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Translator says zeal for job led to prison

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SALEM, N.H. -- He was one of the most requested translators at Guantanamo Bay. His background, as a Muslim who knew Arabic and Middle Eastern politics, was invaluable. He considered himself a trusted colleague, even helping interrogate prisoners.

It was a heady experience for Ahmed Mehalba, an Egyptian-born US citizen who believed that working as a translator at the military base gave him a second chance to serve his country, after being discharged from the US Army for chronic back and knee problems.

"I always believed that what we did there... you were in the business of saving lives," said Mehalba, 33, speaking at length for the first time last week since he was arrested in September 2003 for possessing classified documents. "I was so proud."

But with one misstep, everything changed.

One night in July 2003, Mehalba illegally downloaded classified files onto a computer disc, in order to do work at home. A few days later, he left to visit his sick father in Egypt. He later recalled that he "didn't have a clue" that he had inadvertently downloaded the secret files and was carrying them with him, along with discs containing songs and videos.

Two months later, he was arrested at Logan International Airport, when Customs inspectors discovered that one of the 132 discs in his garment bag contained classified files, which law enforcement officials say contained the names of suspected terrorists being held at Guantanamo Bay.

The mistake was an innocent one, Mehalba said, but he was swept up in an international espionage investigation that involved three military men who worked at Guantanamo Bay -- including another Muslim translator, a Muslim chaplain and a chief interrogator who was not Muslim. Separate investigations focused on whether the men had links to Muslim militants or were leaking information about interrogations or detainees at the camp, where the US government has detained hundreds on suspicion of ties to Al Qaeda or the ousted Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

In the end, none of them proved to be spies or have terrorist ties.

Now living in a one-room Lawrence apartment and working as a car salesman, Mehalba, released March 10 after serving 18 months in prison for mishandling classified documents and lying to investigators, calls himself "just a simple guy" who had good intentions and made a mistake.

Mehalba said he knew the three other men who were arrested in the summer and fall of 2003, Ahmad Al Halabi, an Air Force translator, Jack Farr, an Army reservist colonel and chief of Guantanamo's prisoner interrogation wing, and James Yee, a Muslim chaplain and Army captain, but did not socialize with them and was unaware of the details of their cases.

During an extensive interview, Mehalba described growing up as one of three children in Alexandria, Egypt. His father owned a cheese factory. His mother worked as a teacher. After arriving in the United States in 1992, he said, he never wanted to go home. He married and later

divorced, and had a daughter, who is now 10. He became a citizen in 1999. He bounced from job to job. He worked as a Boston taxi driver. He worked as a salesman.

Then in 2000, he joined the Army and entered a military intelligence program to become an interrogator. He became deeply depressed in May 2001 when he was discharged from the Army because of medical problems, he said.

After the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Mehalba said, he contacted the FBI looking for a job as a translator. He also applied for a job as a gatekeeper at Massport.

Neither agency hired him.

"I felt it was my duty to do something, not only as an American, but as a former military person," said Mehalba, adding that he wanted to help stop Muslim terrorists because he believed they gave him and all other Muslims a bad name.

After being hired as a linguist by Titan Corp., a San Diego-based defense contractor, Mehalba was assigned to Guantanamo Bay in November 2002.

His military supervisors at the base praised him for sharing his knowledge of Arabic culture, politics, and the Islamic faith with interrogators, and for helping them elicit information from suspected terrorists being held at the camp, according to letters of commendation later filed in court.

Mehalba is described in the letters as passionate and hardworking. They note how he had gone beyond his role as translator to serve as lead interrogator during several sessions with prisoners.

"During this time of crisis in our nation, we need more Patriots with his background helping out," Lieutenant Ahmed I. Qureshi, an interrogator with the Office of Naval Intelligence, wrote in a letter dated Jan. 14, 2003.

Then one night in July 2003, while at work, Mehalba downloaded the classified files onto a computer disc. He brought the disc back to his apartment on the base, slipped it into his laptop, and went to work translating.

"It was just an impulse to do better," Mehalba said. "Sometimes you get overzealous and you think of yourself as bigger than you are, because they keep telling you you're good, and it really gets to your head after a time."

Mehalba said that it was not the first time that he had worked on classified material at home. He contends that in March or April of 2003, the FBI dropped a folder with classified material at his apartment, leaving it with a roommate because he was not home.

"It was sort of an emergency project," said Mehalba, who worked on the material, at home and at work, for several days. He said he did not know whether the FBI had permission to leave the classified documents at his apartment.

"It made me feel like" taking classified material home "wasn't a big deal," he said. "It made me feel like it's a rule you can bend."

Gail Marcinkiewicz, a spokeswoman for the FBI's Boston office, which handled Mehalba's case, said that neither the FBI nor the US attorney's office was aware of Mehalba's claim that the FBI had brought classified information to his apartment.

In Guantanamo Bay Mehalba's lawyer, Michael C. Andrews, confirmed last week that Mehalba had told him about the incident, which he said he would have raised as a defense if his case had gone to trial.

Still, Mehalba said, after he brought classified material to his apartment without permission that July, he was nagged by the thought that what he was doing was wrong. So he crushed the disc and deleted the files from his laptop -- or so he thought.

A few days later, he left for an emergency trip to Egypt to visit his father. He had downloaded -- unwittingly, he insists -- the classified files, along with hundreds of songs and videos, onto discs and taken them with him. During his two-month stay in Egypt that summer, Mehalba said he used some of the other discs, but not the one with the secret files, which sat untouched at his parents home in Alexandria, Egypt. On Sept. 29, 2003, Mehalba was stopping in Boston for a brief visit with his daughter, who lives in Massachusetts, before heading back to Guantanamo, when Customs inspectors at Logan noticed his Guantanamo Bay identification card and asked if he was carrying classified documents. He said "no," and was promptly arrested.

In January, Mehalba, who had been jailed after his arrest, pleaded guilty to mishandling classified material and lying to investigators. A judge sentenced him to 20 months in prison, accepting a recommendation for leniency from both prosecutors and defense lawyers, who said Mehalba's judgment was clouded because he suffers from bipolar disorder.

Mehalba, who is currently trying to shop a book about his life, said that because of his felony conviction, he could not even get a job driving a taxi.

Last month, the FBI mistakenly returned the disc containing the classified material to Mehalba while returning some of his personal belongings.

Recognizing the title on the disc, Mehalba said he called the FBI immediately and an agent came to his house to collect it. Mehalba said he told the agent, "I guess the FBI screws up, too."