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US Army Investigator Accuses National Security Adviser McMaster of War Crimes in Iraq

By Jared Labell

April 4, 2017

Former commander in charge of US Army Military Police in Iraq says President Trump's new National Security Adviser, Gen. H.R. McMaster, 'ordered' criminal abuse of hundreds of Iraqi detainees in 2005. "Detainees were abused at Tal Afar under orders and command and control of H.R. McMaster," said Col. Arnaldo Claudio, a retired senior U.S. Military Police officer who served as 18th Airborne Corps Provost Marshal and Chief of Police of the Multinational Coalition Forces in Iraq in 2005.

During his conversation with Scott Horton, managing director of the Libertarian Institute and host of the Scott Horton Show, Claudio elaborated on his recent interview with Univision News, where he first publicly revealed his accusations against Gen. McMaster. Claudio explained how in his capacity as chief of all Military Police in Iraq he was ordered by Gen. J.R. Vines to investigate complaints regarding the treatment of detainees made against the U.S. Army command fighting in Tal Afar in northwestern Iraq in 2005, led by President Trump's current National Security Adviser, then-U.S. Army Col., H.R. McMaster.

Claudio and his team reported back to Gen. Vines, providing information and recommendations to the commanding general, dedicating a portion of their report to details of then-U.S. Army Col. McMaster's violations of the Geneva Conventions and the Detainee Operations Standard Operating Procedures found at Tal Afar.

Presently, Claudio is the Technical Compliance Adviser (TCA), selected by the Department of Justice and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, to oversee reform of their police forces, a position he has held since June 2014.

The Investigation Begins

Col. Claudio was stationed in Iraq from March 16, 2005 through late January 2006. He was tasked to ensure that all detainee operations were being conducted in accordance with the Geneva Conventions and Standard Operating Procedures in compliance with U.S. laws and military regulations.

Claudio told Horton that the number of admissions and releases of detainees from the small detention facility in Tal Afar didn't seem to add up. It appeared the admitted number of detainees exceeded the maximum capacity. Claudio and his investigative team traveled to Tal Afar to investigate further, where they discovered detainees were held in conditions that were both shocking and illegal. Detainees were being deprived of food and water for days while bound together with plastic handcuffs. Hundreds were also being held without shelter. All of this was in violation of military law, according to Col. Claudio.

Claudio and his investigative team were given very specific orders by Vines. "If this guy is doing anything wrong, you need to report back," Claudio was told. "And if he gets out of hand, just bring him back with you."

Claudio did not mince words about his orders. "They were pretty simple. And remember, we just had gotten out of...the scandal of Abu Ghraib."

The Abu Gharib prisoner abuse scandal of 2004 was a prime recruiting tool for Iraqi insurgents and other militant groups taking up arms against U.S. forces there. Claudio said that another similar scandal breaking so close to the significant Abu Gharib torture revelations "would have been devastating for our national security and it would be devastating for the Army, and to our nation as a whole."

The Investigation in Tal Afar: "My God, what is this?"

Claudio's interactions with McMaster were brief. "It was a very short conversation. He basically didn't want me there. And he says, 'Get on with your duty and get out of here.'"

But Claudio responded, "Not so fast. I'm here, I have orders, and if you are in fact violating the standards of how to take care of detainees, you're going back with me. Period."

In a detention camp designed to hold 250 detainees, Col. McMaster held over 900 people in brutal conditions, left outdoors without food, water, or shelter from the sun in their own feces and urine.

Claudio told Horton, "As I was approaching the area where the detainees were, I already knew something was really wrong."

“There was about three to four hundred of them outside...As soon as I got outside of the vehicle, I mean, you could smell the urine and defecation in the atmosphere. It was like, ‘my God, what is this?’”

Alongside one of his medics, Claudio inspected the conditions of the hundreds of detainees before finding even more detainees kept in similarly poor circumstances in other tents being used as temporary detention facilities.

Through interviews with detainees and interpreters, Claudio and his team were told that detainees “had been beaten with sticks in order to take them to the latrine.”

Gerardo Reyes, in the story he first broke for Univision, reported that Claudio’s allegations were confirmed by another military officer who participated in the investigation, although he asked to remain anonymous.

“They weren’t only tied by the hands to each other, when they took them to the latrines they beat them with a stick,” the second source told Univision.

According to the commander of that operation, McMaster had ordered the “good detainee behavior program,” which meant that unless a detainee gave actionable intelligence to be used by the U.S. military, they were to be held indefinitely. Therefore, ironically, the so-called “good detainee behavior program” was in effect an indefinite program in violation of the law. Detainees were supposed to be released after fourteen days at the facility, either transferred to other authorities or set free, but McMaster was holding men for months in horrendous conditions.

According to Col. Claudio, there is no question that then-Col. McMaster himself gave the orders for the treatment of detainees at Tal Afar. “He knew because the orders of the ‘good behavior program’ were instituted by him,” Claudio told Horton.

About 120 detainees were released soon after Claudio’s team began restructuring the facility and taking care of the detainees’ basic needs, with hundreds more following over the next week.

Col. Claudio was unable to find Col. McMaster after he and his team surveyed the facilities. When pressed by Horton as to whether or not he would have arrested McMaster if he had been found, Claudio responded, “I would have asked him nicely to come with me. Because it never happened, I’m not going to speculate, but I’m pretty sure I would have done that.”

The Investigation Disappears

Claudio and his team reported back to Gen. Vines, providing information and recommendations and dedicating a portion of the report to detailing the violations of the Geneva Conventions and the Detainee Operations Standard Operating Procedures.

Apparently, the report was not investigated further. Claudio would not be involved again until he saw McMaster’s name on the list to be promoted to brigadier general in July 2008. Claudio then contacted the Inspector General of the Department of the Army. He resubmitted his report, and the Inspector General’s

office conducted follow up interviews with Claudio and other eyewitnesses, including a U.S. Army Sergeant named John Savo. “I write and I tell him the story I’m telling you today. They did contact me. They contacted other eyewitnesses to that,” Claudio told Horton.

To the best of Claudio’s knowledge, nothing ever became of the Inspector General’s investigation.

Col. McMaster was promoted to brigadier general in August 2009, by his friend, Gen. David Petraeus.

President Donald Trump appointed Gen. McMaster as his National Security Advisor in February 2017.