

~~TS~~ 25X1

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

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Location: 2100 K Street
Participants – Commission: Commissioner Richard Ben-Veniste, Philip Zelikow, Doug MacEachin, Kevin Scheid, Mike Hurley, Alexis Albion,
Non-Commission: Mike Scheuer, 25X1

Note: Scheuer was placed under oath by Commissioner Ben-Veniste at the start of the interview.

Interviewee Background

~~(TS)~~ Mr. Scheuer joined CIA in 1982 as an analyst in the 25X1
of Intelligence (DI). 25X1
25X1

Directorate

Early Details on UBL and Al Qaeda

~~(C)~~ CIA had no contact with UBL during the Afghan war (nor did UBL want this), and his connections with terrorism began to reach the attention of analysts at CIA during the 1992 to 1994 period. Even in 1995, however, CTC, which chased organizations not individuals, did not yet have a handle on a terrorist organization associated with UBL (and thus the 1995 NIE on terrorism did not mention UBL). It was not until 1996/1997 (and the walk-in by Fadl) that references began to be made to 'Al Qaeda.'

~~(C)~~ 25X1 Scheuer followed extremist groups primarily in Sudan but also in 25X1 as well as remnants of the Afghan mujahideen, and noted that UBL's name "came up everywhere," but mostly in financial areas. CIA had already picked up some interesting intelligence during the Somalia operation (1993-1994) on something called "Al Qaeda" operating out of Djibouti, and when Scheuer began to look into Yemen and then Saudi Arabia, this led to a whole new emphasis on the Arabian peninsula. It was the 1995 OPM/SANG attack

that was for Scheuer the "pivotal event", providing the momentum for him to say to Chief of Near East and South Asia Division (NE), Steve Richter, "we've got to look at this closely."

~~(TS)~~ In late 1995, there was a walk-in^{25X1} who had been sent to Sudan and found employment with one of UBL's agricultural firms. By this time, CIA had^{25X1} collection in Sudan, and found that there was lots of traffic about UBL companies and their connections with non-governmental agencies. Scheuer noted that this was a very hit and miss operation against UBL at the time^{25X1}
25X1

TFL/ALEC Station

~~(C)~~ According to Scheuer, he was initially chosen as deputy chief of CTC's new virtual station, but was appointed chief after several other DO officers turned down the job. Most DO officers did not like free-floating platforms, he explained, and heading one up was seen as a risky endeavor: "No DO officer would take the position."

~~(TS)~~ The original name of the unit was Terrorist Financial Links (TFL). Scheuer described how Deputy Director of Operations (DDO) David Cohen had tasked him in late 1995 to write a two-page operational platform in one hour for a new, virtual unit within CTC that would focus on financial operations. Scheuer wrote two proposals, one targeting^{25X1} and the other for a Usama Bin Ladin (UBL) unit, and the latter was chosen. National Security Adviser Tony Lake was very interested in this UBL operation, and visited the unit along with Cohen and Chief of CTC Winston Wiley at its embryonic stage in December 1995. In April/May 1996, the unit's name was changed to ALEC Station,^{25X1}
25X1 when the station moved its location and received cable communication (though CTC/TFL remained the designation for the unit).

Mission

~~(TS)~~ TFL/ALEC Station was primarily a support organization. Scheuer drew up a six-point mission for the unit, which he was given two years to complete:

1. Find out what the international community knows about UBL;
2. Begin to collect more information to round out that picture;
3. Begin to recruit assets to report on UBL's organization;
4. Prepare a slate of covert actions;
5. Support law enforcement, providing information relevant to an indictment of UBL;
6. Prepare a capture operation.

Scheuer noted that all of these directions had been completed by May 1998.

Staffing

~~(TS)~~ The new UBL unit started out in 1996 with^{25X1} officers, which included Scheuer, his deputy, a financial/administrative officer, executive officer for logistics, and other Agency officers. According to Scheuer, he went through "three months of angst" before getting the people he wanted. By June 1999, his staff had grown to²⁵ officers, including a Reports Chief, Administrative Chief, Executive Officer, 1 detailee^{X1} 25X1
25X1 and 25 CIA officers. Scheuer

characterized ALEC Station's growth as a slow accumulation of staff which peaked during the Millennium threat period when 25X1 additional staff were assigned to the Station for six weeks. He did not recall any additional permanent staff being assigned following the August 1998 East Africa Embassy bombings. Overall, Scheuer described ALEC as a medium range station in terms of size. 25X1

~~(TS)~~ Scheuer described an effort in May 1998 to dismantle ALEC Station down to 25X1 people and downgrade his own position to Chief of South Asian operations. This was led by DDO Jack Downing and ADDO Pavitt. Both, Scheuer commented, showed very little interest in ALEC Station and its mission: "they never took the time to meet the people and learn the issues." In Scheuer's opinion, this reflected Downing's prejudice against him as a DI officer. (Scheuer added that Downing had "a visceral dislike" for him, with more interest in 25X1 than the Al Qaeda threat, and no understanding of transnational operations).

~~(TS)~~ Scheuer believed that it was only through the efforts of Rich Blee, then executive assistant to DDCI General John Gordon, that the Station was left intact; he thinks that Gordon consequently called the DCI who then had a meeting and decided against the plan. In support of his description of this episode, Scheuer referred to a May 1, 1998 memo written by the DC/CTC regarding a vacancy notice for Scheuer's department, and a June 16, 1998 staffing memo 25X1 25X1 (Assistant to the DCI).

Building a Case Against UBL

~~(TS)~~ By March or April 1996, Scheuer's staff had collected all information on UBL owned by CIA as well as from open sources, increasing UBL's 201 file from three or four volumes to 35 volumes.¹ Scheuer also put out a worldwide call to all Stations and Bases to collect on UBL. At this point, Scheuer noted, much was already known about UBL's background and experiences, particularly from Sudan, (though he was unaware of an arrest warrant on UBL having been issued by the Saudis). It was known 25X1 for instance, that UBL had quite consistent contact with the Sudanese government, 25X1 25X1 at his leather tannery in Khartoum.

~~(TS)~~ 25X1 Moreover, by the spring of 1996, 25X1 25X1

25X1 offering an opportunity to render UBL to the U.S. It was the FBI's position at this time that there was still no legal basis for this, since the U.S. had no indictment against UBL and perhaps not even the evidence for one. The 25X1 out UBL moved to Afghanistan too soon for any action to be taken.

¹ Scheuer noted that the 201 file for UBL had grown to 400 volumes by the time he left CTC in mid-1999, and that it is currently 900 volumes.

(TS) In May or June 1996, UBL arrived in Afghanistan, finally ending up in Jalalabad, the site of his first training camp for Arabs only in Afghanistan. Scheuer noted that UBL needed to obtain permission from two leaders of Hizb'al Islamiya, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Yunis Khalis (with whom UBL had a number of major connections) in order to make the move. There were two assassination attempts on UBL before the winter of 1996 (during which period the Taliban had taken Kabul), when he moved to Tora Bora 25X1

By the spring of 1997, there had been another attempt on UBL's life, and a Taliban delegation invited him to come to Kandahar. In Scheuer's opinion, UBL's move to Afghanistan was the best news possible for the U.S. As he explained, Afghanistan at this time was a country with no government, where the U.S. had run its largest ever covert action from 1979 to 1992, and on which the CIA had plenty of expertise as well as assets in both the North and South. "We knew the ground," Scheuer noted, "he could not have gone to a better place for us." As a result, in Scheuer's opinion the CIA did "an outstanding job" on intelligence in Afghanistan.

25X1

(TS) In 1996, Fadl, 25X1 walked into the U.S. Embassy 25X1 At that time, 25X1 was not there and the case was instead handled by an administrative assistant, a situation which Scheuer thought was fortuitous. 25X1 was debriefed 25X1 by rotating teams, and was discovered to be the 25X1 for UBL who had at one point worked under UBL associate 25X1 He had been involved in all of Al Qaeda's activities, and gave CIA insight on how the network operated and the characteristics of its leaders. This was, in Scheuer's opinion, "the break through." 25X1

25X1

(TS) By early 1997, then, ALEC Station at least had a much better picture of UBL, as not just a financier but an organizer who was planning operations to strike the U.S., and Al Qaeda, also confirming the sense that this organization had much more to do with terrorism than just providing money but also had a military committee. (Scheuer noted, however, that there was reluctance within the analytic community to accept both these points). Given that Treasury was forcing the focus away from terrorist finances, CIA began to conduct more traditional collection on Al Qaeda's military capabilities. Scheuer brought in DI analysts to work on the issue, and "they found connections everywhere," 25X1

25X1

WMD

(TS) Fadl had also provided CIA with extraordinary information on an attempt by Al Qaeda to acquire nuclear material. 25X1

25X1 including what people Al Qaeda operatives had met with, what they had for sale, how the WMD material was being tested, and so on. Although Scheuer acknowledged that this particular deal was most likely a scam conducted

² Scheuer noted that there was never much information leading to the analytical conclusion that the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center had been an attack by an organization rather than an individual.

by the sellers, he assigned it real importance as reflecting Al Qaeda's clear intention to acquire WMD.

~~(TS)~~ Scheuer tried to disseminate this report in 1997, sending it to the DDO and ADDO, but, he recalled, no one believed it; the assertions made about Al Qaeda's intentions^{25X1} were considered "unreasonable" and would simply "get people spun up." As a result, the account was pared down^{25X1} which Scheuer thought did not accurately present the level of threat to policymakers. After much "dickering back and forth,"^{25X1} was finally disseminated, but this process took months, or, as Scheuer described it, he had "a hell of a time getting it out of the building."

Khobar Towers

~~(TS)~~ Scheuer noted that his reports chief,^{25X1} drew up a convincing document (perhaps in 1997) arguing that Al Qaeda was behind the Khobar Towers bombing. He also believed there to have been a well disseminated document, dating from January 1998, that made the case that the attack may have been a joint operation, laying out a possible connection between the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and other Iranian entities and UBL. Scheuer is confident that the Al Qaeda side of the evidence never received a good hearing, however, because this was not where FBI Director Louis Freeh wanted the intelligence to lead. Scheuer recalled that C/CTC Winston Wiley had told him at the time that it was Freeh's top priority to prove that the attack was organized by Iran alone. Scheuer himself said he believes this theory to be a "fantasy." As for a joint operation, he thought that perhaps Al Qaeda and Iran Hezbollah had cooperated on training and travel arrangements, but he was intensely skeptical that UBL would have been dependent on any other group's assistance to conduct an operation and did not want to be involved with state sponsors (especially Iran, which he believed to be incompetent).

Warning and Strategic Analysis

~~(C)~~ Nothing is more important than threat warning at CIA, Scheuer noted—and yet there is "no adult supervision" on how to discern between threats. According to Scheuer, broader strategic analysis on warning and threats was not ALEC's role (ALEC Station was primarily an operational unit), but since no one else was doing this, the Station ended up doing much of it, often in the guise of Spot Reports and to support operations. He noted that during Winston Wiley's tenure as C/CTC, all analysts were able to read all operational traffic, but that this situation changed under O'Connell and then Black, when there was much less involvement of the DI in DO operations.

~~(C)~~ Most information on Al Qaeda went to the DCI through Scheuer, who would go up to the 7th floor to give briefings. Scheuer described Tenet as "very on this issue from the start"; even as staff director for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI), Scheuer had briefed Tenet on UBL every week for about 18 months, and Scheuer believed Tenet had great respect for Scheuer's candor and great confidence in him. If a particular Spot Report struck the DCI's attention, he would call a briefing. Scheuer would also prepare talking points for whoever went along to NSC briefings (C/CTC O'Connell,^{25X1} or himself), such that information on the

threat also went to National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counterterrorism Dick Clarke, and others on the NSC through Scheuer.

~~(TS)~~ Scheuer said that there were numerous analytical disputes within CTC on the UBL issue, for example, on his connection with WMD, the attack on U.S. troops in Somalia, and the OPM/SANG and Khobar bombings. He said that he repeatedly asked 25X1 for an NIE on the threat, but that CTC did not put a priority on analysis of UBL/Al Qaeda. This did not substantially change, even with the attack on the East Africa Embassies in August, 1998. Two nights before Operation Infinite Reach (August 20), 25X1 a short paper for the President on UBL by simply sticking together tearlines. He added that during his entire tenure at CTC, up until mid-1999, there was no strategic analysis, or even a synthetic product, focusing on methods of attack by UBL and Al Qaeda, and this included WMD.

~~(C)~~ According to Scheuer, then, no analytic product putting together a complete picture of what was known about Al Qaeda was available with which to convince the policymakers of the severity of the threat. This was despite the fact that Scheuer himself made requests to his bosses saying that the IC needed to step up and prepare such a product. Scheuer cited a June 28, 1999 memo he wrote on exactly this issue, affirming that no in-depth papers had been prepared on UBL himself, his intentions, his ties to other groups, states, and so on, and that the failure to have a detailed DI paper on these topics made it impossible for policymakers to take the threat seriously. "We had more intelligence on UBL by the summer of 1998 than any other intelligence in the history of the CIA," Scheuer noted—but no one was interested.

~~(C)~~ Scheuer attributed this lack of strategic analysis to a failure of management. Regarding warning, analysts spend too much time pursuing a single thread they know will lead nowhere because "no one wants to get their butt burned." Moreover, it was hard to move a bureaucracy 25X1 he explained, describing Iran 25X1 as "the colossus that rules this town", and that "anything that threatens to disturb this is kind of frowned upon." Even now, Scheuer commented, the analytic intelligence system is drastically broken: "the DO has been in this fight alone...since 1996. It still is today."

Problems with FBI and NSA

~~(C)~~ Scheuer was highly critical of the Bureau and NSA on both agencies' willingness to share information with the CIA on the UBL/Al Qaeda threat as well as their commitment to the target. He recalled, for example, that as early as 1996 the name Wadi el Hage had come up in some 25X1 and that both he and CTC's 25X1 took note, remembered Wadi from Sudan, followed him 25X1 Understanding that CIA would need a joint operation on this case, 25X1 was brought over from FBI in June 1996. But two weeks before the Bureau raided Wadi's apartment 25X1 in August 1997, John O'Neill, Chief of Counterterrorism Section at FBI Headquarters, removed 25X1 leaving ALEC Station to struggle to find someone who knew the target equally well. The operation 25X1 was, in Scheuer's words, "botched" on several levels, but "we did the best we could out of lemons."

~~(C)~~ According to Scheuer, it was C/CTC O'Connell's opinion that, with respect to information sharing between CIA and the FBI, "we're the whores for the FBI"—that is, that CIA should not

complain about the Bureau's lack of communication with the Agency. Scheuer noted that FBI had not yet entered the electronic age, and that the Bureau was frequently "stiffing us" on sharing information. He cited the example of when a piece written on WMD was not allowed to be included in the March 25, 1999 President's Daily Briefing (PDB) on the subject, "New information on possible chemical weapons threats posed by Usama bin Laden." On the direction of the DCI, the piece was not sent forward because there was concern about the embarrassing two-year time lag that had occurred between the FBI's obtaining the relevant information upon which it was based (from the Wali Khan Amin Shah arrest) and the Bureau's passing it onto the CIA. (On this issue, Scheuer cited a memo written by ~~25X1~~ the author of the PDB, who had received instructions to this effect from the DCI).

25X1

(~~TS~~) Scheuer wrote memos on all these problems in order to prep Rich Blee, his successor at ALEC, and sent them in June/July 1999 to DCI Tenet, DDCI Gordon, DDO Pavitt, ADDO Downing, DDI McLaughlin, ADDI Wiley, Counsellor to the DCI Krongard, Robert McNamara

(Office of the General Counsel). and briefed Executive Director David Carey. (He also wrote about problems with 25X1 liaison).

After the East Africa Embassy Bombings

(C) ALEC Station did not participate in an after-action report on missed signals regarding the August 1998 attacks on U.S. Embassies in East Africa because, Scheuer commented, there were no people to do it. He believes, however, that there was at least one cable 25X1 that did look at all the information leading up to the bombings, and that an in-house analysis done by operators found some leads. Scheuer noted, however, that he was never asked to meet with the State Department's Accountability Review Board on the attack (which, he added, finished its work before anyone at ALEC Station even knew about it), and believes this was a deliberate decision to cut him out of the process, made by CTC leadership (O'Connell and 25X1) and directed from the 7th floor. According to Scheuer, the reason why he was excluded from this review process was because he would have had some sharp criticisms to make about the performance of both the FBI and the NSA, and their unwillingness to share information.

(TS) Scheuer had no recollection of a September 1998 walk-in report referring to a plot for explosives-laden aircraft to target U.S. interests. He noted, however, that using aircraft as weapons was already a known issue for anyone working the UBL threat, after intelligence from Al Qaeda operative Murad revealed a plot to crash a plane into CIA headquarters. (He noted that Clarke had repeatedly briefed Clarke on the Bojinka plot back in 1995, but was unaware of any disseminated product on this threat). Scheuer did recall a November 1998 report 25X1 on a UBL plot to hijack aircraft on the East coast of the U.S., perhaps to secure the release of the Blind Shaykh, and noted that this was widely disseminated. He was not involved in any conversations 25X1 to find out more about this source or his reliability, however, nor was he involved in analyzing this threat report (which was handed off to an analyst, who would come back to a reports officer if there were further questions). After 9-11, Scheuer was brought back to CTC by Rich Blee, who tasked him to look back at reports on aircraft as weapons, as well as looking at links between UBL and Iraq. The accumulation of DO material did indicate that there were some indicators.

25X1

(C) Scheuer commented that in the Fall of 1998 restrictions began to be imposed on his ability to travel abroad. This occurred after he conducted a review 25X1 for DDO Downing in September/October 1998, at which he complained about the lack of cooperation on the Zawahiri case 25X1 But Downing, 25X1

25X1 Scheuer noted, did not agree with this assessment. This was the last meeting Scheuer attended on the 7th floor. Thereafter, Scheuer found himself shut out of the daily 9 a.m. meetings with senior management, and so was unable to have any more impact at higher levels on issues such as NSA's obstructionism 25X1 (and he believes O'Connell never brought this up on the 7th floor).

Covert Action

~~(TS)~~ 25X1 According to Scheuer, TFL/ALEC Station began covert action programs from day one, but it had become clear very early on that from CIA, the Treasury and the NSC, that he was not going to get the covert action (CA) authorities he wanted.

~~(TS)~~ 25X1 CIA had made a request for joint operations 25X1 against UBL in Sudan. The idea involved hitting UBL in as many places as possible 25X1

25X1 Plans were vetted with Congress before even going to the NSC; Scheuer recalled briefing the House Permanent Staff Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) on these ideas, but a staffer saw the approach as putting pressure on Sudanese agricultural farmers, and thus had it struck off the agenda. Scheuer described another opportunity 25X1
25X1 of UBL's tannery in Khartoum; it was decided, however, that an operation to destroy the tannery was too risky since a worker might get killed or injured.

~~(TS)~~ 25X1 Activities against Western banks were ruled out because it might result in the collapse of the banking system. Scheuer noted that when he had tried 25X1
25X1

25X1 was essentially rejected by the condition that the bank could only be destroyed if no U.S. citizen had an account there.

~~(TS)~~ 25X1 The first slate of CA options against UBL had, therefore, been very broad; but by the time of UBL's move to Afghanistan in mid-1996 it had narrowed because most ideas had not passed muster at CIA, NSC or Treasury. With UBL's move to Kandahar in May 1997, Scheuer began to ramp up plans for direct action and field more ambitious proposals. At this point, the only options available to the USG were to take down terrorist cells, collect intelligence and try to capture UBL. Scheuer noted again the problem of there being no analytic product to convince policymakers to go beyond these limited CA options.

~~(C)~~ At this point, Scheuer said he repeatedly asked for more help on countering the threat. He cited an 25X1 memo that he wrote 25X1 that he hand-delivered to C/CTC Wiley. The memo noted that, after 18 months of following this UBL problem, he had determined that it was too big for CIA to manage alone, that this was no longer an intelligence problem but required help across the board (military, diplomatic). "All we're doing is holding the ring until the cavalry gets here," he wrote. According to Scheuer, DOD refused to get involved at first, but finally sent someone who had in his possession an Arabic book that had been published on UBL in 1991, which gave CIA most of its information on Wali Khan (one of UBL's lieutenants). Scheuer commented that he still thinks this was the greatest contribution made by the military to the CT efforts against UBL.

The May 1998 Capture Operation

~~(TS)~~ 25X1 Scheuer described the cancelled plan to render UBL from Afghanistan in May 1998 as a missed opportunity. The program was well planned by experts from CIA who included specialists from ground branch, air branch, and meteorological experts. Scheuer added that General Schoomaker, Commander in Chief of Special Operations Command, said of the operation that he could not do better, and the COS Islamabad gave it a 60% chance of success. Scheuer noted, therefore, that this was by no means a covert action opportunity that could be ignored as a rag tag plan.

~~(TS)~~ 25X1 The plan was approved by 25X1 which agreed on a 30% chance of success, and signed off on by DDCI Gordon before it was sent to the NSC for approval. It was at this point, Scheuer explained, that "it got all screwed up." Clarke, National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, Attorney General Reno, and Director Freeh were all briefed by Scheuer and 25X1 using the 30% figure. O'Connell and O'Neill briefed Mary Jo White, Pat Fitzgerald and Ken Karrass (U.S. Attorney and Assistant Attorneys for the Southern District of New York), and Scheuer recalled that he received a call from Fitzgerald and four others recounting the fact that White had been briefed that the plan had 0% chance of success. For Scheuer, this discrepancy with the 30% figure was a critical point, since he saw Reno as dependent upon White's assessment of the operation for her decision.

~~(TS)~~ 25X1 According to Scheuer, on May 29th 1998 he was in the midst of final preparations with everything a go on the operation when O'Connell called both Scheuer and his deputy to his office. O'Connell told him that he had just met with the DCI, Richter, Pavitt and Downing, and the decision was made not to proceed with the operation. Scheuer asked O'Connell if this was the decision from downtown or from "this building", but O'Connell did not answer, saying that this was the decision that had been made after some discussion. He gave Scheuer reasons for the cancellation of the plan to put on paper.

The Saudis

~~(S)~~ Scheuer described the Saudis as "extremely uncooperative" on the UBL issue. They never helped CIA once on providing even basic information on the Bin Ladin family 25X1

25X1 and during the period of Scheuer's tenure at CTC he "never got a single piece of useful information" from them. Moreover, Scheuer said that he had found the Saudis "obstructionist." In early 1997, it became publicly known that the Saudis were giving sanctuary to UBL associate Madani al-Tayyib and asked for information from Tayyib, "they just stiffed us." Scheuer described "consistent stonewalling" by the Saudis on the most basic information. Scheuer referred to two documents in which he had made the case that the Saudis were not being cooperative regarding UBL: a May 3, 1996 memo for the DDCI 25X1 and a June 24, 1997 Spot Report which reported that he saw little prospect of the Saudis cooperating with CIA on its March 1997 offer to help capture UBL.

~~(TS)~~ 25X1 Scheuer also relayed his belief that one reason for the cancellation of CTC's covert action program to render UBL from Afghanistan in May 1998 was due to the fact the Saudis had

~~TS~~ 25X1

offered to take care of the UBL problem themselves. According to Scheuer 25X1
25X1

25X1 Scheuer recalled a
memo to Berger written by the DCI 25X1 telling Berger to stand down on the
proposed capture plan, and noted that he and others had written a memo objecting to this action.
He referred to documents on this topic beginning May 29, 1998, 2 days after the capture
operation had been cancelled 25X1
25X1

25X1

Pakistan

(TS) Scheuer characterized 25X1 apparent acquiescence to UBL's arrival in Afghanistan in
1996 as 25X1 simply protecting national interests, that is, bringing stability to
25X1 border. He dismissed the idea of a 25X1 UBL 25X1 by which UBL
would train 25X1 as "too conspiratorial," adding that the development of 25X1
25X1 toward Islamic radicalism had been ongoing for a long time anyway.
(Scheuer noted that the seeds to this religious turnabout began during the Afghan war and 25X1
25X1 and not with UBL). For Pakistan, this period of Taliban control was
one of great stability 25X1
25X1 According to Scheuer, the U.S. should not have been surprised 25X1 was not
responsive to U.S. overtures for support on CT issues 25X1 and he
described CIA's requests 25X1 to capture UBL as "madness."

~~TS~~ 25X1