

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Translator sentenced in Guantanamo documents case

Shelley Murphy
Boston Globe
February 19, 2005

An Arabic translator who took classified documents from the US military base at Guantanamo Bay yesterday received a 20-month sentence in US District Court in Boston and said he was trying to do a good job by working on the material at home.

Ahmed Mehalba, 32, a linguist, admitted he removed a computer disk containing 368 secret documents from the military base, but his lawyers urged leniency, because he was off his medication for bipolar disorder at the time.

"We live in a very terrible time, and I was given the opportunity to practice in defending this great nation of ours," said Mehalba, who added that he took the job of translator during interrogations of detainees seriously and spent hours working on his own.

"I was told over and over by my supervisors of how good of a job I was doing," Mehalba said. "This made me even more eager and overzealous. I believed that I could make a difference."

Working for San Diego-based Titan Corp., which has a contract with the Department of Defense, Mehalba translated for Arabic-speaking detainees at Guantanamo Bay from January through July 2003.

In the summer of 2003, Mehalba took the disk with him to his native Egypt during an emergency leave from the job to visit his family.

On Sept. 29, 2003, Mehalba was arrested at Logan International Airport, after customs inspectors discovered the disk in his luggage when he arrived from Cairo.

He was charged with carrying classified information and lying, for telling inspectors that the disks contained only music and videos.

"I realize now more than ever that, although it was never my purpose or intention to retain or use those files for any illicit purposes, especially the way I feel about this great country, it could have fallen into the hands of those with less than honorable intentions," Mehalba said yesterday.

Lawyers for the defense and the prosecution recommended a reduced sentence because Mehalba's judgment was clouded by bipolar disorder, a diagnosis made several years ago. They said he had not received treatment or taken medication for the illness throughout his seven months at Guantanamo Bay.

US District Judge Douglas P. Woodlock accepted a plea agreement worked out between prosecutors and defense lawyers, and he sentenced Mehalba to 20 months in jail. Only 22 days remain in Mehalba's sentence, his lawyers say, because he has spent 16 months behind bars since his arrest and would be eligible for so-called good time.

"I really do believe the agreed-upon sentence reflects a measured, well-calibrated, and in fact humane disposition," said Woodlock, applauding prosecutors for showing restraint in what had been a high-profile case.

Mehalba, who was born in Egypt and is a US citizen, was among four translators and military officers at Guantanamo Bay who were arrested in the summer and fall of 2003 and investigated separately for possible espionage.

The espionage cases against the other three, which were prosecuted by the military, all fell apart.

"We're satisfied we proved the case we could prove and satisfied with the result," said Assistant US Attorney Michael D. Ricciuti.

Boston lawyer Michael Andrews, who represents Mehalba, said, "It was a simple case that had to do with a dedicated employee who made a mistake."

Documents filed by prosecutors and defense lawyers this week revealed that Mehalba had had 10 jobs in 10 years and was battling depression. He had served in the Army from 2000 to 2001 and was discharged for medical reasons. In March 2002, according to a memo filed by prosecutors, Mehalba told a psychiatrist he never seemed to be satisfied with what he had.