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Officer Says He Wrongly Approved Use of Dogs; Tactic Employed At Abu Ghraib

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Washington Post
March 16, 2006

The top U.S. military intelligence officer at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq testified yesterday that he inappropriately approved the use of dogs for interrogations without consulting higher-ranking officers, accepting responsibility for giving his subordinates an aggressive tool that was used to terrify detainees.

Col. Thomas M. Pappas, speaking publicly for the first time since the abuse at Abu Ghraib was revealed two years ago, told a military court-martial that in December 2003 he signed off on using dogs on one "high-value" detainee who was not responding to standard interrogation tactics. He said a series of interrogation memos from Baghdad that listed dogs as an option led him to believe he did not need to seek approval from Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, then the top general in Iraq.

"I wouldn't say that I was confused, but later on it turned out that I was wrong," Pappas said in a low voice, looking out over a small military courtroom at Fort Meade, Md. "I misinterpreted the language."

Pappas -- who was testifying at the trial of a military police dog handler accused of abuse at the prison -- is the highest-ranking officer to take responsibility for misconduct there.

The abuse in late 2003 and early 2004 included soldiers putting detainees in painful stress positions, keeping them naked and sexually humiliating them. The dispute between the military and the accused is whether the actions were the work of a few bad soldiers or whether they were part of a system of aggressive tactics sanctioned by the highest levels of government.

Although Pappas has long been considered a potential link between use of the aggressive tactic and authorizations from superiors in Baghdad and Washington, he instead told jurors he proceeded without clearance in telling one of his interrogators he could bring dogs into an interrogation booth to scare a detainee.

But Pappas was quick to acknowledge that he did not ensure that military intelligence and military police soldiers were trained in using the technique, that he failed to put proper control measures in place, and that he did not follow up with interrogators to see how the approach was being applied. Pappas said that he ordered the use of dogs in interrogation booths only if they were muzzled and that he was unaware that military intelligence soldiers were using unmuzzled dogs outside of the booths.

Attorneys for Sgt. Michael J. Smith called Pappas to testify in an attempt to show that top officials at the prison ordered interrogators to use dogs without explaining the rules to military police dog handlers, who were not trained in the procedure. The lawyers have said that Smith, 24, and his black Belgian shepherd were used as a tool to frighten high-value detainees into talking, while prosecutors have likened Smith to "rogue" MPs who photographed themselves stacking naked detainees in a pyramid and have been sentenced to prison for abuse.

Smith's case has highlighted the fact that dogs were approved for use at Abu Ghraib, and testimony has suggested that at least one civilian contract interrogator was urging the use of dogs at night to break down certain uncooperative detainees. Evidence has shown that one detainee

whom Smith allegedly abused -- Ashraf Abdullah Ahsy al-Juhayshi -- was a suspected al-Qaeda operative and the subject of a "special project team" that some at the prison believed had authority to use severe tactics.

Interrogator notes presented to the seven-member jury yesterday appeared to show that Pappas and a senior interrogator approved the use of dogs for the detainee. But Pappas said he had "no explanation" for why his name appeared on the documents.

For his error, Pappas accepted an administrative punishment, which included being relieved of command and fined \$8,000. He testified under the protection of immunity.

According to testimony this week, there is scant evidence that Smith's dog did more than bark or growl at detainees at close range -- a tactic that his defense team says exemplifies the point of having dogs at a prison in the first place, which is to keep detainees under control. Smith is accused of using his dog to threaten at least three detainees, and prosecutors have said that he and another dog handler -- Sgt. Santos A. Cardona, whose trial is scheduled to begin in May -- were trying to get detainees to urinate and defecate on themselves.

Capt. Jason Duncan, one of Smith's attorneys, said in an opening statement Monday that Smith and his dog were simply doing their jobs at the prison: "The dogs were there to bark at detainees, they were there to scare them."

In two hours on the witness stand yesterday, Pappas testified that he had learned that military working dogs were an effective interrogation tool from a team of intelligence officials visiting Iraq in September 2003 from the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, adding that there was discussion with Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller and his entourage about the "Arab fear of dogs" being a reason to use the animals to "set the conditions" for interrogations.

But prosecutors quickly turned Pappas's testimony against Smith. Maj. Matthew Miller got Pappas to say that he was unaware dogs had been used more than once at the prison and that any use of an unmuzzled dog during an interrogation would have been "illegal."

Still, Pappas said it is possible that the MPs did not know the rules.

"In hindsight, clearly we needed to establish some definitive rules and put out clear guidance to everyone concerned," he said.