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Officials deny bin Laden escaped November capture

By J.S. Newton
Staff writer

A Special Forces soldier says that troops had Osama bin Laden pinpointed in Afghanistan in November, but leaders took too long to decide to go after him and he slipped away.

Military officials have discounted the story.



bin Laden

The soldier, who said he was on the ground at Tora Bora when bin Laden was located, agreed to talk about the incident on condition that his name not be used.

The Observer has been unable to find other soldiers who can corroborate his account, and official military spokesmen say they have no knowledge of it.

Reporters are rarely permitted to accompany special operations troops into battle, so verification of battlefield accounts can be difficult.

But the story is consistent with previous reports from other sources that bin Laden was seen in the Tora Bora cave complex. American and Afghan troops spent weeks attacking and searching the caves late last year in the hunt for bin Laden and al-Qaida terrorists.

“We had ‘the man’ and lost him,” said the Special Forces soldier. “We knew the exact cave he was in and had the coordinates. It was 30 minutes away from our position. But we couldn’t get orders quickly enough.”

Following the operation, military leaders were criticized in the press and in Congress for allowing hundreds of al-Qaida members to escape into Pakistan.

On Wednesday, The Associated Press reported that Gen. Tommy Franks, the commander of U.S. forces in the region, acknowledged that many al-Qaida members had escaped the assault on Tora Bora. Franks was testifying before a Senate Armed Service Committee examining the hunt for the terrorists.

Exact location

According to the soldier who believes bin Laden could have been captured, teams from the 5th Special Forces Group at Fort Campbell, Ky. -- working alongside members of the Central Intelligence Agency -- believe they had the location of the terrorist leader on Nov. 28.

Intelligence reports placed bin Laden in an elaborate cave complex in the Tora Bora mountains of eastern Afghanistan.

The soldier said bin Laden's captured cook had told American military officials bin Laden's exact location.

But a Special Forces team captain on the ground would not give approval to go after bin Laden because there was no specific mission order to do so, the soldier said.

While the Army was deciding what to do, Special Forces soldiers saw two Russian-made helicopters fly into the area where bin Laden was believed to be, load up passengers and fly toward Pakistan.

"I said, 'There he goes,'" the soldier said.



AP file photo

According to a story published Dec. 5 in Newsday, bin Laden had reportedly been spotted in the Tora Bora area in late November.

Eastern alliance soldiers watch as smoke billows from Tora Bora, Afghanistan, in December.

The story quoted an Afghan official, Hazrat Ali, chief of security forces in the area. But the story did not say that bin Laden's location was pinpointed, and no other published reports have confirmed the soldier's story.

Central Command

The U.S. Army Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, which oversees Special Forces units, referred all questions about the soldier's account to U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Fla. The Central Command is running the war in Afghanistan.

Officials at Central Command said that had they confirmed bin Laden's location, they would certainly have acted.

"That's the first I ever heard of it," said Air Force Lt. Col. Martin Compton, a Central Command spokesman. "We have never acknowledged anything like that."

Compton said he doubts the report.

"The bottom line is we have never acknowledged we have had that kind of accuracy to where he is," he said.

U.S. Rep. Robin Hayes, a North Carolina Republican who serves on the House Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism, said House investigators are looking into the time it takes U.S. forces to react to credible intelligence reports.

He said it can be frustrating, and potentially life-threatening, when the military takes too long to make critical decisions.

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And he said he would be disappointed if the military missed bin Laden because key decision-makers failed to act in time.

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“I would say anything is possible,” he said. “I would certainly hope there was more to it to see than the soldier was able to see from his vantage point.”



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Hayes said he would investigate the issue.

“It certainly is not something that needs to be kept under wraps,” he said. “It needs to be investigated. ... It’s very troubling. I think we need to follow up at it.”

But Rep. Mike McIntyre’s spokesman, Dean Mitchell, who is also on the House terrorism panel, said the soldier’s account does not match any reports he has heard.

“We’ve not heard of this situation with Osama,” Mitchell said.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has also said that American troops have never had good enough intelligence about bin Laden’s location to go after him.

In an Associated Press story in April, Rumsfeld said there had been speculation about where bin Laden was, but the pieces of information “haven’t been actionable, they haven’t been provable, they haven’t resulted in our ability to track something down and actually do something about it.”

On Wednesday, Rumsfeld was criticized at the Senate Armed Service Committee hearing by Sen. Max Cleland, a Democrat from Georgia, for not doing a better job of tracking down bin Laden.

Rumsfeld said the U.S. campaign has been successful so far in devastating the al-Qaida terrorist network’s ability to carry out further attacks.

“You can be frustrated if you want, I’m not,” Rumsfeld said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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