

US military exonerated torturers of John Walker Lindh

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The US soldiers responsible for the abuse and torture of John Walker Lindh at an Afghan military base in December 2002—and photographing their handiwork—were cleared of all charges by military investigators more than two years ago on the grounds that their behavior amounted to little more than “barracks humor.” The documents revealing this finding were among materials related to detainee treatment released July 19, in heavily censored form, in response to a federal suit by the American Civil Liberties Union under the Freedom of Information Act.

Lindh, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2002, is the young American, a convert to Islam, who fought with the Taliban forces in northeastern Afghanistan against the rebel Northern Alliance. In November 2001, after the US had invaded Afghanistan and formed a military alliance with the Northern Alliance against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, Lindh’s unit retreated on foot to Kunduz. There it surrendered to Northern Alliance troops under the command of General Dostum, a notorious warlord.

Lindh and the other prisoners were taken to the Qala-i-Janghi fortress outside Mazar-i-Sharif. The following day, the prisoners were led out of the basement and into the yard and made to sit in rows, their arms bound behind their backs. Guards walked among them, randomly hitting and kicking prisoners. Lindh was struck in the back of the head and almost lost consciousness.

CIA agent Johnny Spann and another agent, working with Dostum’s men, singled out Lindh and questioned him at gunpoint. The episode was captured on videotape and records the Americans saying to Lindh, “The problem is, he needs to decide if he wants to live or die, and die here ... we’re just going to leave him, and he’s going to f—king sit in prison the rest of his f—king short life. It’s his decision, man. We can only help the guys who want to talk to us.” Lindh said nothing throughout the questioning.

Later that day, after a prisoner detonated a grenade, Northern Alliance troops and US Special Forces opened fire, mowing down rows of bound prisoners. American planes were brought in to bomb the fortress prison. The CIA agent

Spann was killed in the fighting. Lindh was wounded in the leg fleeing the carnage.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously noted: “He [Lindh] lay on the ground for 12 hours, surrounded by corpses and pretending to be dead, while US aircraft bombed the compound, blowing living and dead prisoners to bits. In the middle of the night, Lindh and several other survivors in the yard made their way back into the basement. Wounded, starving and freezing, Lindh was trapped there for the next seven days. Dostum’s troops periodically dropped grenades down air shafts, killing many. One wounded Lindh with shrapnel.

“On the fourth day, Northern Alliance troops poured gasoline into the basement and ignited it, incinerating several men. Then Dostum’s soldiers fired rockets into the areas of the basement where the men had fled to escape the flames, littering the area with body parts.

“On the sixth day, Dostum’s troops flooded the basement with near freezing water. According to government disclosures, an eyewitness said that the water ‘was about waist high for one full day. Those who were too injured to stand drowned, and the water was full of blood and waste.’”

Lindh and others were obliged to drink this water to survive. At one point, he tripped over a dead body and was submerged in the freezing water, which resulted in his suffering hypothermia.

After this horrifying experience, Lindh and the other 85 survivors (out of hundreds of prisoners) emerged, “wounded, starved, frozen and exhausted.” He was then crammed into a metal shipping container with other wounded and sick prisoners by Dostum’s forces. Next, Lindh was transferred to an open-air truck full of dying prisoners. He was driven to Sheberghan, where he was taken by stretcher into a room about 10 feet by 10 feet, where he was left with some 15 dead or dying prisoners.

It was there that CNN correspondent Robert Pelton, who eventually informed Lindh’s parents of his situation, found him and began questioning him on videotape.

Following the interview, Lindh was interrogated by a

member of the US Special Forces at Dostum's compound. Here ensued the further abuse of the injured young man that US military investigators concluded was nothing more than "barracks humor."

With his hands tied with rope and a hood over his head, Lindh was taken to a schoolhouse in Mazar-i-Sharif, where he was held in a room with the windows covered so that he could not tell the time of day. Armed guards taunted Lindh around the clock with insults like "shitbag" and "shithead."

Lindh was given a little food, but was always left hungry. Interrogations lasted several hours at a time and continued for several days. Lindh was never advised of his legal rights, and when he asked for a lawyer, he was told none was available. His bullet wound was left untreated, "to preserve the chain of custody" of the bullet for its use as evidence at trial.

At one point heavily armed US soldiers blindfolded and handcuffed Lindh, scrawled "shithead" across the blindfold, and posed with him for photos. A soldier told Lindh that he was "going to hang," and then the pictures could be sold and the proceeds donated to a Christian organization. Another told Lindh that he wanted to shoot him then and there. Lindh was cuffed so tightly that his wrists were scarred, and his hands were numb for months.

Lindh was flown to a Marine airbase in the Afghanistan high desert dubbed Camp Rhino. His guards stripped him naked and fastened him to a stretcher with duct tape and placed him in a metal shipping container.

As the WSWS commented: "Conditions inside the container would have tested the endurance of anyone, much less someone in Lindh's weakened condition. There was no light, heat or insulation. Two small holes provided all the ventilation. Guards taunted Lindh through the holes, threatening to spit in his food. Lindh's hands were tied together. At first he was fully exposed, but eventually the guards covered him with a blanket and placed one underneath him.

"For two days, Lindh was provided minimal food and medical attention. He was freezing cold and in constant pain because of the wrist restraints that were too tight. The loud noise of an electric generator echoed in the container. He could not move. Lindh was not even released from the stretcher when he needed to urinate. Instead, guards propped him upright."

Eventually, FBI agents arrived and confronted Lindh with a form waiving his constitutional rights. He signed the form and answered their questions. The agents repeated that no attorneys were available, although by this time a lawyer retained by his parents was attempting to reach him, as the military and FBI knew perfectly well. After several days of further interrogation, his conditions improved somewhat and

he was eventually transferred to the USS Peleliu, where he was treated for dehydration, hypothermia and frostbite. The bullet was removed from his leg.

The documents released Tuesday include a February 2003 memorandum concerning an investigation into Lindh's treatment while in US hands. Brig. Gen. David P. Burford wrote that he concurred with the investigators' findings of no intentional wrongdoing by 5th Special Forces soldiers.

"I would add momentary lapse of 'mature' good judgment and propose that it was a sophomoric idea that quickly grew unsavory in its own right," Burford wrote, referring to the obscenity on the blindfold.

In April 2002, the Justice Department made it known that it wanted the photograph taken by US military personnel of the stricken Lindh with the obscenity. Burford declared, "There is no evidence to support the allegation that [Special Forces] members or any soldier of the 5th Special Forces Group intentionally or maliciously acted to hide the existence of the photograph."

Another document among the investigation records included the comment: "The photo was taken 'as barracks humor.'" The investigation concluded that 5th Special Forces soldiers treated Lindh humanely and in accordance with US military standards.

When asked by an investigator why the photograph had been taken, an unidentified US soldier replied, "The photograph was taken as a final team picture with an American member of the Al Qaeda Terrorist Organization." Lindh was never a member of Al Qaeda.

Why the obscenity? The soldier replied, "Because we thought it was humorous and we thought he was."



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