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Guantánamo: the most expensive prison on earth

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PETTY OFFICER KILHO PARK/US NAVY

A guard looks through the "beanhole" of a cell at Camp 5, where the Pentagon houses its war criminals and other captives, during lunch.

Guards get combat pay, just like troops in Afghanistan, without the risk of being blown up. Some commanders get to bring their families to this war-on-terror deployment. And each captive gets \$38.45 worth of food a day.

The Pentagon detention center that started out in January 2002 as a collection of crude open-air cells guarded by Marines in a muddy tent city is today arguably the most expensive prison on earth, costing taxpayers \$800,000 annually for each of the 171 captives by Obama administration reckoning.

That's more than 30 times the cost of keeping a captive on U.S. soil.

It's still funded as an open-ended battlefield necessity, although the last prisoner arrived in March 2008. But it functions more like a gated community in an American suburb than a forward-operating base in one of Afghanistan's violent provinces.

Congress, charged now with cutting \$1.5 trillion from the budget by Christmas, provided \$139 million to operate the center last year, and has made every effort to keep it open — even as a former deputy commander of the detention center calls it "expensive" and "inefficient."

"It's a slow-motion Berlin Airlift — that's been going on for 10 years," says retired Army Brig. Gen. Greg Zanetti, a West Point graduate who in 2008 was deputy commander at the detention center.

Both its location and temporary nature drive up costs, says Zanetti. While there, he wrote a secret study that compared the operation to Alcatraz, noting that Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy had closed it in 1963 because it was too expensive.

At Guantánamo, everything comes in by barge or aircraft “from paper clips to bulldozers,” Zanetti says, as well as the revolving guard force. Also, more recently, a massage chair for stressed-out prison camp staff.

Zanetti, now a Seattle-based money manager, was a financial advisor in civilian life before his New Mexico National Guard unit’s call-up to Guantánamo. He has never disputed that America needed the detention center after 9/11 but argues that today it deserves a cost-benefit analysis.

“What complicates the overall command further is you have the lawyers, interrogators and guards all operating under separate budgets and command structures,” he said. “It’s like combining the corporate cultures and budgets of Goldman, Apple and Coke. Business schools would have a field day dissecting the structure of Guantánamo.”

An examination of the expenses shows that now, with no strategy for meeting President Barack Obama’s Jan. 22, 2009 closure order, the military is preparing for the prison’s next decade. Spending is not just aimed at upgrades for the captive population, most in medium security confinement, but also for the revolving staff of 1,850 troops, linguists, intelligence analysts, federal agents and contract laborers.

Commanders are contracting for a new round of capital improvements, including \$2 million worth of new computer equipment to grow storage space under a fast-track, noncompetitive contract with Dell recently posted on a government website. And that doesn’t include the un-networked laptops the prison provides captives taking a life skills class that includes a resume writing lesson, in case anyone gets to go home.

Meantime, the guard force commander is getting a new 3,000-3,500 square foot headquarters at the prison camps for what is predicted to cost less than \$750,000, below the amount that needs Congress’ sign-off.

The military is also spending up to \$750,000 to replace the aging, rusting prison camp hospital with a new “infirmary hub” and so-called “expeditionary medical shelters” around the prison camps. Equipping the new hospital will cost more so the Navy Medical Logistics Command has put out a bid for everything from microscopes to resuscitators. Price? Unknown.

Millions go to an intelligence operation whose early Guantánamo interrogations may have fed tips to the U.S. manhunt that tracked Osama bin Laden to his hideout in Pakistan this year. It continues to interrogate some of the captives and maintains risk assessments on each one.

A guard with four years in the Navy, with the rank of petty officer 3rd class, gets \$2,985.84 a month, including the same hazardous duty pay as they’d pull in Kabul. A Navy commander with 15 years but no kids gets \$7,840 a month, including hazardous duty pay.

But Guantánamo’s a place where today an Army colonel can talk about “the battle rhythm” of the camps, have his family on the base and his kids in the base’s school system, which currently has 247 students.

Prison staff have their own gym, housing and newsletter, dining rooms and first-run movie theater at “Camp America,” adjacent to the camps. They have their own chapel, mental

health services and mini-mart that was recently peddling a \$99.99 SCUBA “bodyglove” and tacky souvenirs such as Cuba Libre-Gitmo fridge magnets and a full aisle of protein supplements.

Guards and other staff also cross over to the larger Navy base for the programs of any sailor or contractor pulling permanent duty on the base — a golf course and deep-sea diving, beach parties and fishing trips.

They can hit the Irish pub, which was built after the al-Qaida airlifts began, take classes over the Internet, which were established once the prison was opened, and can grab McDonald’s drive-through on their way to work.

And that’s just for the guards.

Both captives and captors also have their own kitchen, health services, transportation and security services all fueled by a steady supply line.

In their cellblocks, cooperative captives get satellite television with sports, news and religious programming as well as Arabic soap operas. Pentagon contract workers maintain a 24,000-title book, video and magazine library and are building yet another soccer field for cooperative captives. Unless they’re hunger strikers fed Ensure through tubes tethered through their nose into the stomach, each detainee is offered up to 4,500 calories a day — including lamb certified as halal, Islam’s version of kosher.

“We are running a five-star resort and not a detention facility for terrorists,” says Florida Republican Rep. Allen West, the fiscal conservative and former Army lieutenant colonel who toured the facility in March. “For example, why do they need 24 cable TV channels?”

Soldiers and sailors consistently gripe that the Internet is slow inside their private quarters, which mostly range from trailer parks to townhouses.

But, unlike in Afghanistan, some prison camp staff officers have brought their families, gotten suburban-style housing and put the kids in the Navy base school. Sailors said it is better than ship duty. Sure it’s surrounded by water. But you get private quarters, scuba diving and can check in on weekends at guest housing complete with big-screen TVs and backyard patio with barbecue grill.

“This is great. You get the opportunity to serve your country and nobody’s shooting at us. Plus, there’s no mortars coming in,” said Army Staff Sgt. Fred Plimpton, 55, who was a New York state trooper who was dispatched to Ground Zero on 9/11 and later deployed to Baghdad.

And, it’s close enough to home that members of the New York Army National Guard infantry unit now patrolling the prison camps’ perimeter can race home if there’s an emergency.

“Peter’s wife just had a baby and we got him right home,” Plimpton said in September. “Moffit’s wife went into labor and we got him out of here right away. It’s good to see the guys get out of here when a baby’s born.”

Only in an operation bursting with personnel and charter aircraft can that even happen.

At Southern Command, Army Col. Scott Malcom notes that because the Pentagon is holding its prisoners “on a military base in a foreign country” it needs more security measures than on U.S. soil. He also cautions “against making a straight comparison between military detention operations and civilian correctional facilities.”

For example, for federal prison guards, being a correctional officer is a career, a commuter job. They sleep at home, carry their own meals, entertain themselves on their days off. Prison staff come and go on mostly nine- to 12-month rotations, aboard special charter flights, are put up in special housing, help themselves to all-you-can-eat rations from the same dining hall that feeds the captives up to 4,500 calories a day.

But that’s exactly what the Obama administration did this summer in a letter to Congress. The Defense Department “spends approximately \$150 million per year on detention operations at Guantánamo, currently at a rate of more than \$800,000 per detainee,” Attorney General Eric Holder and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and other Cabinet members wrote Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell and others.

“Meanwhile, our federal prisons spend a little over \$25,000 per year, per prisoner, and federal courts and prosecutors routinely handle numerous terrorist case a year well within their operating budgets.”

The Herald then sought to do a line-by-line analysis of the expenses, with which the secretive prison camp command refused to participate. It instructed The Miami Herald to file a Freedom of Information Act request, which Southcom refused to expedite in consideration of the ongoing budget debate.

Instead, The Herald was able to create a snapshot of the costs.

The Pentagon confirmed that U.S. troops working at the prison camps get the same “hostile fire” and “imminent danger” pay as their battlefield counterparts in Afghanistan.

In September, a massage chair was the centerpiece of an office for a special Navy mental health counseling unit — set up to minister to stressed out prison camp staff, such as guards. It was such a success that the unit ordered up another and two biorhythm machines to assist in counseling sessions.

It’s two months later, the Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery still hasn’t been able to figure out how much it spent on purchasing and delivering even the first massage chair.

The camps spokeswoman, Navy Cmdr. Tamsen Reese, said by email Oct. 27 that the prison “executed \$2.4M in FY11 for detainee rations.” Feeding the 1,850 prison staff who eat from the same kitchen is not included, she said.

That’s \$38.45 a captive a day for food delivered to each prisoner.

It’s more than five times as much as the average American spends on food a day and nearly 17 times as much as the State of Florida spends to feed its prisoners.

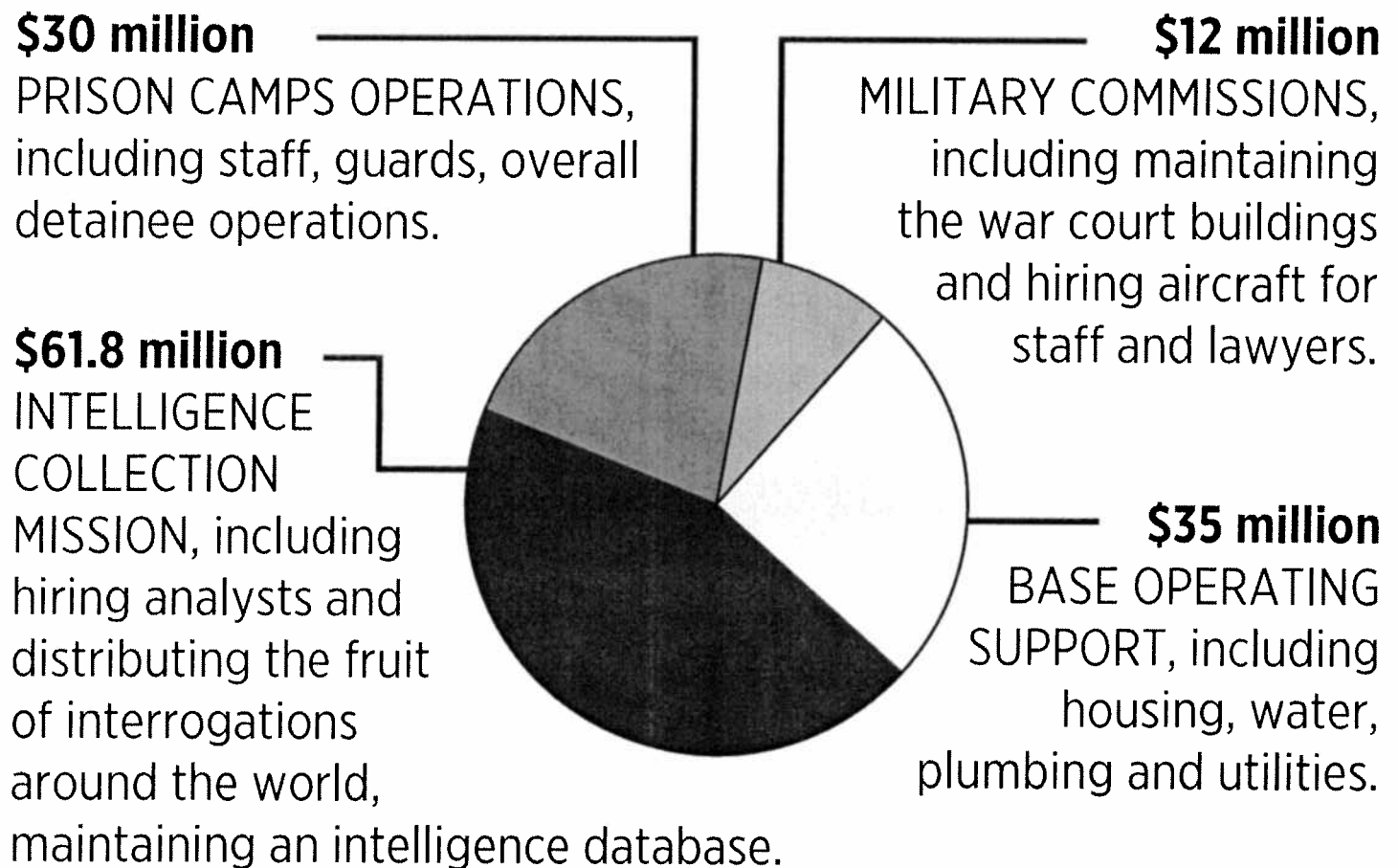
At Guantánamo, the military imports all its food by both cargo airplane and barge from Jacksonville.

A Florida Department of Corrections spokeswoman, Jo Elly Rackleff, notes that the state grows some of the food.

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Guantánamo Bay

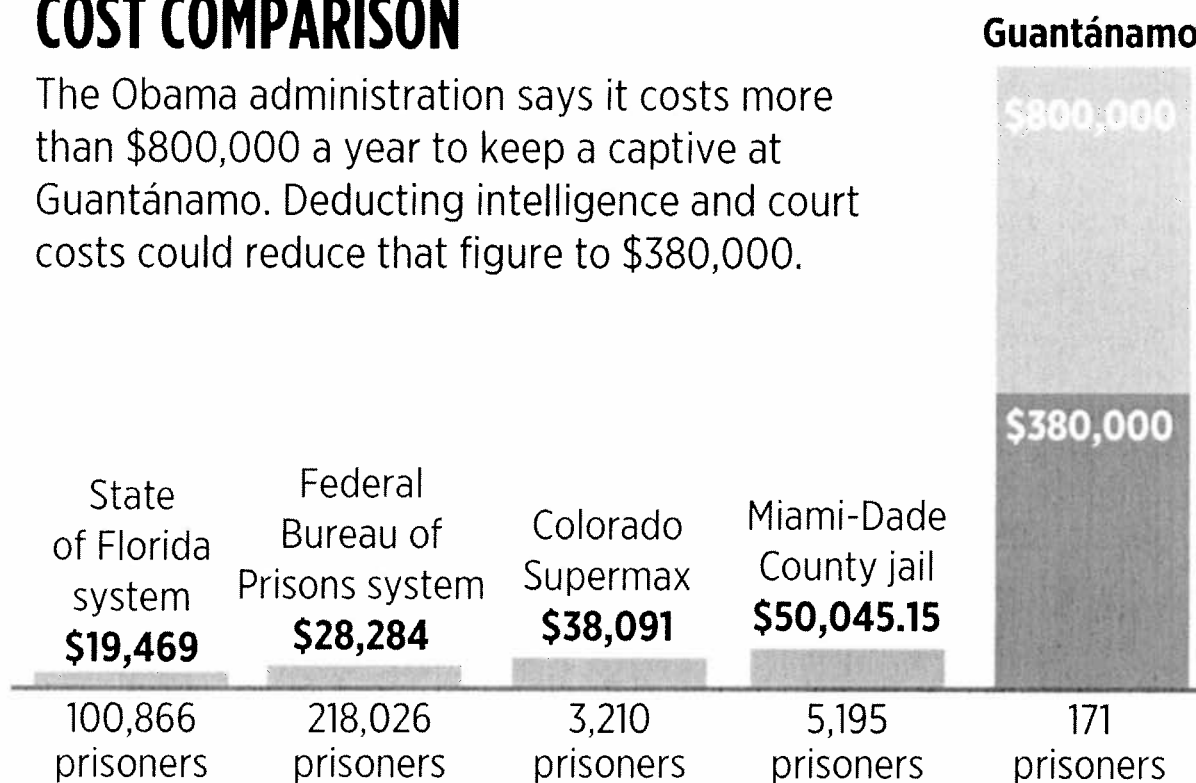
In August, the U.S. Southern Command provided this breakdown of fiscal year 2011 costs for the detention center operations in Cuba. In September, the detention center staff declined a request to elaborate on the budget, and said The Miami Herald should seek that data through the Freedom of Information Act. The Herald sought expedited information in consideration of the ongoing budget debate in Congress. Southcom denied the request.



TOTAL **\$138.8 million** / by 171 detainees = **\$811,695** per captive

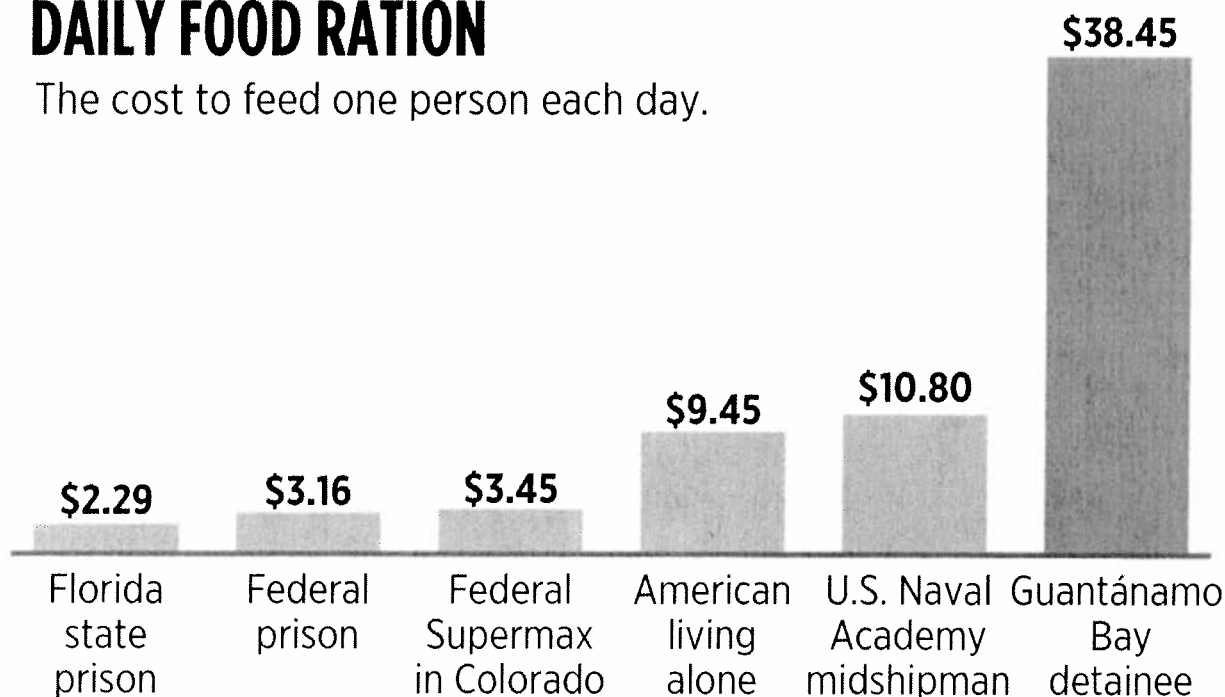
COST COMPARISON

The Obama administration says it costs more than \$800,000 a year to keep a captive at Guantánamo. Deducting intelligence and court costs could reduce that figure to \$380,000.



DAILY FOOD RATION

The cost to feed one person each day.



Sources: Florida Department of Corrections, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2010 Consumer Expenditure Survey, Joint Task Force Guantánamo, U.S. Naval Academy and U.S. Justice Department.