

Air Force officer disciplined for saying Bush allowed September 11 attacks

Hijacker attended US military school

Jerry Isaacs
21 June 2002

A US Air Force officer in California recently accused President Bush of deliberately allowing the September 11 terror attacks to take place. The officer has been relieved of his command and faces further discipline. The controversy surrounding Lt. Col. Steve Butler's letter to the editor, in which he affirmed that Bush did nothing to warn the American people because he "needed this war on terrorism," received scant coverage in the media.

Universally ignored by the press, however, was that the officer was not merely expressing a personal opinion. He was in a position to have direct knowledge of contacts between the US military and some of the hijackers in the period before the terrorist attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon.

Lieutenant Colonel Butler, who wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Monterey County Herald* charging that "Bush knew about the impending attacks," was vice chancellor for student affairs at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California—a US military facility that one or more of the hijackers reportedly attended during the 1990s.

In his May 26 letter to the newspaper, Butler responded to Bush supporters, who had written the paper opposing the congressional investigation into the September 11 events. He wrote:

"Of course President Bush knew about the impending attacks on America. He did nothing to warn the American people because he needed this war on terrorism. His daddy had Saddam and he needed Osama. His presidency was going nowhere. He wasn't elected by the American people, but placed in the Oval Office by a conservative supreme court. The economy was sliding into the usual Republican pits and he needed something on which to hang his presidency.... This guy is a joke. What is sleazy and contemptible is the President of the United States not telling the American people what he knows for political gain."

The letter provoked immediate retaliation against the 24-year Air Force veteran. Butler was transferred from the Monterey installation and threatened with court martial under Article 88 of the military code, which prohibits officers from publicly

using "contemptuous words" against the president and other officials.

Last week the Air Force announced it had concluded its investigation of the case and suggested Butler would likely face "nonjudicial punishment," such as a fine or a letter of reprimand, rather than a stiffer sentence. If he refuses this punishment, however, Butler, who is ready to retire, could still face a court martial.

The issue is a particularly sensitive one for the Pentagon and the Bush administration. While many people believe that the Bush administration viewed September 11 as a priceless opportunity to implement an ultra-reactionary program of militarism and repression, Butler is different. His military assignment brought him into contact with at least one of the alleged hijackers.

Shortly after September 11, several US news outlets reported that Saeed Alghamdi—named as taking part in the hijacking of United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in western Pennsylvania—had taken courses at the Defense Language Institute, the US military's primary foreign language facility, where Butler was a leading officer overseeing students (essentially, dean of students).

Alghamdi, a 41-year-old Saudi national, was one of several alleged hijackers, including accused ringleader Mohamed Atta, who reportedly trained at US military facilities, according to a series of articles published between September 15 and 17 in the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek* magazine, the *New York Times* and several other newspapers.

On September 15, *Newsweek* reported: "U.S. military sources have given the FBI information that suggests five of the alleged hijackers of the planes used in Tuesday's terror attacks received training at secure U.S. military installations in the 1990s."

The magazine said that Saeed Alghamdi was among three who had taken flight training at the Navy Air Station in Pensacola, Florida—known as the "cradle of US Navy aviation"—which also administers training of foreign aviation students for the Navy. The magazine, citing "a high-ranking Pentagon official" as its source, reported that two others—both

former Saudi air force pilots who had come to the US—also attended such facilities. One received tactical training at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama and the other language training at the Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

Over the next few days, more detailed information appeared in several other newspapers. A September 16 article in the *New York Times* reported: “Three of the men identified as the hijackers in the attacks on Tuesday have the same names as alumni of American military schools, the authorities said today. The men were identified as Mohamed Atta, Abdulaziz al-Omari and Saeed al-Ghamdi.

“The Defense Department said Mr. Atta had gone to the International Officers School at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama; Mr. al-Omari to the Aerospace Medical School at Brooks Air Force Base in Texas; and Mr. al-Ghamdi to the Defense Language Institute at the Presidio in Monterey, Calif.”

The Knight Ridder news service also reported that Saeed Alghamdi had been to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey and the Associated Press cited Air Force sources indicating that more than one of the hijackers may have received language training at the installation.

The media dropped the story after the Air Force officials issued a cursory statement aimed at preventing any further inquiry into links between the US military and the terrorists. While acknowledging that some of the suspected terrorists “had similar names to foreign alumni of U.S. military courses,” the statement said discrepancies in biographical information, such as birth dates and name spellings, “indicate we are probably not talking about the same people.” Without providing any substantiation, the statement suggested the hijackers may have stolen the identities of foreign military personnel who received training at the bases.

Following this less than convincing explanation, the Air Force refused to release the ages, countries of origin or any other information about the individuals whose names matched those of the alleged hijackers—making it virtually impossible to verify the claim that these were not the same individuals.

Attorney General John Ashcroft and the FBI also refused to make public any information. Asked by Florida Senator Bill Nelson whether any of the hijackers were trained at the Pensacola base, the Justice Department refused to give a definitive answer, and the FBI said it could not respond until it could “sort through something complicated and difficult,” according to the senator’s representative.

To receive such training, the hijackers would have had connections to Arab governments that enjoyed close relations with the US government. A former Navy pilot at the Pensacola air station told *Newsweek* that during his years on the base, “We always, always, always trained other countries’ pilots. When I was there two decades ago, it was Iranians. The Shah was in power. Whoever the country *du jour* is, that’s whose pilots we train.”

Military officials acknowledged that the US has a

longstanding agreement with Saudi Arabia to train pilots for the kingdom’s national guard. Candidates receive air combat training and other courses on several Army and Navy bases, in a program paid for by Saudi Arabia. Significantly 15 of the 19 hijackers were believed to be Saudi nationals.

According to its web site, the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey—founded in 1946 as the Military Intelligence Service Language School—“provides foreign language services to Department of Defense, government agencies and foreign governments” to support “national security interests and global operational needs.”

As vice chancellor for student affairs, Butler had extensive contact with students, according to Pete Randazzo, a close associate of the officer and president of the National Association of Government Employees Local 1690, which represents civilian employees at the language school.

“He would go and have lunch with the students, sit in their classrooms. He was a very caring officer over there,” Randazzo told the *Herald*. Butler was also navigator of a B-52 bomber during the Persian Gulf War, which made it likely he was familiar with Saudi military operations, given the close relations between the US and Saudi Arabia during the 1990-91 war against Iraq.

In the 1990s, several officers were disciplined under Article 88 of the military code for publicly denouncing Clinton, including an Air Force general who went so far as to ridicule the president as a “gay-loving, pot-smoking, draft-dodging womanizer” in front of 250 people at an awards banquet.

With Butler’s comments, however, the Pentagon faces a more delicate problem. The Lieutenant Colonel may well know considerably more than he is saying about US military-intelligence apparatus involvement in the September 11 events, and, on the eve of his retirement, took the opportunity to set the record straight.



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