

Families testify as Cole trial begins



Lorrie Triplett, wife of slain Cole sailor Andrew Triplett, leaves the Federal Court Building in Norfolk on Tuesday. STEPHEN M. KATZ/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

By **TIM MCGLONE**, The Virginian-Pilot
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NORFOLK - Family members of the 17 sailors killed in the bombing of the destroyer Cole revealed Tuesday the emotional and physical turmoil they've endured since hearing the news that their loved ones died more than six years ago.

Suicide attempts. Marital strife. Job losses. Illnesses. The attack still affects them.

The families arrived in U.S. District Court on Tuesday seeking to hold the Republic of Sudan accountable for assisting al-Qaida terrorists with planning and training for the attack.

The bombing on Oct. 12, 2000, struck the Norfolk-based vessel as it was refueling at a port in Yemen, just across the Red Sea from Sudan where the terrorists trained. Two al-Qaida members pulled up next to the Cole in a small boat and detonated a large cache of explosives. Besides the 17 killed, 39 others were injured.

The trial, in which Sudan has refused to participate, will determine whether the families should be compensated for their losses with some \$68 million in Sudanese assets the U.S. government has kept frozen for more than a decade.

In testimony that left court spectators sobbing, parent Lou Gunn of Virginia Beach described receiving the dreadful phone call that October day.

He was working as a counselor in a Washington Veterans Affairs office. He had just held a session with a couple dealing with the death - unrelated to the Cole - of their son. The first call, from his wife's sister, informed him that the Cole was bombed.

Gunn had spoken to his 22-year-old son, Cherone, three days earlier. Cherone had told him that he was happy to have finally found his way in life by joining the Navy. "That made me very happy," Gunn said.

Then after lunch, as Gunn was about to meet with another grieving family, his son Jason phoned.

"He was screaming," Gunn said from the stand. "He told me that Cherone was one of those killed."

Gunn paused to compose himself.

Through tears he described what happened next.

"I hit the floor," he said. "I felt like someone had pulled my skin inside out, it hurt so much."

He threw a chair out a window, turned over a filing cabinet, punched holes in the wall. With his fist bleeding, he reached into his desk and pulled out a letter opener or a knife - he couldn't remember which.

He said he was consumed with guilt by encouraging his son to join the Navy. Gunn himself served proudly for 21 years.

"I felt I let my wife down," he said. "I felt I let my boys down. All I know is I wanted to take my life."

His training as a grief counselor did nothing to help him.

Colleagues entered the room, struggled with Gunn and took the weapon away.

"I think I finally came to my senses," he said.

He returned to his family in Virginia Beach.

Suffolk resident Lorrie Triplett, who lost her husband, Andrew, in the attack, said on the witness stand that even after hearing of the bombing and being told that her husband was missing she could not accept that he might be dead.

"He's going to be fine because there's nothing wrong with my husband," she recalled telling someone.

She said she's still in disbelief that he's gone.

What made it worse was that the body was not recoverable.

"All I got back was an autopsy," she said. "I didn't get to touch him."

She read in court a poem that one of her daughters wrote about her father entitled "A teardrop for him."

"I can't do anything, but think of him," it says in part.

"I just can't get him off my mind," she read. "Half of my heart is gone."

Other relatives are expected to testify when the trial continues today.

Gunn, who has been one of the more outspoken victims, has been pushing to hold Sudan and others accountable. He said it wasn't fair that Sudan now refuses to acknowledge its link to al-Qaida.

Sudan attorney Carl Gray sat through Tuesday's proceedings largely silent.

U.S. District Judge Robert G. Doumar asked Gray whether he wished to ask any questions during the trial.

"I'm not authorized to ask any questions," he said.



Terrorism expert Lorenzo Vidino, left, is depicted discussing a picture of Osama bin Laden. Sudan provided diplomatic passports to al-Qaida operatives, Vidino said. ALBA BRAGOLI ILLUSTRATION/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Attorneys for the Cole families submitted evidence and presented witnesses Tuesday outlining Sudan's ties to al-Qaida in the 1990s after Osama bin Laden moved there to set up terrorist training camps.

Bin Laden had given \$50 million to the Sudanese government to start up a bank and assisted in building a major road and an airport.

A video played in court showed bin Laden being welcomed by Sudanese government and military leaders at the grand opening of the airport. Bin Laden is greeted with a large, flowered wreath placed over his head like a necklace.

Terrorism expert Lorenzo Vidino of Tufts University explained how Sudan had provided hundreds of diplomatic passports to al-Qaida operatives to move freely, without security checks, in and out of the country. Sudan also allowed al-Qaida to freely import and export weapons and bombs. Sudan's military was at al-Qaida's service, Vidino said.

When neighbors of al-Qaida training camps complained of the loud explosions and gunfire, the Sudanese police "took care of it," he said. The complaints ceased.

"There was complete cooperation between the Sudan government and al-Qaida," Vidino said.

There is little dispute that Sudan and al-Qaida worked hand in hand through the 1990s and into this century, said Andrew Hall, one of the attorneys for the families.

He asked Doumar to find that the bombing could not have occurred without the assistance of Sudan.

The trial is expected to last another day or two. Doumar could rule from the bench, but a written opinion would not be issued for some time.

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