

Clarke saw video taken during the trial flight, he described the imagery to Berger as “truly astonishing,” and he argued immediately for more flights seeking to find Bin Ladin and target him for cruise missile or air attack. Even if Bin Ladin were not found, Clarke said, Predator missions might identify additional worthwhile targets, such as other al Qaeda leaders or stocks of chemical or biological weapons.¹¹⁷

Clarke was not alone in his enthusiasm. He had backing from Cofer Black and Charles Allen at the CIA. Ten out of 15 trial missions of the Predator over Afghanistan were rated successful. On the first flight, a Predator saw a security detail around a tall man in a white robe at Bin Ladin’s Tarnak Farms compound outside Kandahar. After a second sighting of the “man in white” at the compound on September 28, intelligence community analysts determined that he was probably Bin Ladin.¹¹⁸

During at least one trial mission, the Taliban spotted the Predator and scrambled MiG fighters to try, without success, to intercept it. Berger worried that a Predator might be shot down, and warned Clarke that a shootdown would be a “bonanza” for Bin Ladin and the Taliban.¹¹⁹

Still, Clarke was optimistic about Predator—as well as progress with disruptions of al Qaeda cells elsewhere. Berger was more cautious, praising the NSC staff’s performance but observing that this was no time for complacency. “Unfortunately,” he wrote, “the light at the end of the tunnel is another tunnel.”¹²⁰

6.3 THE ATTACK ON THE USS *COLE*

Early in chapter 5 we introduced, along with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, two other men who became operational coordinators for al Qaeda: Khallad and Nashiri. As we explained, both were involved during 1998 and 1999 in preparing to attack a ship off the coast of Yemen with a boatload of explosives. They had originally targeted a commercial vessel, specifically an oil tanker, but Bin Ladin urged them to look for a U.S. warship instead. In January 2000, their team had attempted to attack a warship in the port of Aden, but the attempt failed when the suicide boat sank. More than nine months later, on October 12, 2000, al Qaeda operatives in a small boat laden with explosives attacked a U.S. Navy destroyer, the USS *Cole*. The blast ripped a hole in the side of the *Cole*, killing 17 members of the ship’s crew and wounding at least 40.¹²¹

The plot, we now know, was a full-fledged al Qaeda operation, supervised directly by Bin Ladin. He chose the target and location of the attack, selected the suicide operatives, and provided the money needed to purchase explosives and equipment. Nashiri was the field commander and managed the operation in Yemen. Khallad helped in Yemen until he was arrested in a case of mistaken