

THE STRUGGLE FOR IRAQ: INTERROGATIONS; How Colonel Risked His Career By Menacing Detainee and Lost

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In western Broward County, where Lt. Col. Allen B. West, 43, is preparing to start life over as a high school social studies teacher, the grass is green, the air is moist and the pressure is barometric. Iraq seems very far away, as does the night last August when Colonel West used his gun to coerce an Iraqi police officer during an interrogation.

Intent on foiling a reported plot to ambush him and his men, Colonel West, a battalion commander, made a calculated decision to intimidate the Iraqi officer with a show of force. An interrogation under way was going nowhere, Colonel West said in an interview, and he chose to take the matter into his own hands.

"This could get ugly," he told his soldiers. But, he said, he imposed limits: "This man will not be injured and he will not have to be repaired. There will be no blood and no breakage of bones."

Still, Colonel West wanted the Iraqi policeman, Yehiya Kadoori Hamoodi, to think "this was going to be the end" if he did not divulge what he knew. So Colonel West presided over what he considered a time-sensitive interrogation that grew steadily more abusive until he himself fired a pistol beside Mr. Hamoodi's head.

A strait-laced, by-the-book senior officer, Colonel West deliberately disregarded Army rules and regulations, gambling -- and eventually losing -- a successful 22-year military career that seemed destined for further advancement.

"There are rules and regulations, and there's protecting your soldiers," Colonel West said, sitting by a man-made waterway behind his family's new home in a Florida subdivision. "I just felt I'd never have to write a letter of condolence home to a 'rule and regulation.' "

"The fact is, I made a choice, the choice had consequences and I accept that," he continued.

But, he added, the events of that hot, dusty night still disturb him: "I'm not some bully who goes around threatening men's lives. Certain things we have to do in war are outside our character."

Many months before the Abu Ghraib prison scandal raised questions about whether the military was permitting or tolerating the mistreatment of detainees, the Army pointedly rejected Colonel West's aggressive tactics during that single interrogation.

Expressing concern that his behavior could send the signal that abuse was acceptable as a means to an end, the Army relieved Colonel West of his command and contemplated court-martialing him on assault charges.

When Colonel West's case became public last fall, it, too, provoked a debate about appropriate conduct during wartime. But that debate had a far different tenor than the much larger one raging now.

No one is suggesting now that the abuse of the Abu Ghraib detainees was justified or that the military is being overzealous in policing itself. Then, however, Colonel West's many defenders argued that the military should have viewed Colonel West as a hero who did not disobey rules so much as rise above them.

The conservative media personalities and Web sites that raised money for his legal defense portrayed a military hamstrung by concern for the human rights of Iraqi detainees. The more than 2,300 letters and e-mail messages that he received were mostly "thank you" notes for putting his men first and resisting the pressure to treat suspects with kid gloves.

Ninety-five members of Congress signed a letter to the secretary of the Army supporting the colonel.

Senator John W. Warner of Virginia, a Republican and chairman of the Armed Services Committee, who has pressed for accountability in the Abu Ghraib affair, expressed empathy for the colonel in a letter to constituents. "As a former Marine Corps officer, I support Colonel West's judgment," he wrote. "I understand the colonel was well-intentioned and his efforts appear solely intended to protect the lives of troops under his command."

In his letter, Senator Warner stated that one potential attacker was apprehended and potential ambush sites were identified and avoided as a result of Mr. Hamoodi's interrogation. Colonel West notes that there were no further attacks on him or his men after the interrogation.

But the record of his case is unclear on whether the Iraqi officer provided valuable information, and Mr. Hamoodi said in an interview that he did not, because he knew nothing.

Neal A. Puckett, a lawyer who represented Colonel West and now represents Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, who oversaw Abu Ghraib and other prisons, said the intelligence officers he interviewed in Iraq last fall were highly frustrated with their inability to extract information.

"The detainees would regularly treat interrogators with contempt, spit on them, laugh at them and say, 'We don't have to answer your questions,' " he said. "They would turn our humanity and our following of the Geneva Conventions against us."

The information-gathering system was not running efficiently, either, Mr. Puckett said. The interrogation specialist at Colonel West's base was a "nice young gal oblivious to all things Arab," like the common phrase "inshallah," or "God willing," Mr. Puckett said. Information collected was not systematically compiled, he added.

"Problems like that, I've got to believe, put pressure to bear on folks tasked with gathering information," he said.

Colonel West was not tasked with that duty. Before that August night he had never conducted or witnessed an interrogation. He was a commander, overseeing an artillery battalion of some 650 soldiers and officers.

He had started in such a role early in life, as an R.O.T.C. battalion commander at an Atlanta high school. His father, a World War II veteran, encouraged him to pursue a career in the military "because he felt that it was a good place to be for a young black man," Colonel West said.

Commissioned as an officer even before he graduated from the University of Tennessee, he steadily climbed the ladder, serving in Italy, South Korea and the Middle East, during the 1991 gulf war, while winning medals and gaining parachuting proficiency and master's degrees. He is married to a financial planner, and they have two young daughters.

Colonel West said he could remember one time before last summer that he committed an infraction: he got a traffic ticket in 1990 in Kansas "right after they changed a sign."

He is the very picture of clean cut. In the interview, he wore wire-rim glasses, pressed jeans, a neat yellow shirt and tassled loafers without socks. His Army dog tag and a Christian shield hung on a chain around his neck. Several times he exclaimed, "Aw, jeepers!"

It was in April 2003 that Colonel West's Second Battalion, part of the Fourth Infantry Division, arrived in Iraq and set up camp at Taji, a former Iraqi air force base north of

Baghdad. "We experienced contact from hostile forces from the time we got there," he said in a hearing last November.

Colonel West said he spent much time searching for weapons caches and trying to disrupt the arms market in the area. He would advise his soldiers to keep alert at all times. "You ride along and say to yourself, 'Is that dead sheep a dead sheep, or is it a dead sheep stuffed with a bomb?'" he said.

He also tried to kick-start some projects, engaging Iraqis in repaving roads, restoring drinking-water supplies and rebuilding the police station, he said. Twice a week, he traveled to the nearest big town, Saba al-Boor, for community meetings.

"There I'd be, an inner-city kid from Atlanta sitting on the floor like Lawrence of Arabia, with 30 Arab sheiks," he said.

The first time, the sheiks challenged him about America's intentions in Iraq and, he said, he pulled out a family photograph and told them that the only land he wanted to occupy was the plot his house sat on in the United States. Eventually, platters of lamb and rice came out and he ate with his fingers like everybody else, he said. (He also ended up so ill from the meal that he had to be hooked up to an intravenous drip, his wife, Angela, interjected.)

In August, Colonel West learned from an intelligence specialist of a supposed plot to assassinate him, which would endanger the soldiers who traveled with him, too. The plot reportedly involved Mr. Hamoodi, a police officer who occasionally worked for the Americans. Although Mr. Hamoodi is a Shiite Muslim, and most attacks against Americans were carried out by Sunnis loyal to Saddam Hussein, some police officers do cooperate with the insurgents and several have been accused of attacking foreigners.

Colonel West said he initially thought "the information was a joke." But a week later several of his officers were ambushed when he was supposed to be traveling with them. A roadside bomb sheared off the back panel of a Humvee, and a firefight ensued. None of his men were seriously hurt, but Colonel West began taking the risk of an assassination seriously.

On Aug. 20, he asked his men to pick up Mr. Hamoodi and bring him to the base. "There was a sense of urgency because I felt in the next couple of days, something was going to happen," Colonel West testified at his hearing.

In an interview in Baghdad, Mr. Hamoodi, a thin, bespectacled 31-year-old, said aides to Colonel West stopped by his police station and asked him to join them on patrol. Mr. Hamoodi climbed into the back of their open Humvee, he said, and the vehicle soon jerked off the road.

Soldiers testified later that Mr. Hamoodi appeared to go for his weapon and needed to be subdued. Mr. Hamoodi said that one soldier punched him several times, and that he was handcuffed, shackled and blindfolded.

At the base, he said, they threw him, still bound, off the Humvee, then led him into the jail and eventually into an interrogation room. They pressed him for the details of an assassination plan, about which he knew nothing, he said. During the interrogation, he said, the translator kicked him in the shin and told him he needed to confess before Colonel West showed up to kill him.

Mr. Hamoodi said he felt relieved to hear the colonel was expected. He considered Colonel West to be "calm, quiet, clever and sociable." When the colonel first entered the interrogation room, Mr. Hamoodi said, he thought, "Here is the man who will treat me fairly."

Then, he said, Colonel West cocked his gun.

Colonel West said that he did not then put a round in the gun's chamber but that he did place the pistol in his lap. He asked Mr. Hamoodi why he wanted to kill him. Mr. Hamoodi said that he protested, "I've worked with you, I like you," but that Colonel West silenced his protest. Colonel West pressed for the names and locations of those involved in the supposed plot, and he got no answers.

Soon, the soldiers began striking and shoving Mr. Hamoodi. They were not instructed to do so by Colonel West but they were not stopped, either, they said. "I didn't know it was wrong to hit a detainee," a 20-year-old soldier from Daytona Beach said at the hearing. Colonel West testified that he would have stopped the beating "had it become too excessive."

Eventually, the colonel and his soldiers moved Mr. Hamoodi outside, and threatened him with death. Colonel West said he fired a warning shot in the air and began counting down from five. He asked his soldiers to put Mr. Hamoodi's head in a sand-filled barrel usually used for clearing weapons. At the end of his count, Colonel West fired a shot into the barrel, angling his gun away from the Iraqi's head, he testified.

According to the interpreter, Mr. Hamoodi finally "admitted there would be attacks, and called out names." Mr. Hamoodi said that he was not sure what he told the Americans, but that it was meaningless information induced by fear and pain.

At least one man named by Mr. Hamoodi was taken into custody, according to testimony, and his home was searched. No plans for attacks on Americans or weapons were found. Colonel West testified that he did not know whether "any corroboration" of a plot was ever found, adding: "At the time I had to base my decision on the intelligence I received. It's possible that I was wrong about Mr. Hamoodi."

When the interrogation was over, a physician's assistant checked Mr. Hamoodi and found "swelling but no bruises," according to a hearing transcript. He was detained another 45 days and released without being charged, he said.

Mr. Hamoodi said he did not really blame the Americans for "arresting and torturing me." Obviously, someone had informed on him, he said, and they had to act on the information they obtained. Still, he trembles now when he sees a Humvee and he no longer trusts or works with the Americans.

After the interrogation, Colonel West woke up his superior officer to recount what had occurred. The superior officer testified that he did not remember Colonel West's offering specifics, beyond saying that he had discharged his weapon during an interrogation and that no one was hurt.

Indeed, it is possible that the abusive interrogation might never have come to light if a sergeant in another battalion had not subsequently written a letter of complaint about the "command climate" under Colonel West's superior officer. In that letter, the sergeant mentioned almost as an aside, according to Mr. Puckett, that Colonel West had interrogated a detainee using a pistol. An investigation was set in motion.

In the fall, a helicopter arrived at the Taji base to ferry Colonel West to Tikrit for the duration of the investigation. As he looked down at the soldiers gathered to see him off, he said, he knew his career was over.

The hearing in November was meant to determine whether Colonel West would be court-martialed. News accounts described a highly emotional scene in which the colonel fought back tears as he testified, saying he would "go to hell with a gasoline can in his hand" to protect his troops. His soldiers filled the hearing room and greeted him with hugs and words of support during breaks.

Soldiers testified that they felt safer when Colonel West was in charge. The interpreter, who works for a private contractor, said that "the American soldiers were protected by the tribes" in the area because of Colonel West's good relationship with the community, and that the situation became more dangerous and chaotic after he left.

The military decided against court-martialing Colonel West. He was fined \$5,000, and he submitted his resignation, which becomes effective this summer, when he will retire with full benefits.

Colonel West said he had spent many months grappling with disorientation, wondering, "What is my purpose now, my reason for being?" Shortly after he arrived back in the United States, he got a lucrative job offer from a private contractor to return to Iraq, he said, but he was not interested. Instead, he decided to start again in the world of education.

He is awaiting placement in a high school in Broward County and, he said, he prays that God will see to it that he gets a spot in one of the low-performing, predominantly black schools, where he can try to make a difference. Ever the striver, he plans to begin studying for a master's in education so he can advance into administration "within five years." he said.

In an e-mail message, Colonel West described a recent motorcycle trip through affluent Palm Beach County, with its smells of "fresh air, green grass, ocean salt air and suntan oils," and then back through a depressed, poor strip where the air reeked of "garbage, smoke and alcohol."

"Sorry for the pontification," he added, "but you must understand. I lived in a sort of 'Matrix' world for 22 years and now I have been unplugged."