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Guantanamo Transcripts Paint a Picture of War's Combatants

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Boston Globe
March 20, 2006

WASHINGTON -- In late 2004, under the fluorescent light bulbs of a windowless trailer at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, prisoner after shackled prisoner begged a military tribunal for freedom, insisting that they were not a threat to the United States. But not Ghassan Abdallah Ghazi Al-Shirbi.

Shirbi, a Saudi Arabian whom the US military described as an "electronics builder" for Osama bin Laden, said it was an "honor" to be an enemy combatant.

"May God help me fight the infidels" he chanted.

Thousands of pages of transcripts of military hearings released two weeks ago show that, while most detainees say they are innocent bystanders in the war on terror, a small but crucial number acknowledge -- even boast -- about their ties to terrorists.

The transcripts pull back the veil of secrecy that has surrounded the island prison since its creation in 2002. The documents offer the most detailed picture yet of whom the US government feels it is at war with, and give a rare glimpse into the psyche of Al Qaeda foot soldiers.

Of about 366 detainees interviewed at hearings, about a third -- 107 -- admitted to accusations ranging from fighting for the Taliban to training at Al Qaeda terrorist camps, according to a Globe review of the documents. The majority of the confessors highlighted political, rather than religious, reasons for their decision to become fighters, with many describing the Russian repression of Muslims in Chechnya -- not hatred of the United States -- as their central motivation.

A smaller number of admissions came from those who said they heeded a fatwa, or religious edict, instructing them to fight Americans after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. The fatwa, they said, came from both Taliban leaders and local mullahs.

The fighters, some of whom traded pampered lives in the Middle East and Europe for the parched mountains of Afghanistan, frequently told tribunal officials that they now realize that they had been misled.

But a tiny, hard-core group of firebrands made no such apologies. Instead, they called down the wrath of God on US officials.

"I tell you I don't believe in the American Justice Department and your Supreme Court," a detainee who identified himself as Mohammad Bin Abdul Rahman Al Shamrani, prisoner Number 195, wrote in a letter to the tribunal. "So judge me the way you like. I'm looking forward for God to judge between me and you."

Senior US officials estimate that 10 percent to 20 percent of about 480 detainees at Guantanamo Bay are diehard extremists who have sought to radicalize other detainees during their years of detention. Many do not appear in the transcripts because they refused to participate in the hearings, which were meant to determine whether a detainee should be classified as an "enemy combatant."

The newly released documents reveal that Feroz Abbasi, a Ugandan-born British man released last year under pressure from the British government and human rights lawyers, was one such firebrand.

"Do not be fooled into thinking that I am perturbed by you classifying me as an enemy combatant," Abbasi, then 22, wrote in a letter to tribunal officials. "I am humbled that Allah would honor me so."

Other handwritten letters describe Abbasi's transformation from a teenage computer school dropout in a working class suburb of London to an ardent admirer of Al Qaeda.

"Upon reading 'Jihad: the shortest path to paradise,' by Masood Azhar, I was aware that military struggle was an individual obligation upon me," he wrote, referring to a book by a Pakistani religious scholar and leader of an extremist group.

Abbasi, who had also begun attending a radical mosque in London, eventually traveled to Afghanistan to enroll in "basic training" at an Al Qaeda camp known as Al-Farouq. There, he watched videos about the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia, attended speeches by bin Laden, and held meetings with Mohammad Atef, Al Qaeda's military chief.

After his arrest, Abbasi spent his time at Guantanamo Bay writing legal responses to the accusations against him in which he quoted the Koran and doodled the word "crusader" across a page, referring to President Bush.

In other letters, he cites the outrages of slavery, the treatment of Native Americans, and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan as reasons for his opposition to the United States.

"I must have been about 14 years old when I opened my textbook to a black and white picture of an American," he writes, describing the man's wide grin. "His elbow rested on the very atom bomb that obliterated millions. . . . Pure hate wells in my veins to think that America could get away with such a thing."

But few detainees were as defiant as Abbasi at their hearings.

Twenty-eight detainees -- mostly Afghans -- acknowledged working for the Taliban, and described their service as a matter of convenience or conscription. A handful of others gave haphazard stories for how they ended up embroiled in the war in Afghanistan, including an Iraqi who said he left his country in search of treatment for a sexual disorder and two detainees who said they were former heroin addicts who came for cheap drugs. Two others described money as their central motivation, including an Afghan tribesman who said he helped bin Laden escape the country.

About 50 detainees said they traveled to training camps in Afghanistan, many of which were run by Al Qaeda, because they wanted to prepare to fight in conflicts elsewhere in the world, including the Philippines, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, and Kashmir. Included in this group are 15 ethnic Uighurs who were deemed not to be enemy combatants because they saw their enemy as China.

Many detainees cited Chechnya as the original motivation for receiving military training.

"That was my goal," said one Algerian detainee, who said seeing a videotape of dead Muslims in Chechnya at a mosque in Britain inspired him to travel to Afghanistan for training. He told tribunal officials that he would still be struggling to get into Chechnya if he had not been detained, despite the fact that he had blown off the fingers of his left hand during training on planting land mines.

Another detainee, from Saudi Arabia, told tribunal officials that he had intended to die a martyr in Chechnya, just like his brother.

"When my brother died, I was traumatized because he was so dear to me," he told them. "I wanted to go over there so that I can die and meet up with him."

A majority of the detainees who acknowledged their offenses described a desire to defend fellow Muslims.

"I don't consider myself a terrorist," a British citizen who converted to Islam told judges, describing how he hoped to fight those who were "killing Muslims" in Afghanistan.

When tribunal officials asked Abdul Hakim Bukhary why he traveled to Afghanistan, he was matter of fact.

"President Bush declared war on the Taliban," he said. "After that, the Taliban called for jihad. They called all Muslims. I am a Muslim. I answered the call."

But Bukhary said he had no ill will against the United States.

"American people are very good. Really," he said in a speech that could have been sarcastic or sincere. "They give us three meals, juice, fruit and everything. . . . In a Taliban prison, they do not treat you well. Here we are in paradise. 100 percent paradise. . . . I thank you for America."