

...including agony of being 'hog-tied' for 45 minutes at a time - and the joy of finally seeing his family again. Britain Shaker Aamer, 48, was held at Guantanamo Bay for 14 years. He's given a series of world exclusive interviews, the first since his release. He recreates being 'hog-tied' and recalled being in agony for 90 seconds. Aamer answers a series of questions about accusations he faces now. By DAVID ROSE FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

It began as it always did: with the sound of the approach of the Forcible Cell Extraction team, the ringing jackboot stomp of six soldiers, marching in unison across the floor of the cell block. "You feel scared," says Aamer.

"You know you can get hurt, because there are some huge guys there, 18, 20 stone guys, muscular. You could be paralysed. Anything can happen. Anything."

When they opened the cell door, he was sitting on his bed. "The watch commander screamed: '239 [Aamer's Guantanamo number] get down on your face, do not resist!'. But, as usual, I was not going to lie down, because the cell is so small that if you lay face down, you stick your face in the hole which is the toilet."

Using their shields, the FCE forced him to the ground anyway. "It's like a train hitting you. You are already breathing hard and they are on top of you. They lift you up and press their shields against you so your body is like the meat in a sandwich."

Meanwhile, they were screaming. "They only shout one thing, 'Stop resisting'. I was not resisting at all - how could I?"

Bizarrely, the whole incident was being filmed, because the camp has to provide a 'combat cameraman' for all FCE actions. "It's 'combat', because to them, this is a war - the cameraman is going to war," Aamer says. "All the time they are shouting for the camera's benefit, 'Stop resisting, 239, stop resisting'."

They dragged him out of the cell, and flipped him backwards and forwards on the dirty corridor floor, searching him under his clothing. Finally they released him, and, bruised and battered, he was locked again in his cell.

What had triggered this incident? Had he been found with illegal contraband, perhaps even a weapon?

By no means. All this was for an apple stem: "Before I was in Guantanamo, I always carried a toothpick. They wouldn't let me have one, so I thought, I'll keep the stem of an apple, and use that." On the day of this FCE attack, the inmates had been given apples with their dinner, and afterwards, a guard asked



Aamer to give his stem back. "It was in my mouth. I refused. I said I need it to pick my teeth. But apparently, this apple stem was going to affect the system. It cannot be allowed."

Yet despite the FCE's violence, they failed in their "mission". As the team was walking away, "I called to them through the hatch: "Come on, why didn't you take it?"

He demonstrates what he did next: he stuck out his tongue, so that everyone could see the apple stem was still there.

In the almost 14 years Aamer spent at Guantanamo, he was a victim of the FCE many hundreds of times " he says that in one year, 2012, he was "FCE" 370 times, more than once a day. The last time was just two months before his release, because he refused to give four vials of blood, demanded on the spurious grounds that the authorities were checking inmates for tuberculosis. Guantanamo, he says, "has been built for one purpose" to destroy human beings. There actually used to be a sign on a wall that said "Rodeo Range". A rodeo is where you break horses. There you are trying to break human beings, you are trying to make them like horses."

What makes Aamer remarkable is his consistent refusal, year after year, to give in to this pressure " to try to maintain some semblance of control over his life, even if this amounted to nothing more than keeping an apple stem to pick his teeth. His defiance, he admits, probably delayed his release. It was also how he survived, and clung to his sanity.

Aamer was in Guantanamo for so long that it is impossible to provide a complete narrative. Then again, "There is no such thing as Guantanamo in the past or Guantanamo in the future. There is no time, because there is still no limit to what they can do. What they did ten, twelve years ago, they can do it today. Who is going to stop them?" True, the number of inmates has declined " from a peak of more than 700, to about 100 today.

But the only thing that has really changed are the buildings: the early, open cages, known as Camp X-Ray, have been replaced by an array of concrete blocks.

Camp 6 " where he spent only a few days " is for highly "compliant" prisoners, who are allowed out of their cells for ten hours a day, to eat together and play sports. Camp 5 is much more Spartan: there, inmates spend 23 hours a day locked up, taking bland, tasteless meals in Styrofoam "clam shells", with just an hour for a shower and outdoor recreation. Aamer says that for him, one of the most unbearable aspects of Guantanamo was that Camp 5 was close to the soldiers' kitchen, from which he inhaled the delicious smell of barbecued meat three times a week, yet was never given it. Finally, there is Camp Echo, the isolation wing, where he spent many months in solitary confinement. Sometimes he had access to books: one his favourites was George Orwell's novel about torture and dictatorship, 1984. At other times, he was deprived even of this: weeks and months when the days became a sterile, meaningless blur.



There were also interrogations “ appointments” as they were called. Aamer says that over the years, he had about 200 interrogators, all repeating the same questions he’d already been asked in Afghanistan, along with allegations about his supposed “ and hotly denied “ recruitment for jihadi groups in London.

Often appointments were accompanied by torture: sleep deprivation; being left shackled to the floor in a room colder than freezing point, for up to 36 hours at a time; being bombarded with continuous, deafening rock music. “The cold temperatures: my God, that was terrible.

“They just leave you, tied to a ring in the floor: sometimes the interrogator doesn’t even come. You shout, you bang, you scream. They don’t let you go to the toilet: if you need it, you go on yourself. And nobody bothers about you, that’s it.”

In the spring of 2005, he decided he’d had enough: “I just stopped talking to the interrogators. I refused to answer any more questions.” Afterwards came a pivotal event in Guantanamo’s history “ its first mass hunger strike, which, extraordinarily, was led by Aamer, though he had been in solitary for months.

Using a fork to scratch away the glue around his cell window, he broke the soundproof seal, allowing him to shout to prisoners in the recreation area outside: “I called out, “Who is outside?” and then we transfer information.”

The news spread from corridor to corridor, and then, inadvertently, the authorities gave Aamer a chance to disseminate it further. One technique to deprive prisoners of sleep was the “frequent flyer”, moving them from cell to cell in the space of a few days or hours. This time, when they used it on Aamer, it allowed him to contact more inmates.

One of the worst tortures Shaker Aamer endured at American hands while he was being held at Bagram air base in Afghanistan was to be “hog-tied” “ left trussed up on the floor face down, bent backwards into the shape of a bow, with ankles and wrists tied together.

Last week, in a lawyer’s office in Camden Town, North London, he demonstrated it for The Mail on Sunday. “It is amazing “ a lot of people don’t understand this mechanism. It is very horrible, let me show it to you,” he said, getting up from his chair to lie on the carpeted floor. His legs and wrists would already be tied together, he explained, “and they bring your legs up all the way and tie them close to your arms”.

But his torturers added an exquisite refinement: a further, very tight tie threaded around each bicep, used to bind his upper arms closely together. That meant that if he tried to relax, by letting his chest sink to the floor, the blood supply to his arms was cut off, causing excruciating pain: “It kills you, man. You cry, the pain is so bad.”



The only way to avoid this agony was to raise his head, neck and chest, deepening the concave bow made by his spine. But in just a few minutes, this too became excruciating. Shaker said: "It digs into your wrists. It cuts the blood in your hands, it cuts the blood in your feet and everything." He still suffers severe back pain as a result of this treatment. At Shaker's urging, this newspaper's reporter tried to adopt the position he had demonstrated. In just seconds, I experienced a stab of pain as my left thigh went into a cramp. I tried to hold the position a few moments longer, but the pain in my lower back was becoming unendurable.

"They did that to me twice, once for almost an hour," Shaker said. "They were kicking me at the same time. I thought I was going to lose my legs."

"I remember the day my weight dropped below nine stone, when I'd been on hunger strike for almost two months," Aamer says. "For days, I'd also refused water. I was less than half the size I had been when I was taken prisoner. I saw myself in the mirror. I started laughing, because I was so skinny. Then I remembered my wife, Zin, and I was crying at the same time. I saw her in front me, falling down and dying because of the way I looked: nothing but bones."

"They took me to the hospital and put me in a wheelchair, because I couldn't walk. They wanted to give me a 'banana bag': intravenous fluid with potassium and glucose. Seven times the nurse tried to give me an I/V, but he couldn't find a vein. He said, 'this guy has to drink water, he is so dehydrated we cannot stick a needle in him.'"

"The colonel, Mike Bumgarner, came. He goes, 'come on, Shaker, please don't do this to me. Take a bottle of water.' I said OK, and I drank."

The date is engraved in Aamer's memory: July 27, 2005. It was the closest he had come to death. But it was also a turning point. Fearful the strike would become unmanageable, Bumgarner negotiated with Aamer, who then took charge of what became known as "the Shaker government" – a committee of six prisoners who were allowed to move, handcuffed and under escort, throughout the camps.

The idea was to sound out opinion, to look for ways to ease the tension in ways acceptable to both the authorities and inmates. "I was trying to get them to agree to fulfil the Geneva Convention," Aamer says.

That proved impossible, and on August 8, the experiment ended "with Aamer back in solitary. Meanwhile, he says, he had made a surprising discovery. It was already known that some prisoners were being given exceptional privileges for "snitching" on other inmates, such as trips to the "Love Shack", where they would be given hamburgers and shown pornographic videos. Indeed, Aamer says that his interrogators made three futile attempts to recruit him.

He says: "We had heard rumours that there were detainees who were paid to infiltrate Guantanamo. These guys were doing a job. One is to infiltrate. Two is to spy, to hear. Three is to cause issues between the brothers. Four, to report of any



kind of grouping.â€™™

After the hunger strike, he came to believe they must be true. â€˜I had cruised around the camps and I had counted everybody. I went into every camp, and I knew how many cells there were in each one.â€™™ At this time, Guantanamoâ€™™s official prisoner total was 530. According to Aamer, there were dozens more â€˜“ all of them, he presumes, what he calls â€˜hired prisonersâ€™™.

This newspaper put these claims to Guantanamoâ€™™s spokesman, Lt Col Mike Meredith.

He said only: â€˜For security reasons, we donâ€™™t go into detailed discussions of camp operations. However, our mission is the safe, humane, legal, and transparent custody of detainees.â€™™

Â ANSWERS TO ACCUSATIONS SHAKER AAMER FACES EVEN NOW

Q: Shaker Aamer was held for 14 years on suspicion of being involved in terrorism. Did the US find any evidence of this?

A: No. The US never charged him with a crime, and twice cleared him as posing no security risk. The first time was in June 2007 by a Guantanamo tribunal at which all six of the main US intelligence agencies endorsed his release. A similar decision was reached by a panel set up under President Obama in 2009.

Q: But why did he go to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in 2001, two months before 9/11? Surely that was suspicious?

A: Aamer insists that all he was doing was trying to make a better life for his family where food and property were cheap. In the six years heâ€™™d been in Britain, he found things tough financially, and he was determined not to rely on benefits. By July 2001, the Afghan civil war was ending, with foreign investment coming in. He hoped to get grants and contracts for water projects and a co-educational school. Of course, he couldnâ€™™t have known what lay ahead.

Q: If heâ€™™s so innocent, why was he captured and sent to Guantanamo?

A: Research has shown that more than 80 per cent of the 770 prisoners who have been held at Guantanamo were â€˜soldâ€™™ to the Americans by Afghan bounty-hunters, after the US military dropped leaflets promising big rewards for supposed terrorists â€˜“ especially for Arabs like Aamer. Most have long been freed.

Q: But isnâ€™™t there some secret report that says he was a dangerous terrorist after all?

A: The remaining allegations stem from one source, an intelligence document published by WikiLeaks, dated November 2007, five months after he was cleared. This compiled claims made by other detainees against him. The US Department of



Justice stated such claims are “most often completely bogus”™, because they come from prisoners looking to get privileges by lying about their peers.

Q: But has anyone examined these claims officially?

A: Their authors have been considered in several US court cases, where successive judges have dismissed them as self-serving liars. One of them, Muhammad Basardah, accused no fewer than 200 detainees, after being given access to privileges at Guantanamo. One judge called him “unreliable and unbelievable”™ “as are his bogus claims that Aamer knew Osama bin Laden, and fought with him at Tora Bora.

Q: What about the claim that Aamer belonged to an Al Qaeda cell in London?

A: This came from another detainee, Abdul Bukhary, described by a judge as a serial liar. The former head of MI6, Sir John Sawers, has said there’s “no case”™ that Aamer was involved in UK terrorism. After the end of the Shaker government came Aamer’s longest period in solitary “almost two years. Eighteen months after he came out, there was a new, Democratic administration, led by President Barack Obama. Just as its Republican predecessors had done in 2007, it set up a panel of senior intelligence officers. In 2009, it cleared Aamer for release.

That year, Briton Binyam Mohamed was freed. “I was supposed to be on that aeroplane,”™ Aamer says, sadly. Instead, an officer said he might be sent to Saudi Arabia. He says he was ready to agree, provided his wife and children could join him, but as soon as he raised this issue, the offer was withdrawn.

In Britain, demands to free him were gathering strength.

In their regular visits to him, Aamer’s™ lawyers, led by Clive Stafford Smith of the human rights charity Reprieve, were able to tell him of the support he was getting from this newspaper and others, including his local Conservative MP, Jane Ellison, and from the “I Stand With Shaker”™ campaign. His morale, he says, was “like a candle”™, that could have blown out. “You guys protected it. All those who fought for justice for me, who joined in those protests “I can never thank you enough.”™ Even to the end, Guantanamo stuck to its protocols. Aamer’s™ last argument with a guard came just an hour before he left the camp, when he was told he could not shout goodbyes to other inmates. When he got on the bus that was to take him to the ferry across Guantanamo Bay, the way to the airport, it had blacked-out windows. Going straight to the jetty would have taken five minutes, but he was driven around in circles for two hours, apparently so he would not get an impression of the camp’s™ layout “even though this has been visible on Google Earth for years.

But at last, his ordeal was ending. In the middle of the hot, Cuban night, he stood on the airstrip tarmac, his hands bound with plastic cuffs. “I think I am the only detainee for whom the colonel himself, David Heath, came and cut the cuffs off my hands.



Guantanamo Briton Shaker Aamer relives his 14-year nightmare of savag

“He looked at me and said, “You are a free man”. That was a beautiful moment.”

[SOURCE: Mail on Sunday](#)