

TRIPLE CROSS: Nat Geo Channel's Whitewash of the Ali Mohamed Story **By Peter Lance**

In the fall of 2005 I was approached by Jonathan Towers, producer of *Inside 9/11*, a four-hour documentary on the road to 9/11 in which I was one of 60 journalists and government officials interviewed. I told Towers that I was working on a new investigative book exposing FBI negligence in its nine year failure to stop **Ali A. Mohamed**, al Qaeda's chief spy who infiltrated the Bureau, the CIA and the Green Berets at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Towers immediately optioned my research and flew me to Washington where I presented **TRIPLE CROSS**, my new book to John Ford, programming president of the Nat Geo Channel. He bought the project in the room, declaring, "I don't know how we *can't* do a documentary."

Over Christmas I wrote a 12 page ten-act treatment outlining the *two* key parts of the Ali Mohammed story: First, how he'd come to the U.S. in 1985, seduced a California woman into marriage, enlisted in the U.S. Army and got himself assigned to the JFK Special Warfare School and Bragg. From there, as he stole top secret documents for his chief sponsor, al Qaeda's No. 2 **Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri**, Mohamed commuted to New York City on weekends where he trained key members of the first WTC bombing cell and the notorious "Day of Terror" cell responsible for a plot to blow up the U.N. and the bridges and tunnels into Manhattan.

In 1991 Mohamed moved bin Laden and 100's of al Qaeda terrorists from Afghanistan to Sudan, set up al Qaeda's training camps in Khartoum and literally wrote al Qaeda manual of terror. In 1993 he trained members of the al Qaeda contingent that downed two U.S. Blackhawk helicopters in Somalia, brokered a meeting between bin Laden and the head of **Hezbollah** and personally took the pictures of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi that **Osama bin Laden** himself used to target the suicide truck bombs that killed 224 in Kenya in 1998.

That part of my research was presented in the Nat Geo documentary that aired on Monday.

But that was only half of my story. The other half was the astonishing saga of how the two bin Laden "offices of origin" -- the FBI's New York Office (NYO) and the Office of the U.S. Attorney for the SDNY, allowed Mohamed to operate with impunity for years. How key special agents in the bin Laden Squad (I-49) like **Jack Cloonan** desperately played catch-up as Mohamed planned the Embassy bombings. How **John Zent**, Ali's west coast control agent was totally outgunned by him, getting caught up as a material witness in a grisly triple homicide in Fresno in 1992 when he should have been riding herd over the al Qaeda sleeper. How it was Zent who vouched for Ali and got him released from Canadian custody in 1993 -- allowing him the freedom to help plan the **Blackhawk Down** operation and the **Embassy bombing plot**.

My most astonishing, findings involved **Patrick Fitzgerald**, the former head of Organized Crime and Terrorism in the SDNY, who had allowed Ali to remain free as early as 1994 even though he named him as an unindicted co-conspirator in the Day of Terror. Another of my key findings was that Fitzgerald buried probative evidence of an al Qaeda New York cell in 1996.

Beginning in January 1996 Fitzgerald effectively ran Squad I-49, but I learned that despite wiretaps on the key cell members and hard evidence in 1997 that Ali Mohamed (an FBI informant) was a major player in the Embassy bombing plot – he allowed him to remain free.

Most shocking were two face to face meetings Fitzgerald had with Mohamed in 1997. After the first meeting in April “Fitzie,” as Cloonan called him, declared Ali “the most dangerous man” he’d “ever met” and announced that “we cannot let this man out on the street.”

But Fitzgerald did, even though in October of 1997 Ali told him that he *loved* bin Laden and didn’t need a fatwa to declare war against the U.S. where he’d become a naturalized citizen. Fitzgerald had convicted **blind Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman** and 9 others for seditious conspiracy two years earlier, yet he permitted Mohamed to operate in the open and didn’t arrest him until *after* the simultaneous truck bombings in Kenya and Tanzania on August 7th, 1998 which followed Ali Mohamed’s 1993 surveillance with surgical precision.

Fitzgerald and Cloonan then took more than 18 months to get a plea bargain out of Mohamed, who never truly betrayed al Qaeda. They kept him in Manhattan Federal jail for 9 months on a John Doe warrant for fear the media would get wind of their negligence and actually prevented him from testifying in the Embassy bombing trial in 2001 because of the embarrassment that cross-examination of Mohamed would cause the Bureau and the Justice Department who had allowed bin Laden’s top spy to work as an FBI informant.

Worse, while they had Ali in custody for *three years*, Fitzgerald and Cloonan failed to extract the 9/11 plot from him, even though they *knew* that the plot had commenced in 1994 in Manila, almost four years *before* Ali’s capture and as the man who had lived with bin Laden and personally trained his security detail, Mohamed knew every twist and turn of it.

Within days of 9/11 Cloonan rushed backed from Yemen and interviewed Ali, whom the Feds had allowed to slip into witness protection, and demanded to know the details of the plot. At that point Ali wrote it all out – including details of how he’d counseled would-be hijackers on how to smuggle box cutters on board aircraft and where to sit, to effect the airline seizures.

In effect, my telling of the Ali Mohamed story holds Cloonan, Fitzgerald and a host of other key Feds responsible for not stopping the 1998 Embassy bombings or the 9/11 plot.

And yet not a word of that showed up in the two-hour documentary entitled “**Triple Cross: Bin Laden’s spy in America**” which aired Monday night on the Nat Geo Channel. Why? Because Nat Geo allowed *Jack Cloonan* to become the effective “narrator” of the film. He never once suggested that Fitzgerald was in any way at fault. He never mentioned how Fitzie had failed to keep Ali off the street. Nor did Cloonan name John Zent, Ali’s hapless California “control” agent, who was repeatedly snookered by him for years.

How did this happen? In June, in the midst of script writing the doc of which I was to be the principal narrator, executive producer and editorial voice, the Nat Geo Channel and Towers Productions knuckled under to Cloonan and two other key Feds; former U.S. Attorney **Mary Jo White** and former NYO Joint Terrorism Task Force investigator **Det. Tommy Corrigan**.

My contract with Towers stipulated that I was to get all interview transcripts immediately after on camera shoots in order to incorporate the details in the book's manuscript – Yet these three ex Feds demanded that Nat Geo keep the research from me and they simply acquiesced.

I couldn't go on camera to narrate the doc without these key interviews, so NGC cut me out of the production and post production process – even refusing to send me a rough cut of the doc for fact-checking unless I signed a non-disparagement agreement.

All of this is documented in a series of letters between me and Nat Geo Channel executives contained (along with the January 2006 treatment) in a press released dated August 27th, 2006.

In effect, NGC ended up replacing me with Jack Cloonan, one of the very Feds that my research had found grossly negligent. Cloonan had two and a half years from January 1996 to August 1998 to build a file on Ali and interdict the Embassy plot and yet, despite evidence from I-49's own files of Ali's direct links to senior Embassy plotters, Cloonan, Fitzgerald and other top Feds failed to detect the plot. In the end, 224 died and more than 4,000 were injured.

In February of 2001, Fitzgerald went on to prosecute three relatively peripheral players in the plot and cemented his reputation by convicting them of an act of terror that his own "bin Laden squad" had failed to prevent. The fourth operative, Wadih El-Hage had been on the FBI's radar since 1991. Ali Mohamed had stayed in his Kenyan home in the mid 90's as they plotted the bombings. Another agent in Fitzie's squad searched El-Hage's home a year before the bombings and found *direct* links to Mohamed and yet Fitzgerald failed to connect the dots.

But the viewers of TRIPLE CROSS – the Nat Geo documentary on Monday night never saw any of this evidence critical of the Feds because Nat Geo Channel, allowed the story of FBI failures in the Ali Mohamed case to be told from the Bureau's point of view.

It was like doing *Schindler's List* from Hitler's perspective.

The casualty of all of this was the truth – and under the guise of a documentary which Nat Geo Channel claimed was "based in part" on my book, they perpetrated a factual distortion unknown in the recent history of broadcast journalism.

Why does any of it matter and why is this not simply a case of a disgruntled writer, unhappy at a television adaptation of his work? Because going in, the Nat Geo Channel bought a documentary from a five-time Emmy winning reporter that, once and for all, would expose the negligence of the Dept. of Justice on the road to 9/11. See the treatment that they green lit. It's at the end of the August 27th, 2006 press release.

This matters because key Feds who covered-up probative al Qaeda intelligence in 1996 remain in senior positions at Justice. Fitzgerald is U.S. Attorney for Chicago and Special Prosecutor in the CIA leak case. **Valerie Caproni**, who supported Fitzgerald's burial of evidence of an active al Qaeda cell in New York in 1996. is now the FBI's general counsel.

Most importantly, as I discovered after five years of research, the FBI has utterly failed to reform post 9/11. After more than \$600 million spent on an updated computer system to track bin Laden, they have scrapped the “**virtual case file**” system and FBI Director **Robert Mueller** told Congress in 2005 that it will be 2009 before they have the same ability to connect the dots that most Americans have using Google and other search engines.

Just months ago it was reported that many agents in the FBI’s flagship “bin Laden” New York office didn’t even have access to e-mail - while al Qaeda remains a tightly organized threat.

Further, as I report in TRIPLE CROSS (the book) Dietrich Snell, a key SDNY prosecutor who served with Fitzgerald, covered up crucial evidence of FBI negligence before the 9/11 Commission and flushed key links between al Qaeda and the New York cell of blind Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman turned-up by the Army’s Operation Able Danger in the year 2000.

Tonight’s documentary gave lip service to the tragic Ali Mohamed story but failed to provide a single word of critical analysis to help viewers understand what a disservice Feds like Cloonan and Fitzgerald did to this country in causing citizens to rely on the FBI and Justice Department to protect them, while they were continually outgunned by bin Laden’s #1 spy.

When my book comes out I’ll connect those dots and set the record straight. But for those viewers who thought that they got the truth on Ali Mohamed from the Nat Geo Channel, I can assure them, as the principal investigative reporter to uncover his story, they got a whitewash.

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