



Army files charge in combat tactic

By Rowan Scarborough

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The Army has filed a criminal assault charge against an American officer who coerced an Iraqi into providing information that foiled a planned attack on U.S. soldiers.

Lt. Col. Allen B. West says he did not physically abuse the detainee, but used psychological pressure by twice firing his service weapon away from the Iraqi. After the shots were fired, the detainee, an Iraqi police officer, gave up the information on a planned attack around the northern Iraqi town of Saba al Boor.

But the Army is taking a dim view of the interrogation tactic. An Army official at the Pentagon confirmed to The Washington Times yesterday that Col. West has been charged with one count of aggravated assault. A military source said an Article 32 hearing has been scheduled in Iraq that could lead to the Army court-martialing Col. West and sending him to prison for a maximum term of eight years.

Some soldiers are privately questioning the Army's drive to punish the officer for an interrogation technique that likely is used regularly to get information from terrorists.

Col. West's unit in Iraq operates amid extreme danger. Fighters loyal to ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein are poised at any moment to kill the soldiers in ambushes using explosive devices, guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

Col. West, 42, says he pressured the Iraqi after taking into account the dangerous environment and the risk to his soldiers' lives.

In response to an e-mail from The Times, Col. West, a 19-year veteran, gave his version of events.



U.S. Army 4th Infantry Division soldiers gather outside a first aid station in Tikrit, Iraq, Tuesday, Oct. 28, 2003. One U.S. soldier was wounded when insurgents opened fire late Tuesday on the southern gate of the main U.S. military base in Saddam Hussein's hometown. (AP)



Col. West is a member of the 4th Infantry, the Fort Hood, Texas, division occupying areas around Tikrit, Saddam's hometown and an area infested with loyalists of the former regime.

An informant reported that there was an assassination plot against Col. West, an artillery officer working with the local governing council in Saba al Boor. On Aug. 16, guerrillas attacked members of the colonel's unit who were on their way to Saba al Boor.

An informant told the soldiers that one person involved in the attack was a town policeman. Col. West sent two sergeants to detain the policeman, who was placed in a detention center near the Taji air base. The interrogators had no luck at first, so Col. West decided to take over the questioning.

"I asked for soldiers to accompany me and told them we had to gather information and that it could get ugly," Col. West said in his e-mail.

He said his soldiers "physically aggress[ed]" the prisoner. A subsequent investigation resulted in nonjudicial punishment for them in the form of fines.

After the physical "aggress" failed, Col. West says he brandished his pistol.

"I did use my 9 mm weapon to threaten him and fired it twice. Once I fired into the weapons clearing barrel outside the facility alone, and the next time I did it while having his head close to the barrel. I fired away from him. I stood in between the firing and his person.

"I admit that what I did was not right but it was done with the concern of the safety of my soldiers and myself."

Col. West said he informed his superior of his actions. The incident lay dormant until the Army conducted an overall command-climate investigation of the brigade. The investigation turned up the interrogation technique, and Col. West was charged with one count of aggravated assault.

Col. West said the gunshots spurred the Iraqi to provide the location of the planned sniper attack and the names of three guerrilla fighters.

Col. West says the 4th Infantry's staff judge advocate, the unit's prosecutor, is offering him two choices: resign short of gaining retirement benefits or face court-martial.



Article 128 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice describes assault in these terms: "Any person subject to this chapter who attempts or offers with unlawful force or violence to do bodily harm to another person, whether or not the attempt or offer is consummated, is guilty of assault and shall be punished as a court-martial may direct."

The Army relieved Col. West of his battalion command and has placed him in the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which is attached to the 4th Infantry in Kirkuk.

Said his wife, Angela, who lives in Fort Hood: "My husband is a top-of-the-line officer. My husband is an African-American. He has had to overcome a number of things to get where he is."

"I accept being retired at the grade of major and paying whatever fine required, but resignation and prison seems an attempt to destroy me," Col. West says. "All I wish is to go away, re-establish my family and retain some of my dignity."