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ABLE DANGER

THE event that would change my military career started innocuously enough with an announcement by General Bagby at the morning meeting. Members of the 9/11 Commission investigating the September 11 attacks were at Bagram, he said, and if anyone had any information for them, we could meet with them.

Two words immediately leaped to my mind: Able Danger.

I hadn't thought much about it since coming to Afghanistan. To tell you the truth, I hadn't thought about it much for a while. I'd forced myself to stop thinking about it. The frustration was too great.

I approached Colonel Olivero after the meeting. "Sir, I have some information that the 9/11 Commission might be interested in. It's about an operation I was working on called Able Danger. I've mentioned aspects of it to you because we used some technical operations there that I'm proposing for Dark Heart. What do you think?"

"Write up a talking points memo, send it to me and I'll send it along to General Bagby," Olivero said. "I'll see what he says to do."

I went back to my office and, in front of the computer, the memo-

ries of that operation came flooding back. Christ. We *had* those guys, and we blew it. We all freakin' blew it.

I started typing, bulleting points to talk from if I was asked to brief, to show the 9/11 Commission what we knew more than a year before the attacks: the basic details of NFN 662 (the clandestine penetration we had of al Qaeda); the concept of operations and notable details; of Able Danger, and the notable and numerous problems. The commission had to know the whole story—or as much as I could give them in one session.

In 2000, while targeting al Qaeda, our Able Danger task force had discovered two of the three cells that later conducted the 9/11 attacks. Including Mohamed Atta, the lead hijacker.

I figured someone had already clued in the 9/11 Commission since I was not the only one who knew. By my count, ten folks in all of DoD had that information. We—actually, the army—had found evidence of al Qaeda cells operating in the U.S. in 1999 through its data mining program. Within DoD, there was knowledge of al Qaeda operating for the better part of two years before September 11, 2001. We had known, for example, about the threat that al Qaeda posed to U.S. interests based on the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. I assumed the commissioners were aware of some of that, but I wanted to walk them through the entire operation just in case. It was important for them to learn the whole story—or as much as I could give them in one session.

Able Danger. Where would I start?

Suddenly, I was out of this combat zone in a godforsaken country halfway around the world, and it was 1999 in Tampa, Florida, again.

At the time, I was commanding Task Force Stratus Ivy, a small, special-mission project, for DIA. Created in 1995, it conducted direct support to clandestine and black DoD operations and had several components, only small pieces of which I can reveal. The online component involved penetrating al Qaeda command and control nodes in Kabul to try to pull off information on individuals being trained in the terrorism camps. In fact, we were the first DoD online undercover

operation in the late 1990s; we took cutting-edge, “out-of-the-box” technological concepts and developed them into real intelligence operations. Much of it was so black that we couldn’t talk about the existence of the operations on any computer network, even at the top-secret level, so I had to keep a lot of records in hard copy only and work on stand-alone computers. I often briefed higher-ups in person rather than sending an online memo.

I got involved in Able Danger in September 1999, when I was at SOCOM headquarters in Tampa for my annual reserve training. Because of my work on Stratus Ivy, I was brought in to brief Gen. Peter Schoomaker, then SOCOM commander.

Schoomaker, a stout officer with graying short hair, decisive eyes, and a low, deliberate voice, stopped me in the middle of my Power-Point briefing. He asked me a key question about one of the black operations that involved the penetration of a major transnational state. I gave him a key phrase that was code for the exact nature of the capability. Schoomaker got it. “I need you for a special project,” he said.

He turned to one of the colonels in the room. “I want you to read Major Shaffer into Able Danger ASAP.” He left no room for negotiation. It was a done deal.

The next day, navy Capt. Scott Philpot, who managed the project, took me to the Special Technical Operations office, presented me with a three-inch-thick briefing book and said with a big smile, “Here ya go. You’re going to like this.”

I remember opening the briefing book, starting to read and then stopping.

Oh, my God. This is the A ticket. The ultimate mission.

We were taking the gloves off and going after al Qaeda.

At that point, in 1999, it was clear that al Qaeda was a formidable and deadly opponent. In 1993, a car bomb was detonated below the North Tower of the World Trade Center. The 1,500-pound device was supposed to bring down the towers, but it didn’t. Still, it killed six people and injured more than 1,000. According to the narratives of the

event that I respect, this was al Qaeda’s first decisive, though not entirely successful, strike on U.S. soil.

Then there were the 1998 attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam orchestrated by al Qaeda. Truck bombs killed hundreds of people and injured thousands.

Schoomaker’s concept was to bring together the best and the brightest military operators, technicians, planners, and intelligence officers from the army, the DIA, and SOCOM. They would combine cutting-edge technology with traditional human intelligence operations and link both directly into military planning.

It was like bringing the best minds from Apple, Hewlett-Packard, and Microsoft together to focus on a single challenge. The mission here was to discover the global “body” of al Qaeda and, with this information, prepare offensive operations options. Those options could include everything from raids to highly complex psychological operations to manipulate, degrade, and destroy al Qaeda.

In other words, gather the intelligence to kill the largest and most dangerous terrorist operation in the world.

Gen. Hugh Shelton, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had directed that SOCOM have the lead command on Able Danger. This was the first time that SOCOM was the lead command. Usually the regional commands—CENTCOM, EUCOM, SOUTHCOM, or PACOM—would be the lead command with SOCOM supporting their operations, but in this case, the rationale was that al Qaeda was a global transnational threat that didn’t have one particular regional focus. It was a huge departure from tradition, however. SOCOM would be telling the regional commands what it needed, not the other way around.

With the approval of the DIA director of operations, Maj. Gen. Bob Harding, I put several folks to work on a herculean effort to try to assist SOCOM in several key areas of its mission.

The first was to map something that had never been mapped before, using a clean-sheet approach in which no existing methodology existed.

My staff coordinated—almost as a concierge for SOCOM—the operational requirements and documents. Our task included getting copies of the large, classified “corporate” databases of DIA and NSA—terabytes of data. The patterns found in open-source data would confirm, or be refuted, by comparing them to information and patterns contained in classified databases.

We would follow the data wherever it took us and build a global map of al Qaeda. Since we were not terrorism experts, we had no preconceived notions or bad habits. We were “pure” in our drive.

Still, it wasn’t just about the data.

We would find ways to support the military operationally when it started to act against al Qaeda. Part of my job was to pull from the data fresh leads to launch new clandestine operations to enhance our knowledge of organizations and personnel within them. Also to combine data with on-going espionage operations that focused on penetrating al Qaeda.

One of our key assets was a retired Afghan general whom we coded in as NFN (National File Number) 662. (We never used real names in our intelligence system, just numbers.) NFN 662 was a key, vetted asset, with solid access to the Taliban and al Qaeda, whom we’d had on the books for years, and he was our ticket into the heart of al Qaeda. Using the knowledge we would amass through Able Danger, he and his network of assets would place surveillance devices close to the key leaders, much as we now planned to do in Dark Heart. Like Dark Heart, as well, the devices would have offensive capabilities that would allow us to manipulate the enemy’s ability to communicate—also known as “meaconing.”

For the first four months of the project, our SOCOM Able Danger team floundered because it lacked operational methodology and usable intel. The “clean sheet” approach was more like a sterile one.

I had used the U.S. Army’s Land Information Warfare Activity (LIWA) unit to support two other black operations that Stratus Ivy was running: LIWA had provided key data that had helped us plan operations, and I was impressed with its results. So I recommended to

SOCOM that it look at LIWA and its massive database and data-crunching ability. One of the lead organizations on Able Danger was LIWA, which had begun to adapt to the information age and was considered the army’s lead data-mining center. Its idea was to use high-powered software to bore into just about everything: any data that was available—and I mean anything. Open-source Internet data, e-mails believed to be terrorist-related, nonsecret government data, commercial records, information on foreign companies, logs of visitors to mosques obtained from an outside researcher, and much, much more.

Even before moving in to assist Able Danger, LIWA had begun looking at global terrorist infrastructures. Over six months in 1999, it had acquired a vast four-terabyte database and had assembled all these scattered pieces of information about al Qaeda into a comprehensive global picture.

Its researchers did huge sweeps of the Internet and used highly advanced algorithms to compare and amalgamate data. It was a powerful way to link individuals and organizations and make sense of disparate streams of data. It was like Google on steroids.

Within two months, LIWA had produced some impressive results in establishing a global map of al Qaeda using only open-source data. Its model was based on targeting methodology developed by J. D. Smith, an analyst for Orion Scientific Systems (a LIWA contractor), who deconstructed every individual involved in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing into basis data points—the year they were born, their associates, tribal affiliation, mosque memberships and so on—and built an algorithm. It was then used to examine immense amounts of publicly available data and identify other potential terrorists by comparing them to the original ’93 World Trade Center terrorists. As we identified individuals who matched those characteristics, we looked at their associations with other like individuals and started to create a map of a worldwide organization and its direct links with al Qaeda leadership.

In early January, I brought charts produced by LIWA from Fort Belvoir to Able Danger’s operations in Tampa. I remember opening

them up and laying them down on the table in the conference room located next to Schoomaker's command suite.

"This is what they got for us," I told Scott Philpot, the operations officer of Able Danger. "They say they can do more of this."

We both looked at the charts, blown away.

They were two-dimensional representations of the large open-source database containing between three and four terabytes of information on known and suspected al Qaeda operatives, enablers, and affiliates. The charts had hundreds of photos (from passports, visas, and other sources) and names (sometimes multiple for one individual). Some photos were grouped on the chart by terrorist affiliation, others by suspected geographic location.

One group was the "Brooklyn cell," as we came to call it: associates of Omar Abdul Rahman, the "blind Sheik," who was serving a life sentence for the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.

An al Qaeda cell in the United States.

Scott stared at the chart, transfixed. "This is it," he said. "This is exactly what we need."

We both leaned over it, examining photos of some of the most dangerous people in the world as they stared up at us.

Scott pointed to one in the Brooklyn cell. Thin-lipped, close-cropped hair, a sculpted face. Eyelids pulled partly down over a set of dead eyes. The photo was grainy, but it still captured a sinister feeling.

"That's one scary-looking dude," Scott said.

I remember several names under the photo. One of them was "Atta."

The significance wouldn't become clear to me until much later. At that point, it was just a menacing face set within the Brooklyn cell.

I was just satisfied that Scott was impressed with LIWA's work. The intelligence support team established to work with Able Danger was sent to Fort Belvoir to work directly with LIWA to do more robust mapping and to look at creating options down the road—kill, capture, or monitor. I launched an effort to recruit more assets like NFN 662 to enhance our collection efforts. In the meantime, we prepared to use 662 to penetrate al Qaeda's infrastructure in Kabul. We

were aiming for the electronic records used to track individuals being trained in terrorist tactics.

In my Bagram office, I sat back in my chair, staring at the bulleted points I had made on my computer screen, the memories of that time coming back in waves. The bureaucratic resistance we had faced was positively epic—even for the military.

Senior DIA officers—men and women who never left the air-conditioned environs of the DIA Analysis Center in Clarendon—wanted Able Danger to become exclusively an analytical operation, and there were several attempts to take Able Danger away from us and give it to the director of Intelligence and its Office of Transnational Counterterrorism. They would focus only on the analysis of the data and would rarely produce actionable information.

Other problems persisted. Several agencies treat their intelligence information as if it were proprietary in nature. This was typical of DoD. Intelligence agencies do not like to share their data with the operations side of the organization despite that fact that it is all U.S. government. Senior bureaucrats like to believe the data is exclusive to their command—owned outright. Sharing it might enable some sister organization to be successful. Imagine that. An intelligence service being successful in its mission because it had data from another agency. Cooperation and sharing—even if it resulted in successful identification of threats before they do harm to the United States? Nonsense. That wouldn't be cricket.

In early 2000, after an Able Danger briefing to DIA deputy director Jerry Clark, he told the DIA officers who were at the briefing to drag their feet and slow down the process of providing people and data to our effort. He didn't see the need to "share" DIA's best resources. NSA also refused to provide SOCOM access to its database. My deputy worked her magic and was finally able to convince NSA to give us a copy, which we then sent onto SOCOM.

It got worse. After refusing to provide us with all of DIA's information, DIA finally gave us the data—raw data, everything it had collected—20 terabytes of data on a bowling-ball-sized hard drive

known as the Military Intelligence Database (MIDB). However, it came in an unusable format. It appeared that DIA techs had purposely tried to “scramble” it to make it unusable. Fortunately, an experienced programmer on the Able Danger team was able to create an algorithm that corrected the problem.

Behind some of the resistance, in my view, was sheer denial within DoD that al Qaeda was even a threat to the United States. A senior DoD black-operations program manager once told me that I was wasting my time, that al Qaeda wasn't really a danger because the United States was such a lucrative fund-raising center for it through Muslim charities. Its leaders would never be so stupid as to attack us and risk cutting off that funding.

Right.

Later in 2000, a huge roadblock was thrown up—by our own government. Scott called me.

“You will not believe what is going on here.”

“What?” I had assumed that things were going well.

“The SOCOM lawyers are telling us there is a whole group of folks we can't look at because they are here legally in the United States or they are affiliated with folks who are here legally. They are ‘U.S. persons,’ they say.”

“That's loony,” I said. “Clearly, they're on our radar because they're linked with terrorist organizations. That makes them a valid target.”

“I agree with you,” said Scott, “but the lawyers won't budge on it.”

I broke out President Reagan's Executive Order 12333. It restricted the use and retention of information on U.S. persons for intelligence-collection purposes, but it clearly had an exception for information on individuals suspected of criminal activity, affiliated with, or suspected of being a part of a terrorist organization.

I tried talking to the DIA lawyers, but they didn't want to get involved. This was a SOCOM project and they wouldn't touch the controversy.

On my next trip to Tampa, I saw the chart I had brought them; there were yellow Post-it notes over most of the photographs on the

Brooklyn cell. The SOCOM lawyers had determined they were off-limits to the Able Danger effort. Not to be looked at or evaluated as potential targets.

Shortly after that, the Army got cold feet because of the “U.S. persons” issue, determined that it wasn't in compliance with DoD intelligence oversight policies, and shut down all army support, pulling LIWA out of the project.

Not to be deterred, Schoomaker directed the establishment of a replica of the LIWA technology and the project was revived and expanded.

In the meantime, SOCOM still wasn't allowing any action to be taken on the suspected terrorists with the Post-it Notes on their photographs. I decided that if we couldn't use the data on those individuals, then maybe the FBI could since these guys were operating in the United States. I set up a meeting between SOCOM and the Washington field office of the FBI, where I had some contacts, but, at the last minute, SOCOM canceled it. I tried again—and again. Each time, I would get a call from my baffled FBI friends wanting to know where the hell SOCOM was.

I called Scott. “What's going on?” I asked. “Why aren't you guys showing up for these meetings?”

It turned out, he told me, that SOCOM had been advised by their lawyers not to go. He told me that SOCOM lawyers had forced them not to show up for the FBI meetings because they feared controversy if Able Danger were portrayed as a military operation that had violated the privacy of civilians who were legally in the United States on green cards or valid entry visas.

Never mind that they were Freakin' terrorists.

The first week of October 2000, while sorting through data and looking for al Qaeda centers of gravity, a surprising location showed up on the radar: Yemen.

During an update to General Schoomaker, just prior to his retirement, one of the analysts assigned to the project told the general that al Qaeda's activities were the second highest in Yemen. This was

significant. Schoomaker noted it and suggested that the intel be forwarded to Central Command to make them knowledgeable of the threat.

The threat information on Yemen was passed to the CENTCOM representative assigned to Able Danger, but the information was never passed on, and Lt. Commander Kirk Lippold sailed his ship into the Port of Aden with no knowledge of what had been discovered about al Qaeda half a world away in a SCIF in Garland, Texas. On 12 October 2000, he and his crew fought valiantly to save their ship after al-Qaeda militants in Yemen bombed his destroyer, the USS *Cole*, in a suicide attack, that killed seventeen U.S. servicemen.

After General Schoomaker retired in October 2000, his successor, air force General Charles Holland, didn't seem to understand the Able Danger concept. From Schoomaker's retirement on, Able Danger struggled to survive. Holland ordered Able Danger to terminate its activities sometime in late January 2001, and directed that it become a SOCOM J2/intelligence analysis project. It was rolled into the Special Operations Joint Intelligence Center and was consumed in the dark waters of the river of bureaucracy.

Ironically, it was clear that higher-ups wanted projects like this. When I was with Vice Adm. Tom Wilson, then director of DIA, briefing General Hugh Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, in early 2001 on a parallel clandestine operation, I explained to him that the Internet tools, techniques, and procedures we were using derived from Able Danger, Shelton nodded and said he remembered Able Danger and approved our new project immediately.

"The people of this country think we are doing things like this," he told us. "We *should* be doing things like this."

Shortly after the meeting with General Shelton, my work with Able Danger ended. Maj. Gen. Rod Isler came in the winter of 2000 to replace Maj. Gen. Bob Harding who, as deputy director for operations overseeing Defense human intelligence, was one of Able Danger's few supporters at the DIA.

Isler, who didn't want anything to go wrong on his watch, though,

was no fan of Able Danger or other projects that I was working on. Every operation Stratus Ivy was running was high risk/high gain—and all too high risk for him. Isler ordered me to "cease all support" to Able Danger.

The old arguments about DIA being more for analysis than operations came up again.

"It's not your job to provide direct support to SOCOM or chase terrorists," Isler told me. By this point, we were practically shouting at each other. "You shouldn't be involved in operations." I was as close to hitting an officer as I had ever been.

"Sir, if we don't do this, who will?" I argued. "The objective of Able Danger is to penetrate al Qaeda leaders to the point where we know what they're doing so well we can prevent attacks. That was the ultimate objective."

"Well, it's not your job," he said.

I was stunned. "Sir, if it's not our job, whose job is it?"

"I don't know," he repeated, "but it's not yours."

I stormed out of his fourteenth floor office in disgust. It was the beginning of the end of Stratus Ivy, and I knew it. Shortly after that, one of his deputies started making preparations to move me to Latin America, where I had no background or interest—anyway, salsa makes me break out in hives.

Then the September 11 attacks happened. It was devastating. To know we were right, and the critics were wrong. . . .

Shortly after that, Eileen Preisser, who had run a good portion of the Information Dominance Center at LIWA, called me to have coffee and told me she had something to show me. Eileen was the brilliant scientist who put together the core technologies at LIWA and had managed the effort that had identified Atta. Over coffee at a bagel shop in Springfield, she showed me one of the charts produced by LIWA back in January 2000 that Scott and I had looked at. She pointed out the Brooklyn cell.

"Look," she said.

I was confused at first. What was I supposed to be looking for?

“Look,” she repeated, gesturing to the photographs in the cell. I was getting annoyed. “What’s your point?” I said. She was even more emphatic. “*Look at the chart,*” she said. OK. OK. I thought. *I’ll look at the chart again.*

It took a while, but I found him. Mohamed Atta. The same sculpted face and strange eyes that has been plastered across every television in America. It was the man I had seen more than a year before when Scott and I had stared down at him in the SOCOM conference room.

Mohamed Atta. Mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. Hijacker in control of American Airlines Flight 11 that was the first plane to strike the World Trade Center.

I had a sinking feeling at the pit of my stomach. We had been on the right track. Hell, we were even on the right *train*. Despite that, because of the bureaucracy, we had been stopped. Otherwise, we might have played a role in stopping the 9/11 attacks.

I asked Eileen what she planned to do with the information.

“I don’t know,” she said grimly, “but I plan to do something.”

I knew she would. She was a woman of action.

On a warm September day, about two weeks after 9/11, I was on my normal afternoon run from the Pentagon to the Lincoln Memorial, when I got a call on my cell from Eileen.

“You’ll never guess where I am,” she told me. She was sitting in the outer office of Scooter Libby, then assistant to Vice President Cheney, with Rep. Curt Weldon, Rep. Chris Shays, and Rep. Dan Burton. They were going in to brief Steven Hadley, assistant national security adviser to the White House.

I was surprised, but relieved. The Atta information, and our work on Able Danger, was being provided to the right government leadership. I really expected that the Able Danger team might even be reconstituted.

I moved on then. I was confident that the information was in the right hands.

To this day, I don’t know who finally pulled the plug on Able

Danger—or why—but I do know that a lot of people were more concerned about their careers and getting that next promotion than they were about protecting their country. The army and SOCOM were ahead of their time in doing something about global terror. It was not a “failure of imagination” that resulted in the 9/11 attack. It was pure bureaucratic bumbling and intellectual corruption.

In the end, being right and ahead of our time had gone nowhere. The people who had failed their country had been promoted and had moved up the military hierarchy rather than being fired and moved out.

I stared at my computer. It was time to tell the 9/11 Commission what I knew. It was the right thing to do. I had gotten an e-mail that I was on the agenda for the next morning.

Members of the commission and their staff had gathered in the large command dining hall behind the two-story stucco command building in the CJTF 180 building and had set themselves up around folding tables. There were six people when I came in, including General Bagby, all clustered at one end of the table. Some of them didn’t look too interested. Clearly, they were wondering why they’d ended up in a war zone.

Until this point, I hadn’t paid much attention to the commission, formally known as the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. It had set up shop the previous year, in November 2002. Its mandate: “To prepare a full and complete account of the circumstances surrounding the September 11, 2001, attacks,” and to provide recommendations to safeguard against future attacks. I had figured that after Eileen had passed the information on Able Danger to the National Security Council, everything was taken care of. I was wrong. I didn’t know that at the time.

I was part of the first group of witnesses who would talk about pre-9/11 intel and intelligence failures. Commission executive director Philip Zelikow—a rather gaunt figure with a long face, glasses, and a subdued demeanor—greeted us and settled into his seat. I felt kind of

awkward in my golf shirt and baggy pants. This wasn't something I looked forward to, but I just wanted to make sure they knew about Able Danger. It was important.

My turn took about an hour. I followed the bulleted points I'd made on my memo to myself. I outlined everything from NFN 662 to General Schoomaker's ordering me into Able Danger to the data mining to the actionable options to be taken against al Qaeda, which we'd outlined in January 2001. That got people's attention.

All listened intently as I walked through my narrative, hitting bullet after bullet, but the kicker came when I mentioned that Able Danger was successful in "discovering two of the three cells that were successful in conducting the 9/11 attacks—to include Atta." There was a shuffling of people in their chairs, and the commission staff appeared to be all of a sudden uncomfortable.

I listed the bureaucratic roadblocks that had been thrown up in front of Able Danger, how LIWA had been pulled from the project, and how I'd tried to alert the FBI to this finding before the 9/11 attacks and how the SOCOM lawyers had shut me down. In the end, I explained, despite multiple and strenuous attempts to revive it, Able Danger was finally shut down, and its work had been sucked into the gullet of the military bureaucracy.

There was a stunned silence when I was finished. General Bagby finally spoke. "Very compelling report, Major Stryker," he said.

"Thank you, sir," I replied.

The commission then moved on to the next witness, and I stayed to listen. After the commission stopped for a break, I was getting ready to leave when Zelikow came up to me.

"What you said today is very important," he told me, handing over his business card. "We need to continue this dialogue when you return to the United States. Please contact me when you return so we can continue this discussion."

My next thought was instantaneous. This was going to be trouble. DIA did not like us talking to anyone outside the organization, but this was damned important.

"I'd love to do that, but I'm not back stateside until late December or January," I told him.

"That's fine," he said.

I told him I was undercover and that I would contact him under the name Tony Shaffer. He said he would remember.

I left the room to go back to work, shoving the whole episode into the back of my mind. I had to go back to the war.