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Former Member of U.S. Navy Sentenced to 10 Years in Federal Prison for Disclosing Classified Information

WASHINGTON -- Nora R. Dannehy, Acting U.S. Attorney for the District of Connecticut, and other federal officials announced that Hassan Abu-Jihaad, formerly known as Paul R. Hall, 33, of Phoenix, Arizona, was sentenced today by U.S. District Judge Mark R. Kravitz in New Haven to 120 months of imprisonment, followed by three years of supervised release, for disclosing previously classified information relating to the national defense.

"This defendant provided classified information to others with the understanding that it could be used to endanger the lives of hundreds of members of the United States Navy, and we are pleased that the court imposed the maximum prison term allowed under the law," Acting U.S. Attorney Dannehy stated. "I want to acknowledge the efforts of all the agents, analysts and prosecutors involved in this matter who have worked diligently over the course of several years to bring this defendant to justice."

According to the evidence provided at trial, in 2001, four or five months after the October 2000 attack on the U.S.S. Cole, Abu-Jihaad provided classified information regarding the movements of a United States Navy battle group, which was charged with enforcing sanctions against the Taliban and engaging in missions against Al Qaeda, to Azzam Publications, a London-based organization that is alleged to have provided material support and resources to persons engaged in acts of terrorism through the creation and use of various internet web sites, e-mail communications, and other means, including www.azzam.com.

Between approximately February 2000 and the end of 2001, the web site <http://www.azzam.com> was hosted on the computer web servers of a web hosting company located in Trumbull, Connecticut. At the time the classified information was disclosed to Azzam Publications, Abu-Jihaad was an enlistee in the United States Navy on active duty in the Middle East and was stationed aboard the U.S.S. Benfold, one of the ships in the battle group whose movements were disclosed.

Evidence presented at trial indicated that, in December 2003, British law enforcement officers recovered a computer floppy disk in a residence of one of the operators of Azzam Publications. Forensic analysis of the disk disclosed a password-protected Microsoft Word document setting forth previously classified information regarding the upcoming movements of a U.S. Naval battle group as it was to transit from San Diego to its deployment in the Persian Gulf in 2001. The document went on to discuss the battle group's perceived vulnerability to terrorist attack.

According to the evidence at trial, subsequent investigation uncovered several email exchanges from late 2000 to late 2001 between members of Azzam Publications and Abu-Jihaad, including discussions regarding videos Abu-Jihaad ordered from Azzam Publications that promoted violent jihad and extolled the virtues of martyrdom; a small donation of money Abu-Jihaad made to Azzam Publications; and whether it was "safe" to send materials to Abu-Jihaad at his military address onboard the U.S.S. Benfold.

In another email exchange with Azzam Publications, Abu-Jihaad described a recent force protection briefing given aboard his ship, voiced enmity toward America, praised Usama bin Laden and the mujahideen, praised the October 2000 attack on the U.S.S. Cole – which Abu-Jihaad described as a "martyrdom operation," – and advised the members of Azzam Publications that such tactics were working and taking their toll. The email response from Azzam Publications encouraged Abu-Jihaad to "keep up... the psychological warfare [sic]."

The evidence at trial also indicated that Abu-Jihaad's contact information – namely, his Navy email account – was among the few saved in an Azzam Publications online address book.

The evidence at trial included the testimony of six Navy witnesses indicating, among other things, that as a Signalman in the Navigation Division of the U.S.S. Benfold during the 2001 deployment, Abu-Jihaad had access to certain classified information, including advance knowledge of the battle group's movements.

The evidence at trial also included court-authorized wiretap recordings, during which Abu-Jihaad used coded conversation to refer to jihad; admonished others not to speak openly about jihad over the phone or on the Internet because it was "tapped"; and discussed having conversations with associates using a shredder and after frisking them for electronic components.

The calls played for the jury also included Abu-Jihaad's use of the terms "hot meals" and "cold meals" in reference to his current and former ability, respectively, to provide inside information or intelligence about potential U.S. military targets. Abu-Jihaad told an associate that he "hadn't been on that job in X amount of years . . . to see . . . what the fresh meal is," and in 2006, told another associate that he had not "been in the field of making meals" for more than four years. The evidence established that Abu-Jihaad had left the U.S. Navy in 2002.

On March 5, 2008, a federal jury in New Haven found Abu-Jihaad guilty of one count of providing material support of terrorism, and one count disclosing previously classified information relating to the national defense. On March 4, 2009, Judge Kravitz partially granted a defense motion for a judgment of acquittal on the material support of terrorism charge. The charge of disclosing previously classified information relating to the national defense carries a statutory maximum term of imprisonment of 10 years.

Acting U.S. Attorney Dannehy commended the substantial efforts and cooperation of the several federal law enforcement agencies involved in the investigation including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement ("ICE"); the Federal Bureau of Investigation in New Haven, Phoenix and Chicago; the United States Attorney's Offices in Phoenix and Chicago; the Naval Criminal Investigative Service; the Defense Criminal Investigative Service; and the Internal Revenue Service' Electronic Crimes Program.

Acting U.S. Attorney Dannehy also praised the substantial efforts of law enforcement authorities from the Metropolitan Police Service's Counter-Terrorism Command within New Scotland Yard, whose efforts and assistance have been essential in the investigation of this matter.

This case is being pursued by a Task Force out of Connecticut consisting of law enforcement officers from the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Joint Terrorism Task Force, the Internal Revenue Service's Electronic Crimes Program; the Defense Criminal Investigative Service and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service.

The case is being prosecuted by a team of federal prosecutors including Assistant United States Attorneys Stephen Reynolds and William Nardini from the United States Attorney's Office for the District of Connecticut, Trial Attorney Alexis Collins from the Counter-Terrorism Section of the U.S. Department of Justice's National Security Division in Washington and Trial Attorney Rick Green from the Computer Crimes and Intellectual Property Section of the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, with the assistance of Paralegal Specialist David Heath.

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