

Decrypted iPhones Reveal al-Qaida Link to NAS Pensacola Shooter



Master-at-Arms 3rd Class Arnel Salacup with Naval Air Station Pensacola security forces conducts a traffic stop at the base on May 7. U.S. Navy/Joshua Cox

ARLINGTON, Va. – Information gleaned from the iPhones of a Saudi gunman who killed three Sailors and wounded eight others at a Florida naval base last December links him to an al-Qaida affiliate, FBI and Justice Department officials disclosed on May 18.

U.S. Attorney General William Barr announced that the FBI had recently succeeded in unlocking the phones of 2nd Lt. Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani of the Royal Saudi Air Force, who was killed by security officers during the Dec. 6, 2019, rampage at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida, where he was an aviation cadet.

“The phones contained important, previously unknown information that definitively established Alshamrani’s significant ties to al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP], not only before the attack, but before he even arrived in the United States,” said Barr, adding “the FBI now has a clearer understanding of Alshamrani’s associations and activities in the years, months and days leading up to the attack.”

Investigators received court authorization to search the contents of Alshamrani’s iPhones the day after the 2019 attack. But they were unable to unlock the phones’ security features and approached Apple Inc., manufacturer of the iPhone, for assistance in early January. However, the technology company declined to assist, officials said, and it took FBI technicians months to access the phones’ contents,

which ended up showing that Alshamrani and his AQAP associates communicated using apps that featured end-to-end encryption to evade law enforcement.

Additional information stored in the phones revealed Alshamrani had been radicalized by 2015, had connected and associated with AQAP operatives and joined the Royal Saudi Air Force to carry out a "special operation." In the months before the attack, Alshamrani had specific conversations with overseas AQAP associates about plans and tactics. The FBI maintained he was communicating with AQAP right before the attack and conferred with his associates up until the night before the December shootings.



Attorney General William Barr (center) is joined by other national security officials to discuss the Dec. 6, 2019, shooting rampage at NAS Pensacola with the media. U.S. Justice Department

Ensign Joshua Watson, Airman Mohammed Haitham and Airman Cameron Walters were killed in the attack and eight others were severely wounded. Alshamrani was armed with a locally obtained 9 mm Glock handgun.

The incident prompted the Pentagon to order a stop to all International Military Student (IMS) training at U.S. installations and directed a review of all vetting and security procedures. Defense Secretary Mark Esper later approved an extensive list of recommendations and directed immediate implementation across all the military services.

The added background checks and new physical security procedures included restrictions on IMS possession and use of firearms and ammunition. New control measures also limited IMS access to military installations and U.S. government facilities and set new standards for training and education on detecting and reporting insider threats.

Barr said Saudi Arabia "gave complete and total support for

our counter-terrorism investigation and ordered all Saudi trainees to fully cooperate. There was no evidence of assistance or pre-knowledge of the attack by other members of the Saudi military training in the United States, officials said.