

THE US TRAINING MANUALS AL QAEDA USED

Back in April 2009, I wrote a post outlining how purported al Qaeda training manuals formed the basis of Bruce Jessen and James Mitchell's torture program.

The SASC Report on Detainee Treatment reveals that some information collected from al Qaeda—and not DOD's attempts to find methods to interrogate detainees—is one key to discovering how we got in the torture business. The SASC report reveals (as Valtin has been pointing out for some time) that DOD first contacted JPRA—the unit that oversees SERE—for “information about detainee ‘exploitation’” on December 17, 2001. But there's another reference that suggests James Mitchell—one of the two retired SERE psychologists who reverse-engineered SERE and oversaw the first interrogations—was already on the job. In the section, “JPRA Collaboration with Other Government Agencies” (meaning, CIA), this reference appears:

[classification redaction] In December 2001 or January 2002, a retired Air Force SERE psychologist, Dr. James Mitchell, [redaction that I bet talks about a CIA contract] asked his former colleague, the senior SERE psychologist at JPRA, Dr. John “Bruce” Jessen, to review documents describing al Qaeda resistance training. The two psychologists reviewed the materials, [half line redacted], and generated a paper on al Qaeda resistance capabilities and countermeasures

to defeat that resistance.

Note, the “December 2001 or January 2002” date comes from an interview of Jessen, not directly from Mitchell. It’s not clear anyone has asked when Mitchell got the al Qaeda documents—but by the time Jessen was interviewed on July 11, 2007, DOD had already sent out notice to preserve all documents relating to Mitchell, so he was already under legal scrutiny at the time Jessen gave these dates.

In a section describing a DIA training session Jessen and Joseph Witsch did, it’s clear the al Qaeda documents form the basis for the training.

[classification redaction] Mr. Witsch stated that he worked with Dr. Jessen to develop a set of briefing slides for the [acronym redacted] training. The Department of Defense provided the Committee with slide presentations that appeared to have been produced by JPRA for the March 8, 2002 training. Mr. Witsch testified that the two slide presentations (1) [half line redacted—elsewhere this appears unredacted as Al Qaeda Resistance Contingency Training: Contingency Training for (redacted) Personnel] Based on Recently Obtained Al Qaeda Documents” and (2) “Exploitation” – appeared to be the same as those used by JPRA in the March 8, 2002 training. Dr. Jessen told the Committee that he did not recognize the slides as those that he presented [redacted] but that the vast majority of the slides were consistent with what he

would have taught at the training session.

While the discussion of the slides connected with the al Qaeda documents is heavily redacted, it appears that these slides already attached techniques or objectives to interrogating al Qaeda detainees.

[classification redacted] The “Al Qaeda Resistance Contingency Training” presentation described methods used by al Qaeda to resist interrogation and exploitation and [half line redacted]. The presentation also described countermeasures to defeat al Qaeda resistance, including [~five lines redacted]. Mr. Witsch testified to the Committee that the countermeasures identified in the slides were “just an interpretation of what we were doing at the time and what we constantly did when we trained SERE students.”

So just to review. By “December 2001 or January 2002,” Mitchell already had documents presumably captured from al Qaeda, and he and Jessen proceeded to use those documents to develop a training session on interrogation (one they offered to both DIA and CIA). And al Qaeda’s resistance training—as much as SERE’s program—drove what “countermeasures” Mitchell and Jessen were recommending to the CIA and DIA.

In the comments to that thread, we discussed reports—including from Lawrence Wright’s *Looming Tower*—that al Qaeda member Ali Mohammed had taken training manuals from Fort Bragg.

He managed to get stationed at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Even though he was only a supply sergeant, Mohammed made a remarkable impression, gaining a special commendation from his commanding officer "for exceptional performance" and winning fitness awards in competition against some of the most highly trained soldiers in the world. His awed superiors found him "beyond reproach" and "consistently accomplished."

[snip]

The American army was so respectful of his views that it asked him to help teach a class on Middle East politics and culture and to make a series of videotapes explaining Islam to his fellow soldiers. According to Mohammed's service records, he "prepared and executed over 40 country orientations for teams deploying to the Middle East." Meantime, he was slipping maps and training manuals off base to downsize and copy at Kinko's. He used these to write the multivolume terrorist training guide that became al-Qaeda's playbook. (205)

Which is just one reason this comment from Abu Faraj al-Libi's Gitmo Detainee Assessment Brief is so interesting.

(S//NF) Detainee said prior to 11 September 2001, al-Qaida gained its knowledge of guerrilla warfare tactics from reading translated US military manuals stored in what he described as the group's vast Afghanistan-based library.

It seems to confirm AQ got its manuals—via some means—from American manuals. And while this

reference mentions just “guerrilla warfare tactics,” presumably those tactics would include counter-interrogation strategies like the SERE program taught at Ft. Bragg. While I didn’t get this when I wrote my post in April 2009 (back then I said Mitchell and Jessen didn’t so much use SERE as al Qaeda’s own tactics), this may suggest Mitchell and Jessen used SERE techniques precisely because that’s what al Qaeda used.

I said this was interesting for a couple of reasons. As I noted in that earlier post, Mitchell and Jessen had a series of slides that talked not just about resistance to interrogation, but also resistance to exploitation. And as Jason Leopold and Jeff Kaye emphasized several weeks ago, exploitation (that is, recruitment for other purposes, such as propaganda or spying) is at the core of SERE (and therefore, the program Mitchell and Jessen developed from it).

[A]s Jessen’s notes explain, torture was used to “exploit” detainees, that is, to break them down physically and mentally, in order to get them to “collaborate” with government authorities. Jessen’s notes emphasize how a “detainer” uses the stresses of detention to produce the appearance of compliance in a prisoner.

[snip]

“The Jessen notes clearly state the totality of what was being reverse-engineered – not just ‘enhanced interrogation techniques,’ but an entire program of exploitation of prisoners using torture as a central pillar,” [retired Air Force Capt. Michael Kearns, who provided these notes] said. “What I think is important to note, as an ex-SERE Resistance to Interrogation instructor, is the focus of Jessen’s instruction. It is exploitation, not specifically interrogation. And this is not a picayune issue, because if one were to ‘reverse-engineer’ a course on

resistance to exploitation then what one would get is a plan to exploit prisoners, *not* interrogate them. The CIA/DoD torture program appears to have the same goals as the terrorist organizations or enemy governments for which SV-91 and other SERE courses were created to defend against: the full exploitation of the prisoner in his intelligence, propaganda, or other needs held by the detaining power, such as the recruitment of informers and double agents. Those aspects of the US detainee program have not generally been discussed as part of the torture story in the American press." [my emphasis]

Mind you, all we know for sure from al-Libi's statement is that he told his interrogators that the al Qaeda manuals derived from American ones. That doesn't necessarily mean al Qaeda used manuals on the SERE program, nor does it change the importance of reporting that Mitchell and Jessen designed this torture program so as to use detainees for propaganda and recruitment purposes.

But al-Libi's confirmation sure does make these connections more likely.