

THE DENVER POST

Soldier pleads guilty to killing jailed Taliban commander

By Kevin Vaughan
Updated: 05/26/2011

FORT CARSON — Calmly, in a deliberate, emotionless voice, a young soldier described unlocking a cell door inside a U.S. compound in Afghanistan, raising his rifle, pulling the trigger and shooting a captured Taliban commander in the face.



Civilian attorney James Culp, left, walks with Pfc. David Lawrence as they take a break from proceedings at a military court hearing at Fort Carson, Colo., on Wednesday, May 25, 2011. (AP | Barry Gutierrez)

"I walked out," Pfc. David Lawrence said at his court-martial Wednesday, "locked the cell door, and called up to higher." Lawrence's admission came after he pleaded guilty Wednesday to premeditated murder in the killing of a man identified as Mullah Mohebullah — a shooting that Afghan President Hamid Karzai termed an "assassination" and that raised questions about whether enough attention was being paid to mental-health issues among service members.

It amounted to the final reckoning for Lawrence, 20, who acknowledged, for the first time, that he knew the difference between right and wrong when he squeezed the trigger on his M4 rifle after darkness descended Oct. 17 on a compound called Operation Control Center District in Arghandab, Afghanistan.

Three hours after Wednesday's hearing began, the military judge, Col. Mark Bridges, sentenced Lawrence to life in prison with the possibility of parole, a term that will be limited to no more than 12 1/2 years as a result of an agreement reached between the Army and the soldier's lawyers. Bridges also busted him down to the lowest possible rank, E-1, and dishonorably discharged him from the U.S. Army. Lawrence, who is headed to the military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., will be eligible for parole in four years.

When it was over, attorneys for both the prosecution and the defense pronounced themselves satisfied. For Maj. George Brauchler, one of the prosecutors, it represented "justice" in a complicated case in which a trial would have required returning soldiers from the battlefield to testify and could have hinged on dueling diagnoses of Lawrence's mental health. "I hope the message we send is we police our own," Brauchler said.

For defense attorney James Culp, a former soldier, it represented a chance for a young man to own up to his actions and still have a future. "I hope he has a life like all of us want," Culp said. For his parents, it represented a ray of hope after a bewildering situation — the best possible outcome for a family with a history of mental illness that always had trouble talking about it and acknowledging it. "We let him down," said his father, Brett. "The military let him down. And he let himself down."

Little combat exposure

Lawrence, who was born in Ohio and grew up in Indiana, deployed to Afghanistan in the summer of 2010. He had little exposure to combat, but his unit was hit hard on Aug. 30 when Capt. Dale Goetz, a chaplain based at Fort Carson, was one of five soldiers killed in a bombing. A little more than six weeks later, Lawrence shot Mohebullah. Questions arose immediately about whether Lawrence was mentally competent. Several weeks before the shooting, he had been evacuated to a hospital for treatment of an undisclosed mental issue. Since the shooting, one Army evaluation concluded that he suffered from a serious mental disability; a second one found that while he had issues, they were not serious enough to keep him from understanding the "wrongfulness" of his actions.

That set the stage for Wednesday's court martial. Just minutes into the hearing, Capt. Laura O'Donnell, Lawrence's military attorney, stood and told Bridges that he pleaded guilty to the charge of premeditated murder. And although prosecutors and Lawrence's attorneys had already worked out a plea arrangement, Bridges asked numerous questions designed to make sure that Lawrence understood each aspect of the agreement, that he hadn't been coerced into pleading guilty. Lawrence answered scores of questions — "Yes, sir," "Correct, sir," "Roger, sir."

GI describes shooting

Ultimately, he described the night of the shooting to Bridges — hearing of the capture of Mohebullah, swapping shifts with another soldier, waiting until another guard took a bathroom break, slipping the key into the lock on the cell door. "I went into the cell and I shot him in the face, your honor," Lawrence said simply. He said his motive was simple: to avenge Capt. Goetz's death. As he testified, his parents sat about 10 feet behind him, weeping quietly. Bridges accepted the guilty plea, and the trial moved to the sentencing phase.

"Since coming back to the United States, some people have quietly told me I did the right thing," Lawrence told the judge, reading from a handwritten statement. "Some people have said I should get a medal. "They are wrong. No matter how evil the Taliban is, no matter how many of us they kill, what I did was terribly wrong."

And then the attorneys addressed the judge. "Dishonor. Betrayal. Cowardice. Cold-blooded," Brauchler said. "These are words that permeated the defendant's conduct back in October 2010." As Brauchler spoke, photographs flashed on a flat-panel television. In one, Mohebullah lay on his back, his head resting on his right hand, as if asleep. The bullet hole in his left cheek was barely visible — a dark smudge along his beard. A closeup taken from the opposite side of Mohebullah's body graphically showed the pool of blood that accumulated beneath his head after the bullet exited.

"This was a cold, calculated murder," Brauchler said. Culp told the judge that humans kill for many reasons — jealousy, money, power, the love of a woman. Not just anybody, he said, could kill for money or jealousy. "But deep in the heart of every man and woman is the deep capacity, the dark capacity, for revenge," Culp said.

Lawyer asked for mercy

He asked for mercy in recognition that Lawrence enlisted in a time of war and went to a battle zone knowing he could lose his life, then confronted an enemy with no uniform, no face, and no qualms about the indiscriminate killing of women and children.

"For the first time, on Oct. 17, 2010, the Taliban had a face," Culp said. Bridges retired to his chambers to consider his options — Lawrence could have faced life without parole, although the plea agreement made that moot — then returned shortly before 11:30 a.m. to issue the sentence.

Lawrence displayed no visible reaction. He stepped a few feet to the low wall in front of the gallery and hugged first his mother and then his father. "I love you," he said. And then he was handcuffed and led out of the courtroom.

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