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Soldiers say U.S. let Taliban general go

By Rowan Scarborough
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

U.S. troops say that the military mistakenly released one of the most-wanted Taliban leaders in Afghanistan in the summer based on faulty intelligence.

U.S. Special Forces soldiers said that in late July, a Green Beret A-Team, backed by about 20 local Afghan fighters, apprehended Mullah Akhter Mohammed Osmani as he left his compound at daybreak in a town west of Kandahar. Soldiers identified him as Osmani, handcuffed him and brought him by truck to Kandahar.

Osmani, among the top six most-wanted Taliban, was flown to a detention center at Bagram air base, north of Kabul, for interrogation, the Special Forces soldiers said. He was one of the Taliban's top generals, leading thousands of troops as coalition forces ousted the hard-line regime.

But, according to these soldiers, Task Force 180 — the overall command in Afghanistan — released Osmani a few weeks later.

U.S. government spokesmen expressed skepticism about the soldiers' account in written responses to The Washington Times.

The Times sources maintain their account is accurate. Two Army soldiers and a senior administration official said in interviews that a U.S. intelligence report placed Osmani in another location after his apprehension. This led to his release.

Rather than return to his village, Osmani quickly fled to Pakistan, where he remains today, military officials said.

A spokesman for U.S. Central Command, which runs operations in Afghanistan, declined to comment on questions submitted by The Times.

Col. Roger King, chief spokesman for Task Force 180 in Bagram, said, "We don't discuss specifics of persons captured, neither names nor nationalities. I will tell you that Osmani is one of those we seek."

Col. King quoted Lt. Gen. Dan K. McNeill, the task force commander, as saying, "If we had captured Osmani we would still have him."

Asked if a detainee by the name of Akhter Osmani had been listed at the detention center in the summer, Col. King referred to Gen. McNeill's statement.

The Defense Intelligence Agency, which coordinates the distribution of information to commanders, said in a statement, "DIA has no knowledge that Mullah Akhter Mohammed Osmani was ever in U.S. custody in Afghanistan. Given Osmani's high profile and our interest in detaining him, misidentification by experienced personnel is unlikely."

The soldiers and the administration official, however, are convinced that the United States had Osmani, then mistakenly let him go. They asked not to be identified for fear of reprisal

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from superiors.

Osmani is one of a handful of top former Taliban leaders trying to organize a guerrilla force of fellow militants to disrupt the U.S.-backed government of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan.

The list of the six most-wanted Taliban also includes former group supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar; Mullah Omar's top aide, Tayeb Agha; and top military commander, Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Mullah Omar is believed to be in hiding in his native Uruzgan Province, an area riddled with drug traffickers and Taliban supporters north of Kandahar.

Helmand Province, famous for its poppy crop, also was a haven for Taliban fighters in the summer, when informants told Special Forces soldiers that Osmani had returned to his home in the province.

The former general was living in a compound in the village of Sangin, west of Kandahar, under the protection of Helmand power brokers, the Afghan informants said.

"Right after the sweep through the country in the early spring, they ran," said one soldier. "But after time when it became obvious we were not actively looking for these people, they returned home or back to the areas they lived in."

A Special Forces team traveled by night, via trucks, to the town. They kept the house under surveillance until the man believed to be Osmani emerged to walk to the local mosque.

The man carried some type of old Taliban identification card that contained his picture and the name Osmani, and the name of Osmani's father. He also had burn scars on his chest that matched intelligence data, the soldiers said.

His Afghan companion was searched. Large amounts of cash in Pakistan's currency were found in secret, sewed compartments.

The man identified as Osmani refused to give his name, saying only in his native Pashtun, "Praise is God."

"He was on our list of Taliban to kill, capture or disrupt, the HVT [high value target] list," said one soldier. "He was in Osmani's house. His ID said he was Osmani."

The one discrepancy was that he appeared too young. Intelligence reports put Osmani at about age 40. This man was in his early 30s.

Still, soldiers said they believed the intelligence in Afghanistan was sometimes shaky, and that the estimated age could be incorrect. They took the man into custody.

"When I heard that the scar was consistent, I think they had all the reason on earth to err on the side of caution," said one Special Forces soldier. "Let's say it was his kid brother, you don't release a guy like that, either."

Soldiers handcuffed the man, loaded him on the back of a truck and drove back to base camp in Kandahar. Osmani stayed there for a few days before he was flown to Bagram.

"All our Afghan fighters kept their faces covered when they were around him," said a soldier.

A few weeks later, Osmani was back on a flight, this time to freedom in Kandahar. Afghan sources later told soldiers that he had fled to Pakistan.

"When they let him go, this guy ran like a mad man for Pakistan. He hit the ground and was gone," said the soldier. "Then I heard, everybody was like 'whoops.' Maybe we should have kept our hand on him."

Some Special Forces soldiers have expressed frustration with Task Force 180 for turning down their written concept of operations, or "conops," to attack suspected Taliban. The soldiers said in interviews that they gained information on several occasions last summer on the whereabouts of Mullah Omar.

But, they said, commanders turned down the missions, citing extreme risk.