

The investigation into the Cole bombing

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Less than a day after the attack, Special Agent Ken Reuwer of NCIS, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, was waiting at the medical center of Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany. He knew there was an obvious suspect.

"Things like al-Qaeda had never left my scope, but it was certainly re-energized as soon as I heard about an attack on a Navy ship. It is what first came into my mind obviously but you don't jump to conclusions. You can form opinions but you work with facts and that's what we set about to do."

Special Agent Mike Dorsey was the lead NCIS investigator for the Cole investigation.

"We understood we were at war long before 9/11 occurred. It was unlike a homicide investigation where it's an incident fixed in time. You are trying to capture that incident in time, resurrect it, understand it, document it and then work your way backwards."

In Aden, the FBI led the investigation of the Cole. A small group of NCIS special agents – Mike Dorsey, Robert McFadden, and Ken Reuwer, also played a critical role. At the same time that they were uncovering evidence to help unravel the Cole plot, investigators were also gathering intelligence to help in the fight against al-Qaeda. This dual mission was a daunting one and Yemeni authorities were not exactly enthusiastic about helping their U.S. counterparts.

In the early days of the investigation, Special Agent Robert McFadden encountered stiff resistance from Yemeni authorities. One official he spoke with saw the Cole as an open-and-shut case.

"One of the senior ranking officers of the host nation security service had exclaimed in frustration that he didn't understand why the Americans were so obsessed about interviewing persons that might know about this situation because two young lads conducted a martyrdom operation. They are dead. Case is over."

But U.S. investigators pushed forward to build their case. Mike Dorsey got a lead.

"We began getting out into the Port of Aden where some of the information told us there might have been a safe house – a house where bombs were constructed. Agents from the FBI and the New York Joint Terrorism Task Force – who had been a part of East Africa bombings – when they got to the houses said, 'This is exactly what we found in East Africa. It's almost a mirror image.' As we got out to see some of those locations, there was a recognition that this had the degree of sophistication that we would associate with an al-Qaeda attack."

Investigating locations was critical but so was gaining access to key suspects. Even though Yemeni authorities had found and locked up two known al-Qaeda members less than three weeks into the investigation, they weren't giving access to Robert McFadden and his FBI colleague. It was three months before McFadden got to interview the suspects.

Quso was a slim man in his mid '20s with a wispy beard. It was his job to videotape the strike against the ship. If the video had gone viral, it would have been a propaganda bonanza for al-Qaeda. But on the day of the attack, Quso overslept. McFadden did his homework on this young al-Qaeda operative before the interrogation began.

"He had quite a reputation within Aden amongst the young men as being particularly pious and very well versed in his religion."

Over the course of several weeks, U.S. interrogators gained valuable information. Quso gave them places, individuals, descriptions, modus operandi, associations, a timeline of places that he and cohorts are trained in and fought in various jihad fronts. In this case, important individuals within al-Qaeda itself that he had met with.

The 9/11 Commission reports that by late 2000, interrogation of Fahd al-Quso and his co-conspirator Jamal al-Badawi yielded direct evidence that they received operational direction on the Cole's strike from known al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite the investigators' initial success in tying the attack to al-Qaeda, Ken Reuwer is still frustrated.

"I have to say that I am disappointed with the status today of where the whole investigation and the prosecution of the perpetrators against the USS Cole stands. Justice has never really been done."

Deborah Amos speaks with Lawrence Wright, author of *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*.

Deborah Amos (DA): We just heard in that last segment about a Navy commander. He was frustrated that there was no military response to the Cole bombing. Why wasn't there a response, not just a military one but not much of one at all?

Lawrence Wright (LW): It's true that there was little or no response. There were political considerations. We were in the middle of an enormous presidential campaign. Probably more significant was that Bill Clinton was involved in trying to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, and it was a real moment. It seemed like a real possibility. The idea that suddenly you would be bombing or invading a Muslim nation in the midst of that might have been poor timing from his perspective. One thing I would say about the absence of a response to the Cole bombing on the part of the United States is that it caused Bin Laden to up the stakes. He felt that after bombing the embassies, he was surprised with the mega-response at that time. Then he bombed the Cole, and nothing happened. Something more dramatic had to be done and that was 9/11.

DA: At the same time, the investigation actually is proceeding. Navy investigators get to talk to two key figures: Fahd al-Quso, who was the videographer – the man who sleeps through the bombing and is supposed to document it – and Jamal al-Badawi. Why does it stall after seeing these two men?

LW: It should not have stalled at that point. They were giving information and the FBI was asking the CIA for more information based on the intelligence that these men were providing. Quso was producing information that there had been a meeting. He wasn't sure exactly whether it's Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. As it turned out, it was Kuala Lumpur earlier that year. The FBI's investigator, Ali Soufan, queried the CIA, "Do you know anything about this meeting?" and CIA refused to respond.

DA: Stiffed him?

LW: Absolutely. This is a key moment and the most tragic moment perhaps in the history of American intelligence because the CIA did know about that meeting. They did know that two people who were at that meeting flew from Kuala Lumpur to Los Angeles and from there to San Diego. Just think for a moment... They blocked information that would have led the FBI to know that al-Qaeda was already in America in January 2000. Al-Qaeda's attack on America is still a year and nine months away. The CIA knows that this organization is present in America but hides that information. The striking thing to me is that the Cole bombing which could have been a door through which we went, uncovered al-Qaeda, and stopped the 9/11 plot became really a provocation for al-Qaeda to up the stakes and create an even more gruesome and tragic attack.