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Saudi Man Admits Enemy Role at Guantanamo Trial

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GUANTANAMO BAY U.S. NAVAL BASE, Cuba (Reuters) - An al Qaeda suspect told a U.S. military tribunal that he had fought against the United States and said on Thursday he was willing to spend the rest of his life in prison as a "matter of honor."

"I came here to tell you I did what I did and I'm willing to pay the price, no matter how many years you sentence me," said Ghassan Abdullah al Sharbi, a U.S.-educated Saudi who allegedly met al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden at a training camp in Afghanistan months before the September 11 attacks.

"Even if I spend hundreds of years in jail, that would be a matter of honor to me," he said.

Sporting long dark hair and a beard, Sharbi appeared at a pretrial tribunal hearing near the U.S. prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as one of 10 detainees who face up to life imprisonment if convicted on war crimes charges.

The tribunal has also held hearings this week for his two alleged co-conspirators -- Algerian Sufyian Barhoumi and Saudi Jabran Said bin al Qahtani. The U.S. military says the three were part of an al Qaeda bomb-making cell.

"I fought the United States," Sharbi told the hearing's presiding officer, Navy Capt. Daniel O'Toole. "I'm going to make it short and easy for you guys: I'm proud of what I did and there isn't any reason of hiding."

But Sharbi eschewed the notion that he was "guilty" of wrongdoing and politely said he wanted to represent himself at the tribunal. He firmly rejected his appointed military defense lawyer, Navy Lt. William Kuebler, and said he wanted neither a military replacement nor a civilian defender.

"It's the same circus, different clown," said Sharbi, a fluent English speaker who earned an electrical engineering degree at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in Arizona before leaving the United States for Afghanistan in 2000.

O'Toole tried to order Kuebler to remain Sharbi's lawyer, citing the detainee's ignorance of military judicial rules. But Kuebler told the presiding officer that state legal authorities in California had advised him it would be unethical to represent an unwilling client.

O'Toole then cut short the proceedings and set a May 17 hearing to consider the ethics issues raised by Kuebler.

The legality of the tribunals, which President George W. Bush created to try foreigners suspected of terrorism after the September 11 attacks, was challenged last month before the U.S. Supreme Court. A high court ruling is expected in June. The tribunals are known formally as commissions.

Sharbi appeared before O'Toole in the beige garb of a detainee classed as "compliant" and refused the presiding officer's advice to wear civilian clothes to avoid prejudicing his case.

"I want to wear the same suit I have been wearing for four years. In fact, I miss my orange suit," said Sharbi, referring to the orange uniforms worn by "noncompliant" prisoners among the 490 detainees at Guantanamo.

Military documents allege that Sharbi was introduced to bin Laden in July 2001 at al Qaeda's al Farouq training camp in Afghanistan, where he underwent basic training, stood guard and kept watch for U.S. air strikes after the September 11 attacks.

He was moved by former al Qaeda operations director Abu Zubaydah to a safe house in Faisalabad, Pakistan, for training in the construction of electronic detonators later used in car bomb attacks on U.S. forces in Afghanistan, the military says.

Sharbi, Barhoumi, Qahtani and Zubaydah were captured there together in March 2002, military documents say.