls at Camp X-ray to the pre-fabricated metal cellblocks of Camp Delta. There, the standard punishment was transfer to solitary confinement in the sensory deprivation isolation wing. Once, Ahmed says, he was given isolation for writing 'Have a nice day' on a polystyrene cup. This was deemed 'malicious damage to US government property'. On another occasion, he was punished for singing.

The cells were about the size of a king-size mattress, made of mesh and metal, exposed to the relentless tropical heat, with no air conditioning. They contained a hole in the floor for a toilet, a tap producing yellow water which was so low they had to kneel to use it, and a narrow metal cot. Apart from interrogation, the only break in this confined monotony were showers and 20 minutes' exercise, two or three times a week. 'When we were on a block with English speakers, we'd go over the conversations again and again,' Ahmed says. 'Often they'd start by someone asking if you remembered a particular kind of food. Soon you'd exhaust the possibilities, repeat the same stories four or five times.'

Even this, however, was better than the isolation punishment block, or the fate which Iqbal endured for five months in 2002 - being placed in a wing where all the other prisoners spoke only Chinese.

The three Britons were visited at least six times by MI5 and Foreign Office staff, Rasul says: 'Every time the Foreign Office came we asked about what was going on, and whether we had solicitors. His reply was "I don't know, all I know is what's been on TV. Your case hasn't been on TV."' '

In fact, their families had engaged lawyers in Britain and America soon after learning of their whereabouts in February 2002, and a federal lawsuit was launched in their name which, had they not been released, would have been argued before the Supreme Court next month. They were told of this by a guard a few weeks ago, almost two years after the suit was first filed.

In September 2003 Rasul was visited on consecutive days, first by the man from the Foreign Office, then by an MI5 officer. He asked the Foreign Office man about his legal status and was told: 'You should ask the MI5 guy who's coming tomorrow.' When he did so next day, the MI5 agent said: 'You should have asked Martin from the Foreign Office yesterday.' How long had they thought they would be at Guantanamo? I asked the three men. They reply in unison: 'Forever!'

Interrogation

For the second six months of 2002, the interrogations ceased. But from the beginning of 2003, interviews with MI5, the FBI, the CIA and US military intelligence became increasingly frequent. Rasul says: 'They kept taking us and taking us, showing us photos saying: "This guy says you've done this, this guy says you've done that" - what they meant was that other detainees desperate to get out were making allegations, making stuff up that they thought would help them get out of the camp.'

Last year the Americans introduced a formal system of rewards for co-operation with interrogators, so that detainees would be given an increasing number of so-called 'comfort items' such as books, extra clothes and utensils in return for their testimony. (The books, best-selling novels, usually came with pages torn out, which the censor had deemed too subversive or exciting.)

Experts on the psychology of interrogations and false confessions say that for prisoners who were already depressed and isolated by more than a year of arduous

incarceration, this system seems almost calculated to produce fantastical accounts. Professor Gisli Gudjonsson of King's College London is perhaps the world's leading authority in this area, and he has testified in dozens of trials and helped expose numerous miscarriages of justice. One of the methods which his research has shown to be particularly prone to generating unreliable testimony is the use of deception, where an interrogator will claim he has incontrovertible proof of a suspect's guilt when in reality this does not exist.

Such methods, the three men say, were employed against them time and time again. For example, Rasul says, he was told that photographs of him and an 'al-Qaeda membership form' and his passport had been found in a raid on an Afghan cave. 'Actually I'd left my passport in Pakistan. Then the interrogator told me that next to my file they'd found my brother Habib's al-Qaeda file. The interrogator said he wasn't lying, and that next time he'd bring it with him. When it came to the next time, he claimed he'd made a mistake.'

The interrogators also used the good cop/bad cop routine. 'It was scary although I knew what they were doing. I think they tried it more with some of the Arabs and the young kids.'

Less funny were the conditions in which interrogations were conducted, in so-called 'booths' behind the cell blocks. Throughout their interviews, the detainees wore their three-piece suits, and were shackled to the floor.

In 2003, many more interrogators were brought in, some of them young and inexperienced. 'You'd look at these guys in their shorts and polo shirts and think: 'This guy's an interrogator? He's only 20 years old,' says Rasul. 'About two months ago one guy asked me: "If I wanted to get hold of surface-to-air missiles in Tipton, where would I go?" I started arguing with him. Did he really think I lived in some sort of war zone. I was scared in the interrogations but towards the end the questions just seemed stupid.'

However, last summer the situation of the Tipton Three suddenly took a serious turn for the worse. The Americans had a video of a meeting in August 2000 between Osama bin Laden and Mohamed Atta, the leader of the 9/11 hijackers. Behind bin Laden were three men, and in May 2003 someone alleged they were none other than Iqbal, Rasul and Ahmed.

For the previous two weeks, Rasul had been in the relatively comfortable conditions of Camp Four, the lower-security section of Guantanamo where prisoners are freely allowed to associate and play football and volleyball. Suddenly he and the others found themselves in solitary confinement in the isolation block for three months. Finally, Rasul says, a senior interrogator arrived from Washington and played him the video. He protested that the men in the video looked nothing like him and his friends, and none of them had worn beards. More to the point, in August 2000, when the video was shot, he had been working in a branch of the electronics store Curry's, and was enrolled at the University of Central England - a fact, he suggested, his interrogators could easily check. Instead, he says: 'They told me I could have falsified those records, that I could have had someone working with me at Curry's who could have faked my job records.' I'd got to the point where I just couldn't take any more.

Do what you have to do, I told them. I'd been sitting there for three months in isolation so I said yes, it's me. Go ahead and put me on trial.' The other two made similar confessions.

Last September it was MI5 which for once helped them when they arrived at the camp with the documentary evidence which showed they could not have been in Afghanistan at the relevant time. Rasul says: 'We could prove our alibi. But what about other people, especially from countries where such records may not be available?'

There is also the danger that false testimony from one inmate, extracted by the Guantanamo incentives system, may breed a false confession from another. Iqbal recalls: 'One inmate said I had been in the Farouk terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. It led to a whole series of interrogations where they tried to persuade me that I had been. The way the system is it's accusation after accusation; if this one won't work maybe this one will, if that won't work try this one, until they finally get their confession.'

For those who do confess, and fail to sustain their alibis, trial by an American military commission and a possible death penalty awaits. Those who have been charged are no longer at Camp Delta, the three men reveal. They have been moved to a new, super-maximum security facility outside the main compound - Camp Echo. A few men have been returned thence to the main Guantanamo Camp; they describe a white-walled, sound-absorbent hell of 24-hour solitary confinement in cells smaller than Camp Delta's, with a guard permanently stationed outside each cell door. Camp Echo's current inmates, say the three men, include the Britons Feroz Abbasi and Moazzem Begg, and the Australian David Hicks. One detail of Hicks's life inside Guantanamo Bay reveals the desperate measures prisoners go to retain their sanity. He occupies his mind all day by catching and killing mice. More than a year ago, the three men said, Hicks renounced Islam and shaved off his beard. He no longer answers the call to prayer. 'He's just a little guy with a very deep voice,' says Rasul. 'If you met him you'd think he was the typical kind of Aussie you might see drinking Fosters in a bar.'

Freedom

Proof of the Tipton Three's alibis led to rapidly improving treatment. Every Sunday after last September, Rasul says, they were taken to a shed they called the 'love shack', and allowed to sit unchained on a sofa to watch movies on DVD. They were allowed to read magazines, and were sometimes fed with hamburgers from Guantanamo's branch of McDonald's.

Unaware of the stream of leaks to the media which suggested their release might be imminent, they began to sense that the end of their ordeal might be drawing near. Even then, they were still being interrogated regularly. Rasul says: 'They'd still show us pictures, try to get names. My last interrogation was on 5 March. But I could see the guy was getting desperate. At one point he said: "Look, I'm from the CIA, I can get you anything. What do you want? Coke? Ice cream?" '

For men who had been through Kunduz and Kandahar, this was not impressive. All are convinced that there are no 'big-time' terrorists at Guantanamo: arguably the most dangerous, in American eyes, says Ahmed, is a group of Taliban mullahs. American intelligence sources have confirmed this view to me. The 'big-timers' - men such as Khalid Shaikh Mohamed, architect of 9/11, have never been near Guantanamo. One source says: 'Guantanamo may even be a bit of a front, designed to divert al-Qaeda's attention. It takes everybody's attention away from more important matters and locations where big fish are being held. The secrecy surrounding it makes everybody think that very serious stuff is going on there.'

The three say some of the inmates have seen such suspects - not in Cuba, but at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan. According to Iqbal, 'we spoke to people who'd been with them there when they were being interrogated. They said they flew them out of there alive, but in coffins.'

Reviled so publicly by Rumsfeld, now the Tipton Three must struggle to rebuild their lives. Their home town, say their families, has become too dangerous: effigies of men in orange jump suits have been strung from lampposts, while the area is a stronghold of the extreme right-wing BNP.

For now they have been marvelling at the little things, Rasul says: sitting in cars without chains and being able to operate the windows; finding that food does not arrive automatically at set hours, and can be tasty and varied. This weekend their dominant emotion is relief. As they come to reflect on the experience over the coming weeks, it seems likely to turn to a burning, righteous anger.