

Interrogation Enhanced

The American officer who cracked the Zarqawi network did so without stooping to the terrorists' level.

By Matthew Alexander

THERE'S A JOKE interrogators tell: "What's the difference between a 'gator and a used car salesman?" Answer: "A 'gator has to abide by the Geneva Conventions."

Interrogators don't hawk Chevys; we sell hope to prisoners and find targets for shooters. My group arrived in Iraq in March 2006, at a time when our country was searching for a better way to conduct sales.

After 9/11, military interrogators focused on two techniques: fear and control. The Army trained their 'gators to confront and dominate prisoners. This led down the disastrous path to the Abu Ghraib scandal. At Guantanamo Bay, the early interrogators not only abused the detainees, they tried to belittle their religious beliefs. These approaches rarely yielded results, and our disgrace was detailed on every news broadcast and front page from New York to Islamabad.

My group was among the first to bring a new approach. Respect, rapport, hope, cunning, and deception are our tools. The old ones—fear and control—are as obsolete as the buggy whip. Unfortunately, not everyone embraces change.

The C-130 sweeps low over mile after mile of nothingness. Sand dunes, flats, red-orange horizon. The landscape is as desolate as it was in biblical times. Two millennia later, little has changed but the methods with which we kill. We cross

the Tigris, and I see one of Saddam's former palaces. We're getting close. Our destination is a base north of Baghdad.

The pilots paint the big transport onto the runway then swing into a parking space. The ramp behind us drops. "Welcome to the war," somebody says behind me.

When I went home in June 2003, I thought the war was over—mission accomplished—but it had just changed form. We've arrived in Iraq near the war's third anniversary. The Army, severely stretched, has reached out to the other services for help. Our group was handpicked by the Air Force to assist our brothers in green. We still don't know our mission, but we've been told it has the highest priority.

One of us is a civilian agent. The rest are military. I'm the only officer. In the weeks to come, we'll try to prove our new techniques work, but if we cross the wrong people, we'll be sent home.

My agents are called one by one into the commander's office for evaluation. Finally, a tall Asian-American man steps into the briefing room. "Matthew?"

I step forward. He regards me and says, "I'm David, the senior interrogator." He leads me to the commander's office. There's one free chair, a plush leather number. The interrogation unit commander, Roger, sits behind a desk. Everyone else is in ergonomic hell.

Roger explains that this is an informal board designed to make sure we'll be a good fit for the interrogation unit.

"David, do you want to go first?"

He has dark rings under both eyes. "What countries border Iraq?"

"Turkey to the north. Iran to the east, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to the south, Jordan and Syria to the west."

"What's the difference between Shia and Sunni?"

"It goes back to the schism in Islam caused by the death of Muhammad. Sunnis believe that the legitimate successor was Muhammad's closest disciple, Abu Bakr. Shia believe the succession should have been passed through his cousin Ali. The Shia lost. When Abu Bakr died, the Shia tried to recapture the leadership of Islam, but Ali's son Hussein was murdered outside Karbala, and the Sunnis have held the balance of power ever since."

Roger takes the stage. "If you saw somebody threatening a detainee, what would you do?"

"I'd make him stop."

"How do you feel about waterboarding or other enhanced interrogation techniques?"

Ah, the heart of the matter. Since Abu Ghraib everyone in the interrogation business has been on edge. Careers are at stake. Jail time is at stake.

"I'm opposed to enhanced techniques. They do more harm than good. Besides, we don't need them."

"What do you mean?"

"A good interrogator can get the information he needs in more subtle ways," I reply.

"Okay," Roger says dismissively. "Wait outside. We need to talk."

Ten minutes later I'm called back in. Roger smiles and shakes my hand. "In three weeks, we're going to need a new senior interrogator. You're it."

I follow David and Roger down to a briefing room. The interrogators and analysts take turns discussing the detainees as their faces appear on a large screen. Toward the end of the meeting, a colonel walks into the room.

Someone says, "That's the task force commander. Veteran of the Battle of Mogadishu, which 'Black Hawk Down' is based on." He's charismatic enough to have played himself in the movie.

"For you new guys, here's the run-down. Last month al-Qaeda blew up the Golden Dome Mosque in Samarra. This was a Shia shrine. To a Catholic, it'd be like blowing up the Sistine Chapel."

He lets that sink in. "The destruction of the Golden Dome Mosque has prompted a surge in sectarian violence. Al-Qaeda's leader here in Iraq, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, has made it his mission to spark a civil war between Sunni and Shia. From now on, you have only one objective: find Zarqawi and kill him before he can do that."

We've just joined the hunt for the most wanted man in Iraq.

The first three days are a whirlwind, and the learning curve is steep. Zarqawi started life as a thug who served time in a Jordanian jail for sexual assault. In prison, he embraced fundamentalism. Once released, he traveled to Afghanistan, where he joined bin Laden in the *jihad* against the Soviet Union.

When the war ended, he returned to Jordan and planned terrorist acts to bring down the government. When the authorities closed in, he fled to Afghanistan and rejoined bin Laden, though his relationship with the master

terrorist seems to have been tenuous. Osama reportedly thought Zarqawi little more than an uneducated stooge.

Before the American invasion, Zarqawi moved to northern Iraq to develop a terrorist network called Tawhid al Jihad. He established ties all over Sunni Iraq and began launching attacks in the summer of 2003.

His group became the masters of suicide bombings. Instead of targeting Americans, Zarqawi's true believers went after Shia civilians. He wanted to exploit the centuries-old division between Shia and Sunni to create civil war. Such a conflict would ensnare the United States in a protracted conflict. His plan worked brilliantly.

"ABU ALI, WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF I GAVE YOU A KNIFE?"

"I WOULD SLIT YOUR THROAT AND WATCH YOU DIE."

HIS GAZE ON ME IS EVEN.

His successes gained him the respect of bin Laden, and he became al-Qaeda's chief for Mesopotamia. If we could find Zarqawi and capture or kill him, our intelligence community believed we could stop the suicide bombings. Stop the suicide bombings, and the Sunni-on-Shia civil war would end.

The interrogation booth is a six-by-six room with plywood walls, plastic chairs, and a table. Today, my fourth day in the country, my partner is Bobby, a corn-fed boy from Nebraska.

I sit beside him in front of a human skeleton. Abu Ali, a Sunni. Bitterness leeches out of him. Our interpreter, Hadir, stands in the far corner. The 'terp looks reluctant to speak.

Bobby glances at Hadir, though we're supposed to maintain eye contact with our detainee. "What did he say?"

Hadir frowns. Then, in a perfect mimic of Abu Ali's tone, says, "You came to my country. You Americans ruined our lives and now you want to help me?"

Bobby nods, "Yes, we can help you. Don't you want to see your family again? Help us help you."

He does not reply. Bobby had warned me beforehand that Abu Ali is a hard case. He hasn't given anything up, despite numerous interrogations.

"Abu Ali, what would you do if I gave you a knife?"

"I would slit your throat and watch you die." His gaze on me is even.

"Just because I'm an American? Even though I mean you no harm?"

Hadir translates, "You created this hell we are living in."

Bobby changes the subject. "Abu Ali, why don't you tell Matthew why you joined al-Qaeda?"

"It goes back to when you Americans first invaded," he begins. "Sunni and Shia lived as neighbors. My mother is Shia. She converted to Sunni when she married my father. There was harmony. But you Americans removed Saddam. We lost our protection. America doesn't care about Sunnis. You let the Shia militias kill my people."

"What do they want?"

"Power. Dominance. I owned a clothing store. One day, I came to the store and found a note. 'Pack your things and leave. You have 48 hours or you will die.' The bottom of the page had the symbol of the Badr Corps."

He lets that sink in. We stare at each other.

"What did you do?"

"I did what I had to do to save my family. I lost my shop. My livelihood. I returned to the mosque of my childhood. It was there I met fellow Sunni willing to fight for our people."

I lean forward in my chair. I try to act earnest and sympathetic. "Abu Ali, why al-Qaeda? Why not one of the Sunni groups like Ansar al Sunna?"

"You Americans had wiped them out. Without al-Qaeda, we had nothing."

"So do you believe in al-Qaeda's goals?"

Abu Ali sizes me up. "No, I am Iraqi. I only want back my home."

Bobby cuts in, "Tell Matthew what you did for al-Qaeda."

The stare-down goes on for 30 seconds. "I recruited," he says at last.

The next morning a guard brings Abu Ali back to our interrogation booth. He glares at us. Bobby gets right to the point, "You have a son."

He growls, "Eleven years old. He is just a boy."

"Abu Ali, think about your son. What will happen to him in this Iraq?" Abu Ali's eyes burn with hatred. We've hit a nerve. I press harder.

"Your neighborhood has been ruined. Your life has been ruined. Is that what you want for your son?"

He sinks within himself.

"Look, Abu Ali, we Americans made plenty of mistakes. We didn't realize that the Shia would form militias. We didn't know they would assassinate Sunni."

His eyes spear me. At least I have his attention.

"But that doesn't mean we can't work together to fix it." Silence.

"Who else will help you? The Syrians? The Saudis? The Jordanians? None of them are going to come to your rescue."

"You caused this," he barks. Good, we've got him emotional.

"You've got nobody else. Who is going to help? Al-Qaeda?"

"Al-Qaeda cannot help us." The words seem to slip out inadvertently.

Bobby jumps in, "Abu Ali, do you want your son to grow up in this cycle of violence?"

Defiance flares in him. "I would be happy to see my son die. He would die a martyr."

"Bulls--t!" Bobby yells, throwing his last ace. Abu Ali's head drops ever so slightly.

"I just want things back the way they were," he says in a gentle voice.

We've gotten him.

The next morning I arrive at the 'gator pit early. The night-shift interrogators are typing their reports. I spot my team member Ann.

"How'd it go last night?" I ask.

"Frustrating. I've got this operations guy I know has to be important, but I can't get through to him. He's resigned to his fate."

"*Inshallah.*"

"Exactly."

"Have you shown him any sympathy?"

LENNY GUFFAWS AGAIN. **"CONTROL 101 IS THE FIRST LESSON IN INTERROGATION. THEY'RE THE ENEMY FOR CHRIST'S SAKE. SYMPATHY FOR A HAJI. RIGHT."**

Ann shakes her head.

Lenny, a night-shift 'gator from New York City, guffaws. "F--king muj. Just show him who's boss." Lenny's an old-schooler, a veteran 'gator who got pulled out of Guantanamo.

"What do you mean?" I ask him.

"These muj won't give you nothin' unless you take charge. Take the muj I've got right now. He'll come around once he gets it through his thick skill that he's going to hang."

I'm annoyed. One thing we were taught back at Fort Huachuca was never to use derogatory terms to describe detainees. Dehumanizing them is the first step down the slippery slope to torture. It also exposes Lenny's ignorance; not all of the detainees here are muja-hadeen.

I turn back to Ann. "Your detainee is Sunni, right? Most of them have been terrorized by Shia militias. If you show some sympathy towards him because of this, maybe he'll open up."

Lenny guffaws again. "Control 101 is the first lesson in interrogation. They're the enemy for Christ's sake. Sympathy for a haji. Right."

There's an awkward silence until Bobby bounds up to me. "You gotta check something out," he says. "The Special Forces captured this last night. Unbelievable."

I follow Bobby to his computer. The video opens with a bound man on his knees in a field. Two Sunni insurgents stand on either side in black masks. Their prisoner, who can't be more than 24, looks like an academic. I want to scream for him to run.

One of the insurgents utters a few words as he unsheathes a long, wicked

knife. He stands behind the prisoner, grabs a mass of his hair, jerks his head upward, and cuts his throat. The dirt turns crimson. But the insurgent isn't done. He brings the knife down again. The dying man gurgles. The insurgent saws, tugs, and the head tears partly away from the ruined neck. The second insurgent walks over and takes the knife. He cuts the head free and holds up his trophy, his eyes triumphant.

The file ends.

I have no words.

In my Air Force career, I've been to almost every continent and seen my share of trauma and tragedy. There are things that never leave a man. I try to rely on logic and intelligence when confronted by overwhelming emotion. It is how I got by as a criminal investigator. But nothing in my career has prepared me for this.

Treat them with sympathy.

He hacked the helpless academic's head off with a knife.

Treat them with respect and be sensitive to their cultural traditions.

I don't want to become Lenny. I don't want to dehumanize my enemy. Yet what I have just watched seems like pure evil. If I don't make a conscious choice about how to respond, my emotions will take over. Torture and cruelty are their tools. I won't go down that path. Contempt won't get our prisoners talking. Yet after what I've seen today, it will take an Oscar-caliber performance to display respect for my enemy.

The Group of Five seems to be our only link to Zarqawi. How many times have we captured so many senior leaders in one place? Officially, Abu Haydar is just the cameraman. Yet everything in me screams that he's the link—the guy we need to get talking.

Lenny has tried to control him, and Abu Haydar has played him in every interrogation I've watched. It is clear that he has no respect for him. In return, Lenny treats him with contempt. Maybe our new methods won't work on Abu Haydar. The trouble is, we haven't been able to try them. I look at the clock. Thirteen hundred. He gets transferred in 10 hours.

He's committed. He's cunning and highly intelligent. He has all the hallmark behaviors of a leader. I head for the cellblock.

"Remove your mask, please."

Abu Haydar pulls the black mask off and regards me quizzically.

"Hello," I say with measured cordiality, "I am Dr. Matthew."

"Hello, Dr. Matthew. I am pleased to meet you." His lips are tightly drawn. He's already sizing me up. The game is on.

I DON'T WANT TO **DEHUMANIZE MY ENEMY**. YET WHAT I HAVE JUST WATCHED SEEMS LIKE **PURE EVIL**.

"No," I say, letting excitement creep into my voice, "the pleasure is all mine. I've wanted to talk to you for a long time."

His eyes widen and crawl across my face, studying everything.

"I am fascinated by your education in Islam."

"What did you say?" Abu Haydar replies, his words tightly wound. I know he heard me. Neither of us blinks.

"I have studied Islam for 14 years." He lingers over each word, ensuring perfect pronunciation.

"I have studied Islam myself, but not for the same length of time as you," I marvel. I stroke his ego and wait to see how he responds.

"You have studied Islam?" he sounds respectful, but there's an undercurrent of disbelief. I pick up my copy of the Koran and hold it out to him. I see his poker face slip.

"Before I came to Iraq, I was stationed in Saudi Arabia. A colonel in the Saudi Air Force gave this to me. I loved to sit and talk with my Saudi friends..."

He cuts me off. "What did you talk about?"

He's trying to gain the initiative. Who is interrogating whom? I go with it. Let him get comfortable. Give up control for something in return.

"Are you a Muslim?"

"I don't think I am strong enough to be a Muslim."

He stops stroking his beard. "What do you mean?"

"Well, to be a true Muslim, you must surrender to Allah's will, correct?"

"That is correct."

"I don't think I could live up to that."

He laughs. "Well, no one is perfect."

I laugh as well. "Yes, we all make mistakes."

His eyes narrow. "Yes, we all make mistakes. But mercy demands forgiveness, right?" This smells like bait. I pretend not to notice and change the subject. "What sort of sports do you like?"

He seizes the initiative. "You know, Dr. Matthew, you are not like the others."

He's running an approach on me. I react with caution.

"They are ignorant."

The schoolhouse taught us never to damage the credibility of another interrogator with a detainee. I decide to avoid his gambit.

"Abu Haydar, I have a question for you."

The poker face returns. "Certainly."

"In 2003, the United States takes out Saddam. But after Saddam falls, we make many serious errors." He looks interested.

"Can't the Sunni see the war that is coming? Look at what we've done since 9/11. We invaded Afghanistan. We've got bases in Central Asia. We invaded Iraq. Turkey is our ally and we have bases there as well. Can't the Sunni see that we've positioned ourselves around Iran?"

"Yes," he says slowly, "we have discussed this."

"That's why I'm here. I'm on a special mission. I have been tasked with finding

Sunni leaders willing to fight with us against the Shia and Iran. We need capable leaders whom we can work with as equal allies. I think you are one. But before I can offer this to you, I have got to be able to trust you."

He remains still as a corpse.

"Here is what I need for me to trust you. I am thinking of a name. You know who I am thinking of. I need to hear you say his name."

I have no name in mind.

We sit in silence. Thirty seconds pass. He scrutinizes me and I don't move. Every muscle, every nerve must sell this long shot.

"Abu ... Ayyub ... al ... Masri."

Al Masri is Zarqawi's number two man.

I want to continue this, but I don't have that luxury. "Abu Haydar, I need to leave now. I absolutely must stop your transfer to Abu Ghraib."

"Yes, yes. Please do that." He rises and extends his hand. I am taken off guard. Iraqis don't shake hands. I take his hand. He clasps my wrist with his other hand. It is a handshake worthy of allies.

I race to the conference room. I am borderline euphoric. If we can properly exploit Abu Haydar, he can give us al Masri. Al Masri can give us Zarqawi.

Our operations officer, Randy, is titanium-tough and has devoted the last three years of his life to chasing Zarqawi.

"Slides," he calls. Abu Haydar's mug shot appears.

"He's on the chopper to Abu Ghraib," Randy says. "Next."

I interrupt, "Uh, the detainee provided valuable information today."

Randy freezes. I hear Lenny intake a sharp breath behind me.

"The detainee admitted that he met with Abu Ayyub al Masri four times in different safe houses around Yusufiyah."

Randy looks stunned. "Why is he talking now?" His eyes say *Why is he talking*

to you?

"Maybe because I showed him respect." I hear Lenny exhale explosively.

The meeting continues in subdued silence. When it ends, Randy looks at me from across the table. "Good f--king job." He doesn't wait for a reply; he just gets up and walks out the door.

Lenny turns his fury on me. "You just completely undermined a month's worth of work! You just blew every piece of control I had over him. F--K THIS!" he roars as he storms off.

I shrug. It doesn't matter. The path to Zarqawi leads through Abu Haydar.

We switch to the live feed. The blue car weaves through Baghdad traffic. Our Special Forces teams are on a hair trigger. The moment they get the location, the helicopters will be off. The driver continues outside the city limits, down a highway for almost 40 minutes. Finally, he turns onto a minor road and pulls up to a farmhouse.

The helicopters buzz our hangar as they fly overhead toward the most important target of the Iraq War. Their beating blades grow faint, then quiet.

Ten minutes pass. No sign of the helicopters. The 'gator pit's mood changes from expectant to anxious.

Suddenly, the screen grows dark. There's a collective gasp. A towering column of smoke and debris erupts.

My God.

Before the smoke can clear, another explosion tears through the remains. The feed ends. Finally, an officer walks in. "Ladies and gentlemen, we got him. Abu Musab al Zarqawi is dead."

The ocean looks sweet today, with perfect rollers that break 50 yards from shore. The sun-burnished beach stretches for miles. I am home, on my surfboard.

I've lived a nomadic, sometimes fierce existence in the service of my country. I

have rarely had a place to call my own, so I return to these shores after every deployment to find solace.

Everyone who returns from Iraq must carry personal demons. Mine have haunted me since the day Zarqawi died in our air strike.

Abu Haydar had pleaded to keep his friend Abu 'Abd al Rahman, Zarqawi's spiritual adviser, safe, but he died in the blast. When he heard, Abu Haydar's reaction was total emotional collapse.

Not long after that, Lenny was called into the commanding general's office and was given a Bronze Star.

The next day, as I walked through the pit, one of the other 'gators called me over. "Does this girl look like al Masri?" she asked. She held a photo of a dead child. Her crushed head lay amid the rubble of the house. I looked away. Two children had died in the bombing. I own a part of their deaths and will carry that guilt for the rest of my life.

The sun is low on the horizon, the water glittering gold. Killing Zarqawi dealt a blow to al-Qaeda in Iraq, but it didn't end the suicide bombings. The hydra lives. Al Masri took over and nothing changed in our compound but the target.

I find a sweet spot in the swells and start paddling. In a heartbeat, I'm on my feet, the board aligned below. It's a glorious moment full of translucent sunshine and the perfume of salt water.

I am free again. One day I will make sense of it all and feel whole. ■

Matthew Alexander spent 14 years in the U.S. Air Force and now serves in the U.S. Air Force Reserves. He has conducted more than 300 interrogations in Iraq and supervised more than 1,000. This essay is abridged from How to Break a Terrorist by Matthew Alexander with John R. Bruning. Copyright © 2008 by Matthew Alexander. Used by permission of Free Press, a Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Health of the State

If I were a decent American conservative, rather than a psoriatic Scotch-Irish Catholic depressive, I would probably not take great pleasure in reading what British

writers had to say about American habits and customs. All the same, I am about to gatecrash the Great Obama Healthcare Debate, not least because I have recently survived surgery at a National Health Service hospital and may have some insights to share.

First, a bit of background. On the evening of Dec. 2, 1992, I was in the ballroom of the Capital Hilton in Washington, D.C. at the 25th anniversary dinner of the *American Spectator*, when all of a sudden my heart started to race and I began to pour with sweat.

Somehow I made it to the lobby, where I collapsed. A pretty girl from reception cradled my head in her lap and loosened my tie. Next thing I knew, two paramedics were strapping me to a stretcher and jogging me to an ambulance.

As we sped through the gleaming Washington night, one of the men, a Hispanic with a thick accent, asked me several times for my social security number. "Hey, Jose," said his companion after a while, "leave the guy alone. Can't you see he's an alien?"

They took me to George Washington Hospital. It was ER heaven. I was tested for every disease known to man and discharged at about 3 o'clock in the morning with a clean bill of health. (On the diagnosis sheet, they wrote that I had "fainted.")

At the hospital checkout, I asked the big woman in charge whether they sold cigarettes. "No, sir, we do not," she said. I sensed she was not going to be easy to charm. "That will be \$1,082.49, sir," she

said. I smiled. "Oh, *that*. I'll let you have my insurance details later."

"No, sir. We need a credit card now,"

"Look," I said, "a couple of years ago my boy was treated for a concussion in Albuquerque, at a rather better appointed hospital than this, and there was absolutely no question of my handing over money for the treatment. They took my insurance details and settled the bill with the insurance company."

"Sure, sir," she said. "That was Albuquerque. This is Washington. Here you pay." I knew when I was beaten, and handed over my plastic.

The treatment I received was worth every penny, and fortunately I had a million quid's worth of cover back at the Howard Johnson. The American healthcare system works, and works well, but not for everyone. That's why some of us aliens—especially those like me who have family in America—rather like the look of some of Barack Obama's proposals.

"Socialized medicine" might bring life expectancy in the U.S. up to Western European levels. But it might also turn Americans into vassals of a welfare state. No one knows. In Britain we have managed to live with socialized medicine since the war, and it is not doing as much harm as some right-wing American ideologues may suppose, or as much good as some American liberals like to hope.

Take my experience. Last month I had surgery, a hemorrhoidectomy, on the NHS. So far as I know, the "procedure" itself went well, but the rest of the day

didn't. Following the operation, I spent about seven hours in a recovery ward waiting to be seen by a doctor. None came.

Eventually I managed to speak to a junior doctor by telephone. I asked him the sorts of questions you might expect someone in my uncomfortable, delicate, unseemly, and humiliating position to ask. I am pretty sure the fellow did not know much more about this field of medicine than I do and that he was winging it.

I left the hospital with a plastic bag containing painkillers, a sickly laxative, some antibiotics, and the instruction to see my GP if there was an emergency.

That was it. I was on my own. From diagnosis to operation, my treatment had taken almost five months. I can't imagine that it would have taken much more than a fortnight if I'd used private medicine.

So: not a brilliant experience.

Whatever it's shortcomings, however, millions of Britons are grateful to the NHS, and with good reason. It kills people, of course, but what health system does not? And it acts as the enabling arms of the secular state, handing out condoms to any teenager smart enough to walk as far as the local medical center. But it looks after most of us from cradle to grave and does so pretty well.

Karl Rove will think the NHS socialist, but then he thought Saddam Hussein was a Nazi. In truth, the NHS is no more socialist than, for example, the New York Sanitation Department or the 82nd Airborne. All three are public services.

Here's the bottom line, though: if you want the best healthcare, just as if you want the best education, you have to pay for it. ■