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Able Danger and Zacarias Moussaoui
No Laughing Matter »

31
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Able Danger Twenty Questions

Everything you always wanted to know (but were afraid to ask, or the answers were classified…) about the controversial Able Danger data mining project, which identified four 9/11 hijackers a year before the terror attacks.

1. Did Anthony Shaffer, or anyone on the Able Danger team, obtain a photo of Mohamed Atta from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), as Shaffer's interview with Government Security News (GSN) states?

The photo of Atta came from an information broker who provided it and others. Shaffer's comments were made to GSN based on his knowledge at the time, which came from his knowledge of what the US Army's Land Information Warfare Activity (LIWA) operations center had access to. Shaffer's interview with GSN took place before civilian analyst JD Smith came forward and clarified the issue. Shaffer did not know in 1999-2000 all the specifics of how Smith and company were doing the detailed data mining — it was Shaffer's belief at the time that the photo had come from INS records. LIWA did have access to INS documents - and a Defense Department intelligence program called the Foreign Visitor Program, in which not only photos of foreign nationals but also their entire visa application were provided — but Shaffer was not aware of LIWA's use of information brokers.

2. If Atta was identified as early as January or February of 2000 – as Captain Scott Phillpott has said - when were the other three hijackers (Shehhi, Mihdhar, and Hamzi) identified by Able Danger?

Within the same timeframe, since the missing chart contained the names of all four of the then-future hijackers. They were all listed in what Phillpott had called "the Brooklyn Cell" - not that they were all in Brooklyn, but they met the search criteria that linked them to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

3. Did anyone on the Able Danger team know that any of these four were ever in the US? If so, when did they find out and how?

They did not know, as it was not Able Danger's job to track individuals in the U.S. (based on legal restrictions.) Once it was determined by Defense Department (DOD) lawyers that the "Brooklyn Cell" information could not be used for offensive planning by the Able Danger planners, the Able Danger team then attempted to pass the information to the FBI for its use. At

any given time, there was no specific knowledge of where the terrorists were regarding the continental United States. The Able Danger effort, and targeting of specific individuals, was focused on overseas locations.

4. By early June 2000, these four were the only ones to have entered the US. Most of the hijackers entered the US after May 2001. Is it reasonable to predict that Able Danger could have identified the others, had it not been shut down by then?

When the 2.5 terabytes of data were destroyed by LIWA in the summer of 2000, all information relating to the terrorists was destroyed as well. However, Able Danger II, which started from scratch (i.e. a 90 day full time search of the open Internet and open data sources to re-create the data base), did detect the same basic information about the Brooklyn Cell - and in addition discovered the Al Qaeda activity in the Port of Aden in Yemen.

5. Was there any effort by the Able Danger team not only to identify those individuals' link to Al Qaeda, but also to keep track of where they were located and what they were going?

Yes, but not in the continental United States. Able Danger was extensively targeting specific individuals and activities that were located overseas - and there were "options" prepared for Special Operations Command (SOCOM) to take action against these individuals and groups. The specifics of this remain highly classified.

6. Shaffer's attorney Mark Zaid told the Senate Judiciary Committee that Able Danger never identified Mohamed Atta as being physically present in the US. Does that mean that no one on the team knew he was in the US, or simply that they found out from someone else?

The Able Danger team could not and did not ascertain Atta's presence in the U.S. for two reasons: first, his ID came up as part of the "Brooklyn Cell" and therefore the Able Danger team could not look at him based on the legal guidance they were forced to follow; and second, the focus was on overseas targets. There were specific individuals and activities, which Able Danger could pursue, such as information relating to the attack on the USS Cole in October 2000, and the Able Danger team did provide the specific details of the threat days before the attack on the Cole.

7. Did anyone on the Able Danger team know Atta was in contact with the other three hijackers, as Mike Kelly of the Bergen Record reported? If so, when did Able Danger learn of contact between Atta and the others and how?

There were linkages discovered between multiple "clusters" of individuals. The clusters were tested to see if they were functioning as "cells." The connections between the individuals and the cells cannot be known without looking at the original chart and data. Therefore, at this point it is not possible to re-create how the four were linked. They were on the chart and in the "Brooklyn Cell" cluster. There was contact between cells - the contacts were examined and "tested" using classified methods - but this was done focused on overseas locations.

8. When Able Danger attempted to share information with the FBI, did this information include the names, photos, or any other information about Atta, Shehhi, Mihdhar, or Hamzi? Did it include their location in the US or any other specific information?

At the time that SOCOM wanted to pass "all data relating to the Brooklyn Cell" (since the SOCOM/DOD lawyers would not allow the Able Danger team to pursue them as a target), Shaffer attempted to set up meetings to pass this information. But SOCOM lawyers stopped the Able Danger officers from attending these meetings, and therefore prevented the passage of the information to the FBI. There were other disclosures made to the FBI on other targets within the continental United States, from LIWA (not Able Danger) to the FBI regarding other US locations of known terrorist activity. Both Attorney General Janet Reno and FBI head Louis Freeh were briefed on these other locations and the FBI did take action and make arrests based on the information. The specifics of this remain classified.

9. After the attack on the USS Cole, was there any attempt to use the information Able Danger had based its prediction on - either to investigate the attack, or to determine how they had been so accurate - in order to replicate their efforts?

Yes - there was an "after action" forensic investigation and briefing of the Able Danger data, which is still extant but highly classified.

10. Was Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) terrorism intelligence analyst Kie Fallis, who resigned in protest after the Able Danger warnings about the USS Cole were ignored, ever involved with the Able Danger program in any way?

Kie Fallis' superiors Bob Pecha and Greg Pruett were both aware of Able Danger since Shaffer briefed them on the program in the spring of 2000. In addition, DIA official Cal Temple (who worked Al Qaeda as a target) was aware and even made a visit to Garland, Texas to observe the Able Danger project. The intelligence data being produced by Able Danger was shared with Temple. It is possible he later shared this information with Fallis. Cal Temple, by his own admission, was sent to "spy" on the Able Danger effort so that he could secretly get the information for DIA and then learn the method and technology involved so that DIA could build its own version. DIA did have Cal build a version in secret, since DIA officials did not want SOCOM to know that they were creating a DIA model.

11. Others have said privately that the Cole attack had a "chilling effect" on anything related to "warnings" after Fallis quit. Was this also true of the Able Danger team?

The Able Danger effort culminated in a two-hour briefing to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which General Shelton now publicly acknowledges he received in January of 2001. It was very clear that once General Peter Schoomaker departed as the Commander in Chief of SOCOM in the fall of 2000, and Air Force General Holland took over, there was a diminution of focus and priority on the Able Danger effort. The Able Danger team was disbanded despite the best efforts of the team to continue the work and push to implement the offensive "options" that were derived from the intelligence information.

12. Did the correct prediction (in effect) of the Cole attack play any role, positive or negative, in the discussions when the program was shut down only months later?

Nothing was ever said directly linking the 'prediction' of the Cole attack or its after-action briefing with the demise of the Able Danger project. No one in Able Danger has a clear answer as to why Able Danger was shut down - all they know is that they fought to keep it going and lost.

13. After the Cole attack, did Able Danger make any further discoveries or predictions?

After the January 2001 briefing to General Shelton, the project was changed. There was no clear "ending" - just a quiet and deliberate dismantling of the personnel and capability. As the project was moved from Garland, Texas in January 2001 and dismantled, there was no opportunity to continue to exploit the intelligence information. Therefore, there were no new predictions.

14. When did Shaffer's last conversation with Scott Phillpott before 9/11 take place, when Phillpott was "desperately" trying to preserve the data so that someone could use it, even though Able Danger was being shut down?

The conversation occurred in the May 2001 timeframe. Shaffer was jogging outside the Pentagon at the outdoor portion of the Pentagon Athletic Center. Phillpott called Shaffer on his mobile phone to ask if he (Phillpott) could move the data to a clandestine facility in the area – one of four under Shaffer's control. This one in particular was used for other highly classified intelligence operations and Phillpott had toured it before. Shaffer had already been directed by Major General Rod Isler to "cease all support to Able Danger. " Shaffer said that he'd love to let Phillpott "use the facility" but felt that his leadership would say no. When Shaffer asked his boss, Colonel Mary Moffitt, she not only said no but also began the process of moving Shaffer from his leadership position to a "desk job" on the Latin America desk of DIA.

15. When were Phillpott and his team members reassigned to other work? Were they each reassigned to different projects or was their unit assigned a new task?

Everyone went back to his "normal" job as Able Danger was disbanded - Able Danger was a form of standing "Task Force". There was some DIA leadership retaliation against the DIA members of Able Danger, but that cannot be fully addressed until the DOD Inspector general completes his current investigation.

16. Raytheon's Robert Johnson has told Congressman Curt Weldon that data was transferred to SOCOM, including data the Garland unit used to identify Mohamed Atta, separate from the LIWA effort. When was this transferred and how much data was involved?

A new open Internet data run was conducted from about July to September 2000 - this consisted of "spiders" doing whole searches and downloading of web based information, as well as the integration of all available open sources of data. In addition, copies of the full DIA and NSA data bases were moved by STRATUS IVY (Shaffer's unit) to Garland, Texas - in essence the entire

LIWA capability was re-created from scratch and began to function in earnest in early September 2000.

17. While not physical cells, Able Danger identified five cells of Al Qaeda worldwide. Who was identified as a member of which cells?

There were multiple data runs done with the technology, and cells were produced based on the search criteria. The chart that contained Atta and the Brooklyn cell also contained a German cell, a Mauritania cell, a Malaysia cell, and a cell in Yemen. The members on those cells would be on the charts that were produced, but the charts are not available, at least at this point.

18. Did the network of centers originally used to raise funds for the mujahadeen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan have any relation to these cells?

There were connections to Afghanistan that the Able Danger team were targeting - this was then and remains classified. This information has been provided to Congress in closed discussions.

19. Shaffer told the 9/11 Commission that Able Danger had identified "two of the three cells" that carried out the 9/11 attacks. Which two of the three and who had the Able Danger team identified with what cells?

Shaffer did not know the specific membership of each terrorist to each cell - he knew from his work on Able Danger that the team had found two of the three cells - and the only name he remembered after the 9/11 attacks was Atta (due to seeing his picture on the news and hearing his name repeatedly.)

20. Was Able Danger a Top Secret code name, or was it just an operational name - which may or may not have itself been classified?

There are three categories of "names" in the Pentagon - Able Danger was the unclassified "nickname." Codenames are different and they are classified - there are also "trigraphs," which are three letters that stand for a three letter classified program. Other codenames and trigraphs were associated with Able Danger - but which ones and their names and associations are still classified.