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The Making Of John Walker Lindh

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At 1 in the morning on the day John Phillip Walker Lindh was born, his father Frank drove home from the hospital, listening to the radio in the quiet of his car: it was a dramatic rendition of When Johnny Comes Marching Home. Before falling into bed, Frank captured the moment in his diary: "Earlier this evening," he wrote, "we had a new son, a robust, pink, knowledgeable little sucker whom we'll call John after John Lennon (the musician) and John Marshall (the judge)." It had been a hard labor, but his wife Marilyn had "performed beautifully, with not a bit of medication. So I toast to my new son John, may his life be long and fruitful..."

He awoke the next morning with "the thrill of John's birth still upon me--it seems strange, at first, to refer to these little creatures by the names we give them, but in time, they do come to be the names."

By the time John Walker Lindh came marching home almost 21 years later, he had come to be many other names as well. He was doodoo and John Doe in his teenage Internet messages, when he posed as a black rapper and denounced white kids who acted black. He was Dr. J, Hine E. Craque and Mr. Mujahid (holy warrior), as he posted in chat rooms inveighing against Zionists and homosexuals. He was Suleyman al-Lindh, the name he took when he declared himself a Muslim and began wearing white robes and cap around the streets of San Anselmo, Calif. His Taliban brethren knew him as Abdul Hamid.

There would eventually be other names. He is the Traitor to the general public, which sees a Taliban soldier who attended the training camps and allegedly shook the hand of Osama bin Laden. He is a Lost Soul to his family's friends and defenders, who see a brilliant kid from a nice family who went off to find purity and peace and found fanaticism and war. But a Time investigation of his path to jihad, relying on dozens of witnesses, reveals an even more complex person than the caricatures would allow. When Lindh is sentenced this Friday as part of a plea bargain, a judge will have to decide which of his identities matters most in determining how much of the rest of his life he should spend in jail.

Great parenting job" is how Lindh's mother recalls the anonymous threat she received. "You should be shot with the same gun used to shoot your son." People who don't know Lindh's parents have certainly heard a lot about them: reports typically characterize them as the hippie liberals from Marin County so tolerant of a child's quest to find himself that he ultimately found himself with a bullet in his leg in an Afghan jail. But people who knew the family, grew up with them, first in Maryland and later in California, are often fiercely protective and quick to defend them. "I don't want to see one more bit of pain on this family or on this young man," says Bill Gilcher, a former neighbor in Maryland. "I think it's really too soon to make him a poster child for liberal, valueless, middle-class America."

Frank described his soft, round baby boy as "a little Buddha" and recalls listening to the child softly sing himself to sleep in his crib for about a quarter of an hour every night. He even reminisced with John recently about it, when he visited him in prison. "You know," Frank remembers his son saying, "that's actually my earliest memory, singing myself to sleep." The quiet concert lasted until John was about 4 and had to share his bedroom with his brother. "Connell, three years older, told John to shut up. He didn't like him singing at night," Frank recalls. "So poor John's singing days really kind of came to an end."

The family lived in a rented house on Buffalo Avenue in the Washington suburb of Takoma Park, Md., a house dwarfed by the huge Victorians nearby. Marilyn stopped taking college classes to take care of Connell, then John and eventually little sister Naomi. She nursed each of the younger two until they were about 4 years old, in John's case stopping "cold turkey" on his fourth birthday. The house could be dim and dreary, with "too many dishes in the sink," says a neighbor, Jim Colwell. "It was kind of a turnover to hang out with them." But his ex-wife Judy remembers Marilyn as "the kind of mother who would get down on the floor and play with her kids, and she would do that even if her house was a mess." They used to shop together for clothes at the local thrift stores; the Lindhs were very frugal, especially when Frank was working his way through law school at Georgetown University. They drove a car handed down from her parents, and she sometimes worked retail jobs to make ends meet. To be sure the kids were eating some vegetables, Judy Colwell says, Marilyn would sneak some eggplant into the spaghetti sauce.

The Lindhs eventually saved enough to buy a white brick rambler on

The Lindhs eventually saved enough to buy a white brick rambler on Walden Road in Silver Spring, Md. It was a neighborhood of aspiring professionals, lawyers, lobbyists and professors whom Frank liked to surprise with a visit, bearing a plate of homemade brownies. He used to wear a costume when he took the kids trick-or-treating. One year John dressed as a toilet seat, in an outfit he made himself with lots of tin foil. At Christmas they decorated a live tree and planted it in the yard. "They took life seriously; they took their family seriously," says Gilcher. "They were the kind of people who didn't just go with the flow."

Gilcher saw in John a future scholar, an "intellectual of some kind," and John's close friends were the same way, especially after third grade. John and some of his brightest pals left Takoma Park Elementary School and rode the bus for 45 minutes to attend a program for highly gifted kids, housed in portable classrooms at Kensington Parkwood Elementary School. "We were kind of the not-cool kids," recalls classmate Adam Parr. On the playgrounds the cool kids played soccer; John and his pals created games out of their heads, fantasy games involving knights and ogres or movie characters. This was a time "to act like something you're not," says Parr, "like a policeman."

They may have been different, but they weren't picked on for it. "No one is getting beat up," Parr recalls. "No one is taking your lunch money." Some kids described feeling cut off in their "intense" program, but in another sense they had found a safe place for smart kids. "Everybody was a geek," classmate Bennett Madison notes. "Nobody was really shunned for it." John, he recalls, was "very analytical and very thoughtful, to a point where most fourth-graders are not. And that made him a little bit unusual." When the boys sat in the back of the bus, trading Marvel comic cards and seeing what they could get away with, John watched as if he were in a laboratory. The great thrill was to give passersby the finger through the window in the emergency exit. They imagined that one day a policeman would swoop down and order them off the bus. "John

was, like, keeping a notebook of their reactions," says Madison. "He was thinking of it as an experiment, where the rest of us were thinking, 'Oh, let's give people the finger!'"

However easygoing John seemed, he also began missing a lot of school on account of allergies and asthma. Madison claims that John told him he had also started seeing a therapist. In their circle of high achievers, this did not strike Madison as unusual. "Half of the other kids were totally falling apart," he says. "The kids were all really smart, and sometimes the really smart kids are kind of neurotic."

After Frank finished law school, he worked for a series of area firms and as a litigation attorney for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission from 1987 until 1989. That year, when John was 8, his father joined the Washington office of Le Boeuf, Lamb, Leiby & MacRae and was later invited to move to San Francisco to work in the firm's office there. Thus would begin a whole new chapter for the family. "We didn't keep in touch after they left here," Gilcher says, but "it's hard for me to imagine them fitting into a type of stereotypical life in California. The usual account I've read is this frozen image of a Takoma Park hippie moves into a fancy suburb in San Francisco and lives in a hot tub the rest of their lives. I have some doubts that that's the case."

John's friends didn't keep up either. Just before the day of the move, several of his friends came over for a last sleepover. His mother gave each of her son's friends a stack of a couple of dozen stamped, addressed envelopes so they could stay in touch after the move. "I never sent a single one," says Madison, and when John called him a year or so later, he felt bad about it. "He sounded kind of lonely," Madison says.

For John, then 10, the transition to California went badly. The family settled in the hills of San Anselmo, a picturesque little town in affluent Marin County, about 20 miles north of San Francisco. But John never quite found himself in these new environs. He moved from school to school: he spent fifth grade in one private school and began sixth in another. Midway through that year, he transferred again, to a public elementary school. He was skinny and "sickly," a classmate's mother recalls, and he frequently missed classes. It turned out John was suffering from an intestinal disorder, a particularly embarrassing affliction for a preteen that meant frequent trips to the bathroom. In 1993 the family pulled John out of yet another elementary school and opted to teach him at home.

For two years John was virtually a shut-in. He studied with a tutor and rarely ventured outside to play. Family life too became strained. His parents' marriage was on the rocks; although divorce would not come until 1999, his father would later say the effective separation occurred six years earlier. Amid all of this, John decided to drop his father's surname and use his mother's maiden name, Walker. By autumn 1995 John's health had improved, and he re-emerged into the world, entering Redwood High School as a freshman. He spent five months there, long enough to rate a mug shot in the school yearbook. (He was "invisible," a former classmate says.) But in January he switched to an independent-study high school, Tamiscal, and suddenly seemed to be in a hurry, though even now it's hard to know what was propelling him. After two years, at the age of 16, John earned his high school equivalency and was done with academia.

For diversion, John would often turn to the Internet. There, using phony names, John could be cocky and even at times condescending. He developed a taste for pop music, particularly hip-hop, and in 1995, at the age of 14, he posted a rap song on rec.music.hip-hop. In it he refers to himself as John Doe, boasting, in the posturing typical of the genre, that he is "Hip Hop's Christ." ("I'm much more than merely a master, in fact I'm faster than the last flash flood disaster.") The lyrics slam many of the biggest names in hip-hop. In this world, the quiet, self-effacing boy was in control.

Music and the Internet would open a door to the spiritual world. His cousin Thomas Maguire says he and John first developed an interest in Islam from what Maguire described in a website posting as the "pseudo-Muslim murmurs within hip-hop music." John already had an inkling about the faith. His mother took him, then 12, to see Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X*, and she says he was moved by a scene showing people of all nations bowing down to God. By his later teens, John was a conspiracy enthusiast: his Web wanderings covered ufos, the "new world order," the Illuminati and the cia. He also sampled religions online and in the end was attracted to Islam. John frequented Islamic newsgroups and posted questions about the faith: Does the Koran forbid certain musical instruments? What would he have to give up to become a Muslim? ("Is it O.K.," he asked, "to watch cartoons on TV?") He tried to locate online hard-to-find books--on Islam, the Palestinian cause, the Freemasons. He sometimes signed off as "Brother Mujahid"; his e-mail name, apparently a play on hip-hop monikers, was Hine E. Craque.

Years later, after Lindh's arrest in Afghanistan, quiet, affluent San Anselmo would be described sneeringly as a place for overindulgent hot-tubbers who let their kids do whatever they want. Locals prefer to call themselves tolerant. So when folks at, say, Bubba's Diner on San Anselmo Avenue would see the tall, awkward, teenage John strolling the streets in Islamic dress, they did not get especially worked up. It was just another kid experimenting with his life, with his spiritual side, certainly nothing to fear or loathe. "He actually looked very lonely," recalls Elaine Scheeter, who owns Paper Ships, Books & Crystals, a store for spiritual pursuits. "I got the impression that he did not fit in."

But John was finding his place. He had become hooked on Islam and was searching for a place to pray. He visited the Redwood Mosque, a nearby prayer hall that sits on 22 acres of woodland grove. But he dismissed it as insufficiently orthodox. He later turned up at the Islamic Center of Mill Valley, a small mosque serving mainly South Asian immigrants on a tree-lined residential street not far from Highway 101. In late 1997 he was ready for commitment. He presented himself before two witnesses at the Mill Valley Mosque and declared the shahada, an affirmation of faith: "I declare that there is no god except God, and I declare that Muhammad is the Messenger of God." With that, he became a Muslim.

It was all foreign to the Roman Catholic Frank and Marilyn. They were attuned to matters of the spirit, particularly Marilyn, who was attracted to Native American rites. But they had little experience with Islam. Still, they were pleased to see that their son had found something that moved him. And at a time when other parents they knew were coping with their kids' experimentation with drugs, booze and fast driving, it all seemed fairly innocent. Marilyn would drop young John off at the mosque for Friday prayers. At the end of the evening, a fellow believer would drive John home.

John's infatuation blossomed into a deep commitment when he met followers of Tablighi Jama'at, a group that performs missionary work and preaches a strict interpretation of the Koran. While nonpolitical, it looks forward to the rejuvenation of an Islamic caliphate. In November 1997 John joined the group at a gathering in Santa Clara, Calif. Says Hateem Bazian, an Islamic-law scholar in the Bay Area acquainted with John: "The Tablighi Jama'at are best at providing, giving a hug to a person who comes in." For perhaps the first time, John was surrounded by people with whom he shared a bond.

He began to spend weekends at the Islamic Center of San Francisco, where many of the missionary group's followers gathered. His weekends were quite unlike those of his former high school classmates. At the Islamic Center, John and his colleagues would pray, eat and set out on missions to area mosques. "John Walker was in desperate need of having Allah in his heart," says an elder of the congregation who gives his name as Mohammed. "God said, 'You come to me walking. I come to you running.'"

In 1997 John told his parents he wanted to travel to the Middle East to become a serious scholar of Islam. He announced he planned to go to Yemen to study a pure form of Arabic and be immersed in Islamic culture. Now, years later, people criticize Frank and Marilyn for poor parenting, for letting their boy set off for a hostile place overseas without knowing what he was in for. Marilyn says they didn't let him go just "willy-nilly." She did some research online into the Yemen Language Center (YLC), where he

planned to register. She was aware of tribal kidnappings and other perils. But she put on a brave front. "As a parent, you want your kids to follow their heart," she says. "To be honest, I would have liked for him to stay home." Frank says much the same: "When kids get a certain age, you let them go. You wish them well, and you help them, and you support, and you never stop loving them, but you let them explore the world and find themselves." Frank also found comfort in the Islamic custom of hospitality for fellow believers. And he always tried to appreciate his son's faith, one day telling John, "I don't think you've really converted to Islam as much as you've found it within yourself; you sort of found your inner Muslim."

For John Walker Lindh, Yemen had the promise of an Islamic Shangri-La, a country within the Dar al-Islam (Realm of the Faith), on the same peninsula as the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, a land where some of the oldest wellsprings of Arab culture could be traced. He introduced himself as Suleyman al-Lindh and arrived dressed in what he believed was the proper attire. "I remember him the first day he arrived," says Rizwan Marwan, a Canadian Shi'ite now living and studying in London. Lindh was wearing the clothing worn by devout Muslims from Pakistan and the Indian subcontinent.

He did not fit in. Sana'a is an inexpensive city, and foreign students tend to live it up there, eating well in the modest restaurants, sitting at the dinky cafes sipping tea and dragging on the water pipe, shopping from the abundant display of souvenirs everywhere and even chewing khat, a leaf with ephedrine-like qualities that many Yemenites are addicted to. All of the worldliness appalled the 17-year-old convert, and he complained about coed classes to the YLC director Sabri Saleem. "He was a pain in the butt," says Saleem. Lindh once posted a note on the door of fellow expatriate students who lived across from his room. Obtained by Time and the Yemen Observer, it reads, "Dear Inhabitants of This Room, Please abstain from getting naked in front of the window. Our neighbors from the apartment building across the street have complained to Sabri, who has ignored them. However, this is not a matter to be taken lightly. Some of our neighbors have threatened to shoot Sabri and/or the inhabitants of this room and the room next to it. Please pass this message on to the inhabitants of room #2, and thank you for your decency."

Lindh's fellow students mockingly nicknamed him Yusuf Islam, after the folk singer Cat Stevens, a celebrated convert to Islam who took that name. For his part, Suleyman Lindh shunned his fellow expatriates and, after five weeks at the YLC--even though his parents had already paid half the \$6,000 annual tuition--dropped out of the secular center. He frequented mosques and other holy places. Says a teacher: "He was always wandering around the mosques of old Sana'a, from the Grand Mosque to the Talha Mosque to the Motawakil and Ali Ibn Abi Taleb." Yet even the religion bewildered him. He had been indoctrinated as a Sunni of the Salafi sect, but most of the mosques in the area were Shi'ite mosques of the Zaidi sect--which can be compared to an evangelical Protestant finding himself at worship in a Catholic church. Eventually, Lindh learned to travel to the outskirts of the crowded Shamayla zone, to find a Salafi mosque, the Ahl El Kheir.

The puritanical Salafis, who forbid the chewing of khat, built the Ahl El Kheir Mosque from plain beige bricks, with black basalt adorning windows paneled in white iron. The interior of the mosque is unadorned: whitewashed walls, green and blue carpets. Mosque decoration is considered heresy. This was the Islam Lindh sought. It was reinforced by what he learned at Al-Iman University, where he studied after leaving the YLC. There he would have heard the teachings of Al-Iman's founder, Sheikh al-Zindani, a fiery political leader whose ideas parallel bin Laden's. Lindh's parents never inquired about his new school's politics.

Yemenites say the blame for Lindh's radicalism lies elsewhere, however. A language teacher says Lindh came from the U.S. already hating America. And Lindh's correspondence from Yemen evinces an ambivalence toward the U.S. In a letter to his mother dated Sept. 23, 1998, he refers to the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Africa the previous month, saying the attacks "seem far more likely to have been carried out by the American government than by any Muslims." By October he writes home, saying, "Although I'm not particularly fond of the idea of returning to America, I do have a four-month vacation in about six months. This means you'll probably be seeing me again before you expected."

Leaving Yemen in February 1999 turned out to be tumultuous. YLC director Saleem says Lindh was detained when he tried to leave the country without an exit visa and was taken to the school he had abandoned, to clear matters up. "His face was awful," says Saleem. "I think he was tired of Yemen, tired of everything, and he wanted to go home." But even when Lindh was finally permitted to return to the U.S., the drama was not behind him. Life at home, he soon discovered, had undergone a dramatic change. In late 1998 Frank said he was gay and moved out. On June 30, 1999, not long after Lindh's return, Frank filed for divorce from Marilyn. Three days later the Lindhs sold their home in San Anselmo at a profit of approximately \$270,000.

When Lindh got together with his young Muslim friends, he would discuss many things, including his desire to continue studying Islam and return to Yemen. But he did not discuss his family--except Naomi. Says his friend Abdullah Nana from the Mill Valley Mosque: "He did mention about his sister. He was worried about his sister."

As time passed, Lindh started to wear Arab, not Pakistani, dress. He also spent less time at the Mill Valley Mosque and began frequenting mosques in San Francisco where Salafi Yemenis worshipped. To reach the mosques on Sutter and Jones streets for Friday prayers, he would take a bus ride into the city, leaving the sunny hills of Marin County for the streets of San Francisco. It was while waiting to return to Yemen that his path into Pakistan and then Afghanistan opened up.

In autumn 1999 the Mill Valley Mosque played host to a band of seven visiting missionaries who belonged to the Tablighi Jama'at. They had journeyed north from San Diego on what is called an aik saal--a one-year religious trek from mosque to mosque--preaching as they went. One member of the group was Khizar Hayat, a businessman from the town of Bannu in Pakistan. Hayat apparently made such an impression on Lindh that the American asked him for his address and telephone number in Pakistan. Hayat says he barely remembers the meeting. But Lindh's spiritual adviser in Pakistan, Mufti Mohammad Iltimas Khan, says that the young American vividly recalled the occasion. Says Iltimas: "It was the beginning of the dangerous journey, the first jaunt, the pleasure journey."

Soon after, Lindh got a visa for Yemen. His mother was distraught but again kept it to herself. "I was promising myself that I wasn't going to lose it this time like the last time he left," she said. But his sister Naomi was devastated. As Frank noted in his diary on Feb. 1, 2000, "Poor Naomi was crying endlessly" as the family saw Lindh off. "God bless my darling, tall, sweet, handsome John as he leaves on this wonderful journey to the ancient city of Sana'a!"

Lindh would remain in Yemen for nine months. He behaved as he did during his first trip. He was distinguishable from most Yemenite men only by his height. He insisted on speaking in Arabic, even though his mastery was still weak. He took language instruction at a different school but still pursued religious studies at Allman University, which, despite its designation and funding from Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, is an undistinguished building on a hill surrounded by dirt paths. The school boasts 4,000 male students and 1,000 female students from 55 countries. "Even Americans?" a TIME reporter asked Aisha Abdel Maguid al-Zindani, the daughter of the school's founder. "Yes, of course," she replied. Did she remember the American mujahid? "I don't know anything about him. But anyway, we are not the terrorists; the Americans are."

Though Lindh's lawyers deny that he traveled there, reports persist in Yemen that he frequented the town of Damaj, near the Saudi border, where religious controversies brew. "He got even more confused there," says the Yemen Times' Mohamed bin Salam, a well-connected local journalist. "He came for something, but he did not know what." One theory circulating in Yemen is that Lindh was enlisted by anticommunist Islamic recruiters who had been associated with Sheikh al-Zindani and were looking to deploy fighters in Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan. With a promise of jihad and a \$500 monthly salary, the offer was attractive to many poorer Arabs. "He seems to have been a victim of these

people," says bin Salam, who assumes Lindh "was told that what he was looking for could only be found in Afghanistan." In any case, just weeks into his second stay in Yemen, he wrote to Hayat, the businessman-missionary, in Bannu asking him about lessons in Pakistani madrasahs. In October Hayat says he received a call from Lindh saying he was arriving in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, in a week. Would Hayat mind making the five-hour drive to pick him up?

Hayat met Lindh and took him on a tour of various madrasahs, searching for the perfect one from Karachi in the south to Peshawar in the northwest. The young American rejected them all and preferred remaining at Hayat's side. He helped Hayat at his store, a prosperous business dealing in powdered milk. Hayat, who has a wife and four children, says he had sex with Lindh. "He was liking me very much. All the time he wants to be with me," says Hayat, who has a good though not colloquial command of English. "I was loving him. Because love begets love, you know." Lindh's lawyers deny that their client engaged in homosexual relationships.

"He was ready to stay with me," says Hayat, "but I pushed him into the madrasah." Nevertheless, the businessman appears to be jealous of Lindh's relationship with the teacher he recommended, Mufti Iltimas Khan. (Lindh, says Hayat, "loved me more.") The mufti does not discuss the nature of his relationship with Lindh, though he seems happy to talk about the young man. "Everyone who saw him wanted to talk to him and to look at him and to look at his face. A very lovely face he had, John Walker."

Lindh chose to study at Iltimas' Madrasah al Arabia, in the village of Hasanni Kalan Surani, outside Bannu. He would remain there from December 2000 until the following May. The mufti insists that the studies had nothing to do with jihad, just the Koran and its memorization. Lindh could recite almost a third of the holy book by heart before he headed for Afghanistan. How, then, did the reputedly scholarly Lindh become a holy warrior? Did Hayat have anything to do with this? In response, Iltimas just smiles and says, "Maybe Mr. Hayat was trying to turn a warrior into a scholar." Iltimas recalls lying next to Lindh on their separate cots at night, talking about opening a madrasah in the U.S. He felt that Lindh's faith and natural magnetism would make him an influential American imam.

Nevertheless, Lindh's notebooks from the period contain translation exercises with passages from the Koran that include descriptions of battles with the Jews. One of the notebooks includes a passage that reads, "We shall make jihad as long as we live."

It was in Pakistan too that Lindh fired his first Kalashnikov. Nearly every compound around Bannu has one of the Soviet-designed submachine guns for protection from thieves and attacks from rival clans. Hayat says he took Lindh out behind their walled home for some dove hunting. He showed Lindh how to load the clip and cock the gun. He says Lindh was a miserable shot. "He was hitting nothing but air."

While with Iltimas, Lindh would e-mail his mother every Thursday night from an Internet cafe. Sending a message could sometimes take hours, but Lindh soon became something of a local computer whiz. At the end of the U.S. presidential election in 2000, he e-mailed his mother, referring to George W. Bush as "your new President" and adding, "I'm glad he's not mine." Despite the weekly contact with home, Lindh would not discuss his family with Hayat or Iltimas (except for the occasional mention of concern for his sister Naomi). Both men said he was always careful to ask for parental permission before embarking on any large trip. And yet, when he decided to leave Bannu, he did not elaborate on his plans. Frank Lindh says he would have refused to give it if he had known that the ultimate destination was Afghanistan. But in May, all Lindh said was that the weather was cooler in the mountains and it was terribly hot in Bannu. Could he go up to the mountains? And Frank gave permission.

Iltimas packed Lindh's suitcase for him, but the young man said, "I want to leave my things here with you." He took only a small backpack and wore sunglasses and a white shalwar kameez--a long tunic over loose-fitting pants--as he waited for Hayat to arrive on his 2001 Honda 150-cc motorcycle to pick him up. "When will you be back?" Iltimas asked his student. Lindh, he says, was silent. He wonders whether Lindh didn't want him to know where he was going or when he would be back. "A Muslim is never a liar," Iltimas says. The next time he heard of Lindh was from Hayat. The young American, said the powdered-milk entrepreneur, was in Batracy, a small village in the rugged mountains of Mansehra, north of Islamabad--a gateway into the militant training camps that stage attacks in Kashmir. From there, it was on to Afghanistan.

The video is riveting. "do you know..." cia agent Johnny (Mike) Spann begins, addressing the bedraggled prisoner in front of him. "Do you know the people you're here to... Hey, look at me. Do you know that the people you're here working with are terrorists? They killed other Muslims. There were several hundred Muslims killed in the bombing in New York City. Is that what the Koran teaches? I don't think so. Are you going to talk to us?" Lindh remains silent. Almost immediately afterward, the cia officer was slain by other prisoners in an uprising that riveted the world, as allied control of northern Afghanistan seemed to hang in the balance. While his fellow Taliban prisoners set upon the Americans and their Northern Alliance allies, Lindh took off running. He sought safety in the basement of a fort from which several Taliban soldiers would sporadically fire upon the Northern Alliance. The Northern Alliance would use burning oil and then freezing water to roust the holdouts. After seven days Lindh and his fellow fighters surrendered.

On Dec. 1, after the rebellion had ended, Marilyn Walker turned on her computer and chanced on a website bulletin touting the discovery of an American Taliban. And then she saw a photograph of her son. She was terrified but at the same time relieved. She had spent months writing letters to Pakistan, including one in Urdu, trying to determine if he was alive. And now she knew he was. But he was no longer just her son: the young man she believed to be gentle and sensitive had become, in the eyes of the world, the American Taliban, a traitor to his country.

Frank continues to believe in his son's idealism, saying the al-Farooq camp where he is said to have trained with al-Qaeda was for "Saudi teenagers [who] would come down for summer, do their jihad military service... Many of them never had any intention actually of going to the front lines." Says Frank: "John went [into Afghanistan] to help the mujahedin, as he understood the people Ronald Reagan called the 'freedom fighters.'" But in America's eyes, those freedom fighters have become terrorists.

Marilyn and Frank are allowed to visit their son twice a week, approximately one hour at a time. There is always an fbi agent present. Frank says the agents are pleasant but every word uttered during their visits is recorded. Even so, Marilyn tries to fly across the continent to Washington every two weeks to see her son. They talk through Plexiglas. Neither parent has been able to embrace him. The closest they have come to physical contact was through a mesh screen when they saw him after he was first brought back to the U.S., 55 days after the world saw him on television. Lindh held his palms to the mesh, and each parent took turns holding their hands against his, palm to palm, mother to son, father to son. Frank says he could feel the "warmth" of Lindh's hands through the mesh. That was the last touch that his mother and father had from Lindh.

Since he agreed to plead guilty to "supplying services to the Taliban," Lindh has been debriefed regularly as part of the ongoing effort to gather intelligence about terror networks. "They ask him very detailed questions," says a visitor. "If he went into a room, they ask him what color is the door, the room." Though now clean-shaven and scrubbed, Lindh remains a faithful Muslim, praying toward Mecca five times a day, kneeling on a jailhouse towel that serves as his prayer mat. Lindh has access to newspapers and rues the way he feels the media has demonized Islam. Says Abdelwahab Hassan, spiritual leader for Muslim inmates at the Alexandria Detention Center: "He said the America he is reading about is not like the America that he knew when he left here." Does he worry about the long prison sentence he may face? Says Hassan: "He thinks life is of value wherever it is. In his cell he can enjoy praying and reading the Koran." He will now have time to memorize the two-thirds he had left unfinished when he headed for the mountains. --With reporting by Frank Sikora/Birmingham, Alex Perry/Mazar-i-Sharif and Hannah Bloch/Islamabad

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