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Faulty Intel Source "Curve Ball" Revealed

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(CBS) Did Saddam Hussein have weapons of mass destruction? No, he did not. We've known that for some time now. So where did the intelligence come from that he was building up his arsenal? Fantastically, the most compelling part came from one obscure Iraqi defector who came in and out of history like a comet. His code name, ironically, was "Curve Ball" and his information became the pillar of the case Colin Powell made to the United Nations before the war. Who is Curve Ball and how did he fool the world's elite intelligence agencies?

60 Minutes spent two years, and traveled to nine countries, trying to solve the mystery. We talked to intelligence sources, to people who knew Curve Ball and to people who worked with him. As **correspondent Bob Simon** reports, Curve Ball's real name has never been made public, nor has any video of him, until now.

60 Minutes has obtained video of Rafid Ahmed Alwan at a 1993 Baghdad wedding, filmed six years before he became the key Iraqi source known as Curve Ball, six years before he helped launch the war.

Former CIA senior official Tyler Drumheller was an insider and watched Curve Ball emerge from nowhere.

Asked how important Curve Ball was in taking us to war in Iraq, Drumheller tells Simon, "If they had not had Curve Ball they would have probably found something else. 'Cause there was a great determination to do it. But going to war in Iraq, under the circumstances we did, Curve Ball was the absolutely essential case."

How did Rafid Alwan become Curve Ball? **60 Minutes'** investigation led us to Germany, where in November 1999, Alwan arrived by car and requested asylum at a refugee center outside Nuremberg. The 32-year-old told German intelligence that he was a chemical engineer in Saddam's Iraq, and that he had done so well in university he had been made director of a site at Djerf al Nadaf, just outside Baghdad. The Iraqis called it a "seed purification plant." In reality, he said, the place was secretly making mobile biological weapons.

He told the Germans specially-equipped trucks made their way to one end of a warehouse, entered doors there, hooked up to hoses and pumps and brewed biological agents. The germ trucks then exited hidden doors on the other side.

Alwan's story fit what Western intelligence agencies feared: that Saddam might turn to mobile weapons to evade American bombs. The Germans hid Alwan in Nuremberg, then later in the town of Erlangen. He was given a code name: Curve Ball. He was interrogated once a week, sometimes twice, for a year and a half. He told the Germans he didn't want to meet with Americans. Only summaries of his debriefings were transmitted to Washington. Still, there were enough details to convince analysts at the CIA.

"Curve Ball was the one piece of evidence where they could say, 'Look at this. If they have this capability, where they can transport biological weapons, anthrax, all these horrible weapons, they can attack our troops with them. They can give them to terrorist groups,'" Drumheller says.

One of Curve Ball's reports was especially alarming: proof that the agents were lethal, something Curve Ball claimed he had seen while working at Djerf al Nadaf.

"He said, 'In 1998, working around these tanks, there was even an accident and 12 people were killed.' And that got everybody's attention," Drumheller explains.

So much so that in February 2001, German and American experts met in Munich to discuss Curve Ball. The Americans revealed they had located Djerf al Nadaf on overhead imagery; **60 Minutes** found it on Google Earth.

The imagery was very close to what Curve Ball had described, with one exception: "If you look at the photos, all the way back to 1998, there was a wall that was built there," Drumheller points out. "Like a cinderblock wall that was built there, that nothing could go through."

The wall stood right in front of where Curve Ball said the trucks went in. CIA analysts who believed in Curve Ball had an explanation.

"There was an idea that it could have been a fake wall," Drumheller says.

The analysts believed Iraq had put up a fake wall to make the Americans think no trucks could pass through. The analysts also believed Curve Ball because he named names. He claimed that Dr. Basil al Sa'ati, a noted nuclear scientist, was a senior official in Iraq's mobile bio-weapons program. British intelligence found Dr. Basil outside of Iraq and pressed him on Djerf al Nadaf, as did **60 Minutes**.

"Rafid Alwan told German intelligence that you personally were fully involved in the project to use Djerf al Nadaf for

mobile biological weapons," Simon tells Dr. Basil.

"Big lie," the doctor replies.

If something were going on there, Dr. Basil says he would "definitely" have known about it.

"There are people in the American intelligence community...who believe that seed purification is a cover for biological weapons production," Simon remarks.

"No. It was, it was really seed purification," the doctor replies.

Dr. Basil pointed out that if he had been working on something top secret, why did Saddam let him emigrate from Iraq in 1999? In Germany, Curve Ball was caught by surprise. He didn't know Dr. Basil had left Iraq. Curve Ball became less cooperative, more nervous in debriefings. The Germans became uneasy about their source. And they weren't alone. At a CIA meeting in December 2002, the agency's former central group chief, Margaret Henoach, raised her own doubts.

"I said, 'You know, I don't know who this guy is. There's no proof that he is who he is. There's no proof that any of this ever happened. And, from my perspective, I just don't think we should trust this,'" Henoach recalls.

The top analyst, who believed Curve Ball, brought up the alleged accident at Djerf al Nadaf and said there were pictures of Curve Ball in a hazmat suit.

"Then I said, 'How do you know that was him if he's completely covered? 'Cause it could be me.' And, as God as my witness, she looked at me like a pig looking at a wristwatch. And I thought it was over. And, when I went back, I sort of said to my boss, 'Well, I'm such a genius,'" Henoach says.

"That's it for Curve Ball," Simon remarks.

"We killed that one," Henoach says. "And it was whack-a-mole. I mean, he just popped right back up."

Curve Ball was still seen as credible at the highest level of the CIA.

On Dec. 18, 2002, sources tell **60 Minutes** that an urgent request from CIA Director George Tenet was relayed to the head of German intelligence. Tenet was going to meet President Bush in three days to discuss the case against Iraq. Tenet wanted the Germans to let Curve Ball appear on television or have an American expert debrief Curve Ball and then go on TV with the story.

Failing that, Tenet wanted to use Curve Ball's information publicly. An answer was requested within 48 hours, before Tenet went to the White House.

The answer came from Berlin 48 hours later from the German intelligence chief, Dr. August Hanning. In a letter, a copy of which **60 Minutes** has obtained, Hanning began, "Dear George." He said no to Curve Ball being interviewed on television or by an American officer. Hanning wrote that Curve Ball's reporting was "plausible and believable," but, he added, "attempts to verify the information have been unsuccessful." Curve Ball's reports "must be considered unconfirmed," Hanning wrote. If Tenet still wanted to use the information despite these caveats, Hanning said he could if the source was protected.

Since the letter was addressed to him directly, **60 Minutes** wanted Tenet's response. Through a spokesman, he said he never saw the letter.

Former CIA European division chief Tyler Drumheller doesn't believe that. "He needs to talk to his special assistants if he didn't see it. And the fact is, he had very good special assistants. I'm sure they showed it to him. And I'm sure it was just, it wasn't what they wanted to see," Drumheller says.

The next day, Dec. 21, Tenet met with President Bush and told him making a public case that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction was "a slam dunk." Making that case would be Secretary of State Colin Powell before the United Nations. Powell sent his chief of staff, Col. Larry Wilkerson, to the CIA to prepare the presentation. Wilkerson says Tenet and his experts brought up Iraq's mobile bio-weapons program.

"They presented it in a very dynamic, dramatic, we know this is accurate way," Wilkerson tells Simon.

"Did it make any difference that the source on this was a firsthand witness?" Simon asks.

"Certainly it did. This was a man who had actually been in the belly of the beast. He had been in the lab. He had been there when an accident occurred. He'd seen people killed. And the implication was, strong implication, that they weren't killed because of the accident in the explosion, they were killed because they were contaminated. Yes, the source was very credible. As it was presented by the CIA," Wilkerson says.

Asked if Colin Powell accepted all this on blind faith, Wilkerson says, "Well, you're the secretary of state. You're not the head of intelligence for the United States. And you depend on the director of central intelligence to assimilate all the intelligence community's input and give it to you."

Once the speech was ready, Wilkerson felt the section on mobile bio-weapons was the crown jewel. "This was the strongest part of the secretary's presentation," Wilkerson recalls.

"And Secretary Powell was convinced as well?" Simon asks.

"I'm convinced he was convinced," Wilkerson replies.

On Feb. 5, 2003, Powell told the world that Saddam Hussein had mobile biological weapons. The source: Curve Ball.

"The source was an eyewitness, an Iraqi chemical engineer, who supervised one of these facilities. He actually was present during biological agent production runs. He was also at the site when an accident occurred in 1998. Twelve technicians died from exposure to biological agents," Powell said.

Prominently displayed were models of the mobile trucks Curve Ball had sketched to the Germans. The most damning evidence in the speech had come from a source no American had interviewed. Just three days later, U.N. inspectors in Iraq visited a suspected WMD location -- Djerf al Nadaf, Curve Ball's secret site. And what did they find there? A wall -- the very wall that had appeared on the overhead imagery back in 2001. Curve Ball had claimed the mobile bio-weapons trucks entered through doors at one end of a warehouse.

"When the inspectors examined the facility, they found that this was an impossibility," explains Jim Corcoran, whose job it was to relay intelligence to the inspectors in Iraq.

Corcoran learned the wall blocked any entrance to the warehouse. As for Curve Ball's hidden doors at the other end that would allow the trucks to exit?

"Again, there was a wall there, no doors. And outside there was a stone fence that would have made it impossible for this to have occurred," Corcoran says.

Corcoran knew Djerf al Nadaf was of great importance, so he sent inspectors back 20 days later to take samples, to see if any traces of biological agents were there. "They proved negative," Corcoran tells Simon. "There was nothing there."

But the inspectors' findings in Iraq made no impact; the war began three weeks later.

Once the U.S. took over Iraq and started looking for WMD, Curve Ball's story began to unravel. His university record was located. **60 Minutes** obtained a copy. Rafid Ahmed Alwan, aka Curve Ball, had claimed to the Germans he graduated at the top of his class in chemical engineering. Well, not quite.

60 Minutes showed a copy of the record to Dr. Basil, Alwan's former boss and a scientist himself.

"It's a 59, 50, 50, 50, 50, 50, 67. I can see all his marks are 50, 50s," Dr. Basil remarks.

Those marks were out of a score of 100.

"Not a great student," Simon remarks.

"Never. No, never," Dr. Basil replies.

Not only that, it turns out Djerf al Nadaf was a seed purification plant after all. Dr. Basil was the head of production design. Alwan worked for him as an engineer, but only while the facility was being built.

"Rafid left few months after we finished Djerf al Nadaf, which was I would expect Rafid left sometime 1995," Dr. Basil says.

He did. **60 Minutes** discovered Alwan then worked at the Babel television production company, where he stole expensive equipment. An arrest warrant was issued for him; charges were dropped when Alwan agreed to repay Babel. After that misadventure? The man who invited Alwan to his wedding, Dr. Hillal al Dulaimi, says Alwan's career took an even more unlikely turn.

"He working for a cosmetics," Dr. Hillal tells Simon. "He did some homemade cosmetics."

As for the biological accident that supposedly killed 12 people at Djerf al Nadaf in 1998? It never happened. Rafid Alwan wasn't even in Iraq when he said it happened. He had left the country, first traveling to Jordan, then Egypt, then Libya, before making his way to Morocco. From there, Alwan's trail ran cold, until he showed up in Germany and became Curve Ball. The case finally ended in Munich in March 2004, when the Germans allowed a CIA officer to interrogate Curve Ball.

"And the key thing, I think, was the wall. He showed him pictures of the wall," Drumheller remembers.

What did Curve Ball say?

"'You doctored these pictures.' And he said, 'No, we didn't.' He said, we didn't doctor them," Drumheller says.

The wall had been built in 1997. Curve Ball didn't know it existed because he had already left Djerf al Nadaf.

"Curve Ball was caught," Simon remarks.

"And Curve Ball said, 'I don't think I'm gonna say anything else,'" Drumheller says.

The CIA finally acknowledged Curve Ball was a fraud. But why did he do it?

Former CIA insider Tyler Drumheller has an idea. "It was a guy trying to get his Green Card, essentially, in Germany, playing the system for what it was worth. It just shows sort of the law of unintended consequences," he says.

Rafid Alwan got what he wanted. He is thought to be living in Germany today, most likely under a new name, after pulling off one of the deadliest con jobs of our time.

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