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Former military chief confirms al-Qaida mission

By James Rosen

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WASHINGTON -- Gen. Hugh Shelton, who was the military's top commander during the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, confirmed that four years before the tragedy he authorized a secret computer data-mining initiative to track down Osama bin Laden and operatives in the fugitive terrorist's al-Qaida network.

In his first public comments on the initiative, which some former intelligence officers now say was code-named Able Danger, Shelton also confirmed that he received two briefings on the clandestine mission -- both well before the Sept. 11 attacks.

"Right after I left SOCOM (Special Operations Command), I asked my successor to put together a small team, if he could, to try to use the Internet and start trying to see if there was any way that we could track down Osama bin Laden or where he was getting his money from or anything of that nature," Shelton said Monday in an interview.

"It was just kind of an experiment," Shelton said. "What can we do? So, he pulled together a bunch of really bright, computer-literate guys from across the services."

Shelton's assertions are significant because they raise new questions about the government's knowledge of the al-Qaida network before the Sept. 11 attacks and about the subsequent findings of a commission that Congress set up to probe the attacks.

Shelton was responding to claims by former Pentagon intelligence officers, who say they used a data-mining program code-named Able Danger to identify ringleader Mohammed Atta and three other hijackers in early 2000 but that Pentagon lawyers blocked them from relaying their findings to the FBI.

Before the Defense Department issued a gag order that prevented them from testifying to Congress in September, the former intelligence officers said they were assigned to use sophisticated software to perform complex computer searches of "open-source" data in a bid to locate links among al-Qaida operatives.

Navy Capt. Scott Phillpott said he led the program that identified Atta in January or February 2000. Army Lt. Col. Anthony Shaffer said Shelton had issued a directive establishing Able Danger, and that he and other intelligence officers on the top-secret program briefed Shelton on its findings in early 2001.

In its final report last year, the Sept. 11 commission spread blame across the government but said it had not identified any of the 19 hijackers before the attacks. The panel Monday gave the government poor grades on implementing its post-Sept. 11 recommendations, some of which aimed at increasing the sharing of potential terrorism intelligence among different agencies.

Rep. Curt Weldon, R-Pa., who has led a congressional push for the Pentagon to allow open Able Danger hearings, said the Sept. 11 commission failed to adequately investigate the program or its findings.

"This is not Curt Weldon speaking," Weldon told Fox News on Monday. "These are senior military intelligence officers. These are not people off the street. One's a Naval Academy graduate. Both of them have 23 years of experience. The analysts who worked this program are all in sync."

Lee Hamilton, a former Indiana Democratic lawmaker who was vice chairman of the Sept. 11 panel, said its staff interviewed the intelligence officers at the center of the Able Danger saga.

"They claim to have information about Mohammed Atta, and they claim to have this chart, but they cannot produce it," Hamilton said Monday in an interview. "If these folks have documentary evidence, let's bring it forward."

Despite an exhaustive two-year probe, Hamilton said, the commission might have missed important clues about the Sept. 11 attacks.

"We're still looking at the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy," he said. "That's OK. And it may very well be that there are documents (related to Sept. 11) that we missed. We looked at over 2 million documents and had a very good staff, but it's possible we missed something."