

The Truth about John Walker Lindh

By Robert Young Pelton

John Walker Lindh *aka* John Walker *aka* Suleiman Ferris *aka* Abdul Hamid *aka* The American Taliban is a person that I will mostly likely to be associated for some time to come. I am sure on my obituary there will be a bombastic note that I was “the journalist who “discovered” Lindh after the battle at Qali Jangi” (the afghans have that dubious honor).

Many have told me that Lindh’s story was a big deal back in the States. I will never know as I was in Afghanistan covering combat operations with in the ongoing war against the Taliban for CNN. I will never have the chance to the get the full impact of finding an American professing his love for the Taliban.

To me Lindh was just an unpleasant arrogant kid who preferred to stay with his murdering friends. He was in the fact, the second Irish-American Jihadi I have met and interviewed. The first one was a one-legged psychopath who had been trained in the same camps and had fought in Kashmir, Kosovo, Bosnia, Chechnya and Liberia gave me his opinion. When I called him to discuss Lindh’s *hejira*, Aqil Collins simply called Lindh “a pussy”. When I returned from Afghanistan I was quite aware of the outrage he had caused. I only did interviews in which I spoke positively about Lindh in a deliberate effort not to influence his pending case. Privately I warned his lawyers to keep me off the witness stand because I would send their little Johnny to prison. Wisely Lindh copped a plea and I was spared months of inconvenience.

Some people wanted a trial to get to the bottom of Lindh’s nefarious activities, among them the grieving family of Mike Spann. Lindh’s plea bargain denied them and the country of that truth finding. So it was left to me to set the record straight. My decades of travels with jihadis and terrorists, my time with both the Taliban leadership, the Northern Alliance *aka* the United Front, Dostum’s forces and and based on my time spent during and after talking to the players involved with Qali Jangi leads me to believe that I am uniquely qualified to pass judgment on Lindh and to accurately describe who he was and what he was doing there. Now that Lindh’s father has decided to wrongly blame me for his son’s misery and seek clemency under false pretences, I feel its time to reveal the truth.

Quite simply in my opinion, Lindh was a terrorist, a member of what we call *al Qaeda* and a man who chose to stay with killers even though he was afforded numerous opportunities to separate himself from his murderous associates. Twenty years in jail may be a blessing compared to how many of his friends have been dealt with since.

Frank Lindh cannot be blamed for the emotions behind his need to reinvent history or doing what he can to get his son out of jail. But he is lying. His son did not “love America”, he fought for bin Laden against us, his son is not “honest”, he lied to his parents and others. His son is not a “decent” young man; he trained to be a murderer. His son went to kill strangers in a stranger land. A spiritual quest? What part of grenades and AK 47’s can be described as spiritual? What part of patriotism is eating bin Laden’s food, listening to Usama’s droning hate-filled speeches against America and sitting obediently within strangling distance of our greatest single enemy? To think that the American public is that stupid is an insult. John Walker Lindh was an Arab speaking member of bin Laden’s terror legions. He called it Al Ansar (the correct term) we call them al Qaeda. He was never a member of the Taliban. Why because Lindh only spoke Arabic and English he would have been useless in a combat situation among Pashto or Dari speaking troops. I have seen Taliban ID cards and spent time with bin Laden’s “055 Brigade”, “al Ansar” members and al Qaeda. Lindh was exactly the person we were trying to kill in Afghanistan and now around the world. An educated, idealistic young Muslim who chose murder of innocent people as his path in life. He is no different that Mohamed Atta, Zarqawi or thousands of other terrorists that come from nice middle class families.

The elder Lindh would have us believe that somehow America supported what his son and bin Laden did at one time. Pure invention. Osama bin Laden never received any US CIA funding, he channeled Saudi money into what was then called the Office of Services and then into his own ventures. Yes the Taliban were mujahids but their draconian regime and support of bin Laden made them pariahs long before Lindh went there. Later in the post Soviet era of Afghanistan the CIA would pay Massoud money to try and kill Bin Laden. John Lindh went there to kill the members of Massoud's fighters. When the war broke out there was no clearer distinction of "with us or against us" than the forces of bin Laden and the Taliban against the combined Afghan forces we called "the Northern Alliance. Lindh was on Bin Laden's side against us. Period. End of conversation.

I agree with Frank Lindh that perhaps his son's timing sucked. Johnny's perverse need to run around Afghanistan looking to murder other Muslims would not have been that big a deal pre 9/11. Once he and his Arab jihadi friends heard on their BBC short-wave radio broadcasts that the US was coming...Well only the dumbest or the most resolutely criminal were going to stay for what was going to be a high tech, high ordnance ass whupping. Lindh chose to stay. He watched America's B52 contrails in the sky, he felt the destruction American bombs dealt his friends and yet he stayed with his terrorist friends. When he fled to Kunduz he again chose to stay with his murdering friends and when a small group of foreign jihadis was chosen for a Hail Mary suicide mission to nearby Mazar i Sharif. Lindh was on board.

What you say? I thought poor Abdul Hamid (Lindh's "jihad" name) was fleeing his evil master and seeking help. No. The group of around 460 jihadis that left Kunduz towards Mazar i Sharif were on their way to link up with Mullah Dadullah (now the leader of the Taliban military) in Balkh (just west of Mazar) and then attack the city while the US and Afghan forces were tied up in Kunduz monitoring the surrender. Yes, thousands of fighters did surrender peacefully but Lindh again chose to associate with a rag tag group of die-hards led by one of bin Laden's lieutenants; Abdul Aziz, as well as the hardest core terrorists that comprised Saudi, Uzbek, Iraqi, Russian, Sudanese, Yemeni and Pakistani jihadis.

This group was stopped heading west early in the morning and had an armed standoff with Afghan and US forces. (Yes Lindh's group was fully armed during their purported "surrender" and they had no good reason to explain why they not going east towards Pakistan). The stand off was tense until bombers appeared overhead. Dostum drove by on his way to Kunduz and told them to be disarmed and taken to his garrison called Qali Jangi. Lindh during that entire time was within feet of western journalists and US forces and could have simply identified himself as an American. But he chose to stay in the company of killers. Lindh also knew that his cohorts were still secretly armed with pistols, rifles and even grenades tied by shoelaces and dangling around their groin area. A place where they knew Afghans dare not pat down.

The Uzbek terrorists among Lindh's group were ecstatic. Qali Jangi was where they had trained under the Taliban and the storage rooms of garrison were literally overflowing with weapons confiscated and stored by the Taliban.

Upon arrival one of the Uzbeks immediately killed himself with a grenade while trying to murder what he thought was Dostum. It was Dostum's Intel officer (who survived) and a Hazara general was killed. This event was filmed and once again, despite the presence of western media and the casual atmosphere (prisoners were even being interviewed by CNN and others), Lindh refused to identify himself or ask for help.

Terrified and outnumbered by the false surrender the Afghan guards (there were only about 100 guards for the 460 prisoners) pushed the killers down into the basement of a fortified schoolhouse until they could be searched in the morning. That night in the cramped five-room basement there was an angry and desperate argument among the prisoners. The Saudis and Uzbeks planned an attack; they just needed a diversion to get to the weapons stored a few yards from the pink schoolhouse. The Pakistanis wanted to just surrender and go home. According to the survivors I interviewed, Lindh was an Arab speaking al Qaeda member and had full knowledge of this discussion and he has yet to admit which path he was going to choose. Some insist that Lindh was among the main proponents of this violent action. I was not in that basement so I don't know

what happened. What I do know is that Lindh's actions the next day would provide the damning answer.

The next morning two CIA officers went to Qali Jangi to interview the prisoners. Mike Spann and Dave Tyson arrived in separate vehicles. Tyson spoke a number of languages but Spann only spoke English. The prisoners were brought up one at a time. They were searched, bound with their turbans and then marched into lines inside the southern courtyard. Spann walked up and down the lines of prisoners. He asked an Iraqi mechanic who spoke English if there were any other prisoners who spoke English. The Iraqi pointed out the "Irishman". Lindh had been told to say he was Irish in the camps to avoid problems. Spann had Lindh brought over away from the main group and put out a blanket for him. Spann and Tyson tried to talk to Lindh. Mike even calls him "Irish". Away from his peers Lindh just stares down. Mike pleads with Lindh to talk. Lindh remains hostile and silent.

Spann and Tyson play a clumsy game of "good cop, bad cop". But one thing is clear; they offer Lindh a way out. Lindh is alone with two of his fellow countrymen with full knowledge of the violence that is about to happen. He says nothing. If there was ever one moment that will define one man and damn another this was it. Lindh is put back into the lineup, and Mike Spann will die in the next few minutes as Uzbeks rush up from the basement, yelling Allahhuakbar detonate hidden grenades. The fighting begins. Lindh has once again has been given a clear choice between right and wrong and once again. He makes that clear choice again.

It is not known what Lindh and his fellow terrorists did for the next few days while fighting raged and Mike Spann's still body lay there with two AK 47 bullet holes through his head - one straight down, and one from left to right. When the Afghan Commander Fakir used pleading, threats, then finally flame, explosions and flooding, to roust the killers, the first person that came up to negotiate on behalf of the jihadis was John Walker Lindh. The same murderous group that had shot and killed a clearly identified elderly Red Cross worker who went down to look for bodies a week earlier.

I had asked Dostum to bring me the prisoners. I wanted to interview and meet these men. At around midnight after Lindh and his 85 friends surrendered, two open trucks showed up filled with shivering, screaming jihadis. One truckload was unloaded in front of me. I photographed and talked to the men while a group of Special Forces soldiers watched from a distance, their guns at the ready. This was not the first false surrender they had suffered. One truck was full of moaning and crying men. Way in the back sat John Walker Lindh. He slowly hides from view in my series of photographs. Once he had a chance to identify himself and surrender but he chose to stay in the company of killers

A few minutes later Dostum's cameraman runs into the living room and says there is an American. He shows me an image of Lindh repeating his name "John" on his Panasonic camera. My first impression is that whoever this American is, he needs help. Fast. I ask the Special Forces medic if he will bring his medical bag and come with me. We jump into a truck and I along with my cameraman and some SF team members go into the triage room. The doctor is whacking Lindh on the head trying to talk to him. I motion for the doctor to back off and ask if I can ask the questions. I clearly identify myself to Lindh as working for CNN. Frank Lindh ignores the fact that all my initial questions are about his son's health and if he wanted to contact his loved ones. Lindh Jr (who called himself "Abdul Hamid" and "John Walker" repeatedly states that he is not. I move him to a private room so the medic can examine him properly. Downstairs the doctors hate these people. They have just murdered their compatriots in cold blood there will be no pity for the men left downstairs. They are all now dead or in Gitmo. Lindh will be the lucky one. Upstairs Lindh and despite our attempts to improve his condition, he was yet again rude, arrogant and unhelpful. I still press him for someone to contact. He refuses. He is being given gentle medical care by a US medic who was busy killing his murderous friends a few days earlier. There is a myth that morphine somehow forces Lindh to talk. But his statements (some of them true and some of them false) begin and flow without my help. He is consistent in his love the the Taliban and his cause. I clearly identify to Lindh when he is given morphine (happy juice) and I ask no leading questions. My interest is simply understand who is he is and how he got there. In

fact the reason Lindh talks to me is because he senses that I know about jihad, Muslims and his cause. He even asks me if I am a Muslim. I know jihadis and I know jihad. On tape I ask him if it is Ok for Muslims to kill other Muslims. He brushes me off saying the Koran deals with this. Finally I ask him what he thinks of his condition and decisions. He is unrepentant.

Despite his attitude and affections for killers. I left Lindh tea and cookies and once again ask him if he wants to contact his parents. He refuses. Finally, I turn off my camera and tell him to sleep. Consulting with the doctor and concerned that he could be killed by revengeful Afghans, I decide to take him home with me for his own safety. One of the Special Forces soldiers, fresh from three weeks in combat, gives up his room so that Lindh could sleep in his bed. The next morning Lindh is taken to the Turkish School, rested, fed, attended to and dressed in a clean pair of pajamas and out of my control. I know what happened to Lindh after that because I met some of the Marines that did it. He could have suffered much worse. His parents have never thanked me.

For an entire month I called Lindh's parents and lawyers to provide the details of his capture and events surrounding the uprising. Brosnahan tried to cajole me and then threatened me sputtering about how the courtroom would be a dangerous place for me. His parents refused to take my calls or call me back but his mother had time to chastise a gossip columnist for criticizing her relationship with her lawyer. During Lindh's 15 minutes of fame, I respected my responsibility as a working journalist for CNN and did nothing that would influence his case. Despite my dark knowledge I told his lawyers to keep me out of it. They played games and and I fought my court appearance knowing full well that they would characterize me as a spy and I would bring out information that would put Lindh away for a very long time. They wasted \$64,000 of CNN's legal money and worked the media to present me as a greedy story hungry freelancer. The truth is I have made no additional money from Lindh's story (other than my standard day rate for CNN) and never will. Now that Lindh's father is now blaming me for his son's "exculpatory" interview and has restarted his negative spin, the gloves are off. The truth will prevail.

I don't think about the evening of December 1 2001 that much. I continue to cover conflict and the actors within but on a recent motorcycle trip from the east coast to the west coast, I found myself passing through Victorville close to where "Johnny Taliban" is staying. The cold dirty wind and high mountain air reminded me of Afghanistan. I thought about Lindh, felt the air on my face and wondered how lucky Lindh is to be still alive. A privilege that Mike Spann, a real hero and American patriot will never have due to John Walker Lindh's duplicity.

So for Mike's sake, don't let Frank Lindh's PR and legal campaign change the fact that his son was the exactly the kind of person that fly aircraft into buildings, blow up American troops in Iraq and kill innocent Muslims on their "spiritual journey" to paradise. He was and is a terrorist. To hell with John Walker Lindh and his murderous ilk. They have done nothing to advance the cause of Muslims and they have caused a world of heartbreak in their arrogant pursuit of senseless death. To support Frank Lindh's naïve, self-serving and false view of his son's motivation and actions furthers that dark vision.