

Documents Reveal “Reverse-Engineered” SERE Tactics Used in Afghan Torture

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Documents released last week by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reveal that U.S. Special Forces interrogation teams operating in Paktia province illegally tortured Afghan prisoners. As a result of brutal treatment at the hands of his interrogators, one of the detainees subsequently died.

Debriefing files from the military’s Criminal Investigation Division (CID), obtained as a result of a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit against the Department of Defense, confirmed that Special Operations officers in Gardez admitted to using “reverse-engineered” Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) techniques on detainees.

According to the [ACLU](#),

Today’s documents reveal charges that Special Forces beat, burned, and doused eight prisoners with cold water before sending them into freezing weather conditions. One of the eight prisoners, Jamal Naseer, died in U.S. custody in March 2003. In late 2004, the military opened a criminal investigation into charges of torture at Gardez. Despite numerous witness statements describing the evidence of torture, the military’s investigation concluded that the charges of torture were unsupported. It also concluded that Naseer’s death was the result of a “stomach ailment,” even though no autopsy had been conducted in his case. Documents uncovered today also refer to sodomy committed by prison guards; the victims’ identities are redacted. (“Documents Obtained by ACLU Describe Charges of Murder and Torture of Prisoners in U.S. Custody,” American Civil Liberties Union, Press Release, April 16, 2008)

SERE, a program designed to train American service members for possible brutal treatment should they be captured in combat, was reverse-engineered by CIA and Special Operations Command psychologists as a means to break alleged “enemy combatants” in U.S. custody.

As was first revealed by *Salon*’s Mark Benjamin in 2006, the former chief of the Interrogation Control Element at Guantánamo Bay’s Camp Delta detention facility, in a March 2005 sworn statement, said that SERE instructors from Ft. Bragg, N.C., taught their methods to interrogators in Cuba.

According to [Benjamin](#), the affidavit read in part: “When I arrived at GTMO, my predecessor arranged for SERE instructors to teach their techniques to the interrogators at GTMO ... The instructors did give some briefings to the Joint Interrogation Group interrogators.”

As with this month's revelations, earlier reports suggest that Fort Bragg's SERE program, run by the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, was the hothouse where brutal interrogation techniques were cultivated before migrating to Guantánamo and then to Afghanistan and Iraq's notorious Abu Ghraib prison, "Gitmoized" under U.S. Major General Geoffrey D. Miller's command.

A close associate of Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence Stephen Cambone, Miller's brief was to impose a virtual regime of terror upon detainees at Saddam Hussein's former prison. Many of SERE's techniques, including hooding, drugging, isolation, random assaults and forced nudity were applied with appalling results at Abu Ghraib. Miller retired in 2006.

Since leaving the Pentagon, Cambone has become a top executive with the British-owned defense and security contractor QinetiQ, based in McClean, Virginia.

According to [CorpWatch](#) investigative reporter Tim Shorrock, QinetiQ signed a five-year, \$30 million contract with the Pentagon's now-defunct Counterintelligence Field Activity unit (CIFA). One of CIFA's directorates, Behavioral Sciences, had provided a "team of renowned forensic psychologists [who] are engaged in risk assessments of the Guantánamo Bay detainees."

Writing in the July 11, 2005 issue of [The New Yorker](#), investigative reporter Jane Mayer revealed that Behavioral Science Consultation Teams (BSCTS) under General Miller's watch at Guantánamo Bay, became "essential in developing integrated interrogation strategies and assessing interrogation intelligence production," Miller explained in an internal report in September, 2003. According to Mayer's sources,

[A]fter September 11th several psychologists versed in SERE techniques began advising interrogators at Guantánamo Bay and elsewhere. Some of these psychologists essentially "tried to reverse-engineer" the SERE program, as the affiliate put it. "They took good knowledge and used it in a bad way," another of the sources said. Interrogators and BSCT members at Guantánamo adopted coercive techniques similar to those employed in the SERE program. Ideas intended to help Americans resist abuse spread to Americans who used them to perpetrate abuse. Jonathan Moreno, a bioethicist at the University of Virginia, is a scholar of state-sponsored experiments on humans. He says, "If you know how to help people who are stressed, then you also know how to stress people, in order to get them to talk." (Jane Mayer, "The Experiment," *The New Yorker*, July 11, 2005)

Since Mayer's initial reporting in 2005, [Salon's](#) Mark Benjamin identified two of the SERE-linked psychologists, CIA contractors James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen. Present during the interrogation of a "high-value" prisoner, presumably at a CIA "black site" in 2002, "Mitchell urged harsh techniques that would break down the prisoner's psychological defenses, creating a feeling of 'helplessness'."

As Afghan prisoner Jamal Naseer was burned, doused with cold water and then beaten to a pulp by U.S. Special Forces' interrogators well-versed in SERE techniques, one is left to wonder at Naseer's feelings of "helplessness" as his tormentors watched him die.

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