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Guantanamo translator pleads guilty

Denise Lavoie
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BOSTON --A former Arabic translator who took classified documents from the prison camp at Guantanamo Naval Base pleaded guilty to federal charges Monday in a deal that will set him free within two months.

Ahmed Fathy Mehalba, 32, an Egyptian-born U.S. citizen and civilian translator at the Guantanamo Bay base, was arrested at Logan International Airport on Sept. 29, 2003, after returning from a trip to Egypt.

Customs agents found 132 compact discs in his luggage, including one that contained hundreds of documents labeled "SECRET" or "SECRET/NOFORN," meaning no foreign government was allowed to look at them. Mehalba initially told investigators that the discs contained only music and videos, then later said he had no idea how the classified documents got on the discs.

His lawyers had argued that he was taking materials with him to work on translating them.

In U.S. District Court Monday, Mehalba pleaded guilty to one count of unauthorized possession of classified materials and two counts of lying to federal investigators.

Under federal sentencing guidelines, Mehalba would have faced between 37 and 46 months in prison. But prosecutors agreed to recommend a lower sentence because Mehalba has no criminal record, accepted responsibility for his actions and had "significantly reduced mental capacity" at the time he committed the crimes.

Joseph Savage, one of Mehalba's lawyers, said in court that Mehalba has been treated for bipolar disorder, depression and attention deficit disorder.

Mehalba was one of four men swept up in an espionage investigation at the Navy base. Some or all charges were dropped against the other three men, who included a Muslim chaplain, another interpreter and an Army Reserve colonel.

U.S. Attorney Michael Sullivan called the plea "a proper and fair result."

"These charges were brought to redress serious breaches in security and Mr. Mehalba's failure when first interviewed to honestly acknowledge them," Sullivan said.

With credit for time served since his arrest, Mehalba is expected to be freed in two months, shortly after his sentencing on March 9.

Defense Department officials said Mehalba worked at Guantanamo for San Diego-based defense contractor Titan Corp. He was a civilian who formerly served in the Army and twice started but failed to complete a military intelligence course to become an interrogator.

Mehalba did not speak in court, except to answer questions from Judge Douglas Woodlock. He said that he has taking lithium since he was arrested, and has taken other prescription drugs in the past for depression and concentration problems.

Mehalba was medically discharged from the Army in May 2001 and later hired by the private defense contractor to be a translator at the prison in Guantanamo Bay.

At the time of his arrest, Mehalba was returning to the U.S. from Cairo, with a stop in Milan, Italy. The FBI launched an investigation into where he had traveled and who he had met with while out of the country.

He is a former Boston area resident who used to drive a city cab.