

My name is George Walls. I am a retired brigadier general from the United States Marine Corps. I served for 28 years.

There was a court ruling that said that the Coast Guard, once they picked Haitians up in the Windward Passage, could not return them to Port au-Prince, and that was the process. The coast Guard had a number of cutters that were positioned in the Windward Passage. As the Haitians would come out, they would take them aboard, they would sink their boats, and just repatriate them directly to Port au-Prince. A couple of the Haitians' rights groups were able to get a court order that said because of the fear of persecution if they went back to Haiti that we could no longer repatriate them. So the Coast Guard kept picking them up but the Coast Guard cutters got full to the point where it became operationally hazardous to have three or four hundred Haitians on the helicopter deck of one of these Coast Guard cutters and it reached a point where the cutters were saturated. They were allowed to pull into Guantanamo but they were not allowed to offload the Haitians.

The commander of the base at Guantanamo, Captain Bill McCamey sent a message, and it was pretty much a duress message saying, "Look, we have got all these people. It's 100 degrees down here, they are living on these steel flight decks. We have got to do something." On the day after Thanksgiving, 1991 my staff and I packed up and we went to Guantanamo Bay. Now, we were told that we were going to be there for a period of time to be determined and that our mission in life was to provide humanitarian relief to these Haitian migrants until something was decided about what was to happen with them and the idea was that we would build camps as necessary to handle the migrants as they came in. At the high water mark we ended up with 12,500 Haitians in the camps at Guantanamo. In order to get them involved in something, to relieve the boredom and kind of keep their minds occupied, we provided them with art supplies and that was at their request. You know, "we'd like to be able to do something." So we gathered these art supplies and they were prolific artists. I mean there was art all over the place, just everywhere. Some of it was political and we allowed them to do that. That was fine, free expression, no problem, as long as it wasn't overthrow the camp commandant and that kind of thing. Expressions of their feelings towards the government in Haiti, they did a lot of that.

There was considerable talk about why we were not allowing Haitians to come to the United States. I never got the feeling that it had anything to do with the fact that Haitians, for the most part, are black. The processes that were put in place for, you know, the credible fear of persecution - that was one filter, then the other thing that became a filter was HIV and once we started screening people in and out, then the CDC - Center for Disease Control - said, "well, maybe we had better start looking at HIV." So unfortunately, some of the people who had been screened in turned out being HIV+ and then became screened out.

The thing about the military is we work at the behest of our commander in chief and the generals or admirals who supervise us and the political policy is made completely out of our realm so we implement orders. The things that we were asked to do were reasonable things. Sometimes they made life on the ground hard because you had to get into situations where you

are going and telling somebody who thought that they were screened in that, “well, no. You’re HIV+ and you can’t go.” When we started moving people we were prepared for folks to, you know, grab onto a telephone pole and not let go, or claw... you know. And it did not happen.

We had given the Haitians a lot, you know, blankets, and health and care items and all this sort of stuff and when it came time for them to go back, we gave them a plastic garbage bag and they put all their things in them and we called them Haitian suitcases. And they very calmly boarded the ships and went back to Port au-Prince.

The experience for me was probably the most profound experience that I have had in my life. To think that what you do or do not do is going to influence the daily lives of 13,000 people. And I have carried that with me forever. The thing that often crosses my mind when I think about it is, you know, the grace of God and where you born you could have been one of those people.

I often wonder what happened to the young man who painted this picture, or the little kids I would go talk to when we had the school set up. But now one of those children, they would be in their thirties! Or pretty close to their thirties now so... but every once in a while it crops up. I wonder where they are and what they are doing.