

The USS Cole: Twelve years later, no justice or understanding

by Kevin Ryan

Twelve years ago, the American warship *USS Cole* was the target of a successful terrorist attack when it made a brief stop in the port of Aden, Yemen. This was one of only four attacks attributed to al Qaeda prior to 9/11, according to a 2004 U.S. government report.[1] Like 9/11, there are numerous unanswered questions about the *Cole* bombing and, as with 9/11, little or no justice has been done. This article examines a few of the unanswered questions in an attempt to make sense of the background story that was later used to produce and justify the official account of 9/11.

The al Qaeda attack that was said to precede the bombing of the *Cole* was the August 1998 bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa. A year later, in 1999, the *Washington Post* described how people were not convinced by the case made by U.S. officials against al Qaeda: “But for all its claims about a worldwide conspiracy to murder Americans, the government’s case is, at present, largely circumstantial. The indictment never explains how bin Laden runs al Qaeda or how he may have masterminded the embassy bombings.”[2]

Although the *Washington Post* and a U.S. government indictment could not, in 1999, convincingly explain how al Qaeda operated, today there is an enormous amount of historical “chatter” available to consider. Some of it is based on investigations into the year 2000 *Cole* bombing and details surrounding the al Qaeda “operations hub” in Yemen. Still, the government’s account of the *Cole* attack remains unconvincing and problematic.

According to the official account, the *Cole*, a nearly new, state-of-the-art destroyer, had just come into the Aden port for refueling when it was attacked in broad daylight by two men in a rubber dinghy filled with explosives. Seventeen sailors were killed and 49 others were wounded.

Much has been said about one of the two alleged “masterminds” of the *Cole* attack, Tawfiq (Khallad) Bin Attash, who has been incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay for nine years while awaiting a U.S. military trial related to the 9/11 attacks. Several points are often overlooked regarding Bin Attash and his devious plan, however. These include that he was a handicapped teenager at the time of his alleged involvement in the African bombings, and that the *Cole* plan he created a year later was, at best, a very simplistic scheme which required an extraordinary amount of luck to have any chance of success.

The evidence against Bin Attash centers on information obtained through his torture, and that of others, and communications intercepted by the National Security Agency. After being captured by U.S. forces in 2003, Bin Attash was said to have confessed to planning the *Cole* attack as well as that of the failed attempt on the *USS The Sullivans* in early January, 2000. Officials had not been aware of

the attempt on the *The Sullivans* prior to November, 2000, through the interrogation of another suspect.

The Sullivans was the target of a similar bombing plan in the port of Aden. It was not sunk, however, because the masterminds did not bother to calculate how much weight the rubber dinghy could hold and therefore they overloaded it with explosives and it sank as it began to move toward the ship. According to terrorism historian Dennis Piskiewicz, one of the bombers then left in disgust but the rest stayed on and, when they went for help, their outboard motor was stolen from the sunken boat. Despite the insulting turn of events, they “took the next ten months to buy back their stolen motor, repair the water damage, and prepare for another attack, this time on the USS *Cole*.”[3] This historical description suggests an incredible lack of sophistication on the part of the terrorists — almost a Three Stooges scenario — and certainly nothing that would lead to the use of the word “mastermind.”

Regardless, it is important to understand that there was never a plan to attack the *Cole* specifically. Due to the very short period of time that the ship was in port for refueling, it would have been impossible for the attackers to have known in advance that it would be there without having gained some kind of official knowledge about the refueling plan. Although U.S. officials have suggested that perhaps Yemeni authorities tipped-off the terrorists to the incoming vessel, it is still difficult to believe that the suicide bombers and their appropriately packed rubber dinghy (with repossessed motor) could have been made ready on such short notice. A conspiracy of information sharing involving the private Yemeni refueling company is also possible but has been rule out by official reports.

Apparently the plan masterminded by the 20-year old Bin Attash was to have a pre-loaded rubber dinghy at the ready so that the next U.S. warship entering the port might provide an opportunity for success. Since January 1999, U.S. ships had come into the port to refuel 27 times, or approximately once per month. Because al Qaeda could not possibly know when that monthly visit might occur (barring the US government conspiracy theory that the Yemeni government was in on it too), the mastermind’s suicidal associates would need to be sitting in the dinghy full of explosives round the clock in order to have any real chance to respond.

In actuality, the plan required that the conspirators depend on a significant amount of luck as well. According to a Congressional Research Service report on the *Cole* attack, before the destroyer arrived at Aden “for its brief refueling stop” the *Cole* was “required to file a force-protection plan for the visit.” According to this plan, at the time of the attack the *Cole* was operating under a heightened state of readiness against a potential terrorist attack. This state of readiness (threat condition Bravo) included steps that were specifically intended to provide protection against attack by small boats.[4]

The captain of the *Cole*, Kirk Lippold, later recalled that his ship was moving quickly through the area and stopped for refueling at 9:30 am in Aden. Lippold described the situation in which the attack occurred by saying, “We’d arranged for three garbage barges to come out. And by around 11 o’clock that morning, two boats had come out and the crew was unloading trash. I was turned back

to my desk and doing routine paper work when at 11:18 in the morning, there was a thunderous explosion.”[5]

Lippold clarified: “The first thing that went through my mind was one of these rafts clearly got alongside and has blown up. It turns out, it wasn’t. The two garbage barges that had been alongside the ship had left at about 11:15 transiting back across the harbor. What we didn’t know is Al-Qaeda had been in that port for a number of months observing us, observing Navy ships and the third barge that came out masqueraded as the garbage barge. We were operating under peace time rules of engagement. It didn’t exhibit what we call hostile intent like aiming guns at us or hostile act like shooting at us. So, people thought naturally, it was the third garbage barge, came down the side of the ship, two guys were in it, stood up and even waved to the crew. It came to the exact same spot in the middle of the ship where the previous barge have been and then initiated the explosion.”[6]

This is a very remarkable story. Lippold claims that he ordered three garbage barges to come out and pull alongside his destroyer so that his crew could put out the trash. Two such garbage barges came out and the trash was unloaded. Then a third came out but it was not a barge at all, it was a rubber dinghy filled with explosives. Of course, anyone who knows what a garbage barge looks like – a huge flat steel boat – knows that it looks nothing like a rubber dinghy. But since the two terrorists in the dinghy were waving as they prepared to commit suicide, and were not shooting at anyone, nobody thought twice about it. And despite the *Cole*’s force protection plan that ensured the crew would take every measure to prevent terrorist attacks, the dinghy was allowed to pull up right next to the ship and blow a huge hole in the port side.

Captain Lippold failed to take about a dozen required safety precautions on the day of the *Cole* attack. Despite these facts, Lippold and his crew received no punishment.[7]

The Yemeni government certainly could not have caused the leadership of a U.S. Navy vessel to be so nonchalant about security, and therefore the U.S. government’s hints that there was a conspiracy between the Yemenis and the bombers carries less weight. Interested 9/11 researchers might also note that just one “Three Stooges” dinghy was able to intercept a U.S. destroyer in less than two hours that day, but the entire U.S. Air Force could not intercept even one of the four hijacked airliners on 9/11 in the same time frame.

In any case, one might think that reliance on gross malfeasance on the part of a U.S. Navy vessel would not make for a good terrorist plan. In fact, that would be a poor plan even for a twenty year old kid, which is what mastermind Bin Attash was in January 2000 when he came up with it. But apparently it worked without a hitch. Perhaps that’s why the 9/11 Commission gave so much credit to Bin Attash. The Commission’s report called him a “senior security official for Bin Ladin,” and a “veteran mujahid,” and mentioned his name 110 times within the report’s narrative and 150 times in the notes. This should be compared to the report’s references to the FAA’s national operations manager (only once) and its hijack coordinator (twice, and neither instance was related to his being the hijack coordinator).

Coincidentally, on 9/11, the *Cole*'s Captain Lippold was at CIA headquarters, receiving an off-the-record briefing on what the agency knew before, during and after the *Cole* attack. Lippold recalled that he told an assistant deputy director, only 20 minutes before the first plane struck the WTC, that "America doesn't understand. I believe it's going to take a seminal event probably in this country where hundreds if not thousands die before Americans realize we're at war with [Osama bin Laden]."[8] Minutes later, that seminal event began.

Several 20-year-old kids were said to be involved in the 9/11 attacks. In fact, the average age of the alleged hijackers on a couple of the planes was only 22 years, and the official accounts depend on these youngsters for a lot of the historical background. For example, twenty year old Salem al-Hazmi was said to have had a "relatively long history with al Qaeda." [9] Twenty-year-olds Ahmed al-Haznawi and Hazma al-Ghamdi were said to have been (teenage) warriors in Chechnya.

One thing about kids is that overall they have much less history which can be challenged through examination of the evidence provided by experiences and relationships. What we know about them comes from brief periods of their independence for which the official investigations provide all the information. This ability to control the story could be why, since 9/11, we have seen the FBI caught in several attempts to entrap teenagers in terrorist plots manufactured by the FBI itself.[10]

Interestingly, a Yemeni government official's investigation into the *Cole* bombing came to an alarming and contradictory conclusion in July, 2001. It suggested that the U.S. government bombed its own ship in order to provide a pretext for military or covert action. The leading Egyptian newspaper reported that a senior Yemeni security official claimed that "there was evidence that the US itself was responsible for the explosion as part of a conspiracy to take control over the port of Aden." [11] The Yemeni's investigation determined that "one explosion happened from within the destroyer, along with another, external, explosion that hit the body of the destroyer, as a result of the booby-trapped dinghy."

Years later, the President of Yemen repeated a similar claim, saying on national television that the U.S. had plans to invade and occupy Aden after the bombing. These back and forth accusations and insinuations continued. There were claims that the U.S. ambassador to Yemen, Barbara Bodine, was sympathetic to the Yemenis and obstructed the investigation led by the FBI. And not long after the Yemen president's claim of a U.S. plan for occupying Aden, CIA officer Robert Baer claimed that he "was given information by a Saudi military contact that a Saudi merchant family had funded the *USS Cole* bombing and that the Yemeni government was covering up information related to that bombing." [12]

The end result was that the investigation into the *Cole* bombing collapsed completely. A few defendants had been convicted in Yemen, but all of them escaped or were freed by the government.[13] Only two of the alleged planners remain in custody of the U.S. government, Bin Attash and his alleged colleague Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, who was labeled "al-Qaeda's operations chief in the Arabian Peninsula." Al-Nashiri is said to have confessed under torture to being the second mastermind of the *Cole* bombing.

What little we know about what happened on October 12, 2000 in the port of Aden is not comforting. We know that 17 sailors were killed by a terrorist plot that, on its face, was simply absurd. Two men in a rubber dinghy waited for a monthly visit by a U.S. warship and then depended on the crew of that warship to mistake their approach, in broad daylight, for that of a garbage barge. The terrorists also depended on the leaders of that U.S. vessel, which was in a heightened readiness against a terrorist attack, to disregard a dozen safety measures required by the force protection plan that the ship had filed for the visit. All of this was dreamed up by the 20-year old Bin Attash and his colleagues who had only recently bought back their stolen outboard motor so that the plan could go forward.

Meanwhile Captain Lippold has gone on to write a book and join the board of directors for the Homeland Security industry company, HALO Defense Systems. The U.S. has been accused by Yemeni officials of facilitating and/or profiting from the attack and has declined to punish the captain for his apparent gross negligence. Instead, the vague and unconvincing story of the *Cole* attack has been used by the 9/11 Commission and the mainstream media as one of the most significant pieces of historical background supporting the official account of what happened on 9/11.

Notes

[1] Congressional Research Service, “Memorandum to House Government Reform Committee on Terrorist Attacks by al Qaeda”, March 31, 2004, <http://www.fas.org/irp/crs/033104.pdf>

[2] Colum Lynch; Vernon Loeb, “Bin Laden’s Network: Terror Conspiracy or Loose Alliance?”, *The Washington Post*, August 1, 1999

[3] Dennis Piskiewicz, *Terrorism’s War With America: A History*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003, p123

[4] Raphael Perl and Ronald O’Rourke, CRS Report for Congress, “Terrorist Attack on USS Cole: Background and Issues for Congress”, Congressional Research Service, Updated January 30, 2001, <http://f11.findlaw.com/news.findlaw.com/cnn/docs/crs/coleterrattck13001.pdf>

[5] Interview with Kirk S. Lippold, Q&A (C-SPAN series), July 8, 2012, <http://www.q-and-a.org/Transcript/?ProgramID=1399>

[6] Interview with Kirk S. Lippold

[7] ABC News, “No Punishment for Cole Captain”, January 8, 2001, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=81741&page=1>

[8] Interview with Kirk S. Lippold

[9] Wikipedia page of Salem al-Hazmi, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salem_al-Hazmi

[10] Glenn Greenwald, “The FBI successfully thwarts its own Terrorist plot”, *Salon*, November 28, 2010, http://www.salon.com/2010/11/28/fbi_8/

[11] The Middle East Media Research Institute, “Al-Ahram Al-Arabi: A High-Ranking Yemenite Intelligence Official Blames the US for the Cole Bombing”, July 17, 2001, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print479.htm>

[12] Jane Novak, “Al-Qaeda Escape in Yemen: Facts, Rumors and Theories”, February 18, 2006, <http://www.globalpolitician.com/21614-yemen-arab>

[13] Craig Whitlock, “Probe of USS Cole Bombing Unravels”, *Washington Post*, May 4, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/03/AR2008050302047.html>