

By Richard Spencer

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In the film *Zero Dark Thirty*, she was the persistent, conscientious CIA officer who finally tracked Osama bin Laden to his lair.

In real life, her identity and current position were carefully hidden: until now.



Since the release of the controversial US Senate report on the CIA's use of torture and rendition, the officer, played by Jessica Chastain in the film, has had her less-than-sparkling record picked over, been dubbed by the media "The Queen of Torture" and now finally been outed.

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"She dropped the ball when the CIA was given information that might very well have prevented the 9/11 attacks," wrote Jane Mayer, author of a definitive history of the agency's "enhanced interrogation" practices, in the New Yorker.

"She gleefully participated in torture sessions afterward; she misinterpreted intelligence in such a way that it sent the CIA on an absurd chase for al-Qaeda sleeper cells in Montana. And then she falsely told congressional overseers that the torture worked."

As with other reporters, Mayer acceded to the requests of the CIA not to name the officer, although she has been identified in other contexts.

However, in response to Mayer's article and the investigation by television's NBC news channel that triggered it, the investigative website The Intercept decided to "out her".

It said it was doing so over "CIA objections because of her key role in misleading Congress about the agency's use of torture, and her active participation in the torture programme (including playing a direct part in the torture of at least one innocent detainee)."

Many of the incidents involving the 49-year-old career CIA officer have been described before. However, because of redactions in official reports of CIA activities, few were aware the operative featuring in them repeatedly was the same woman.

According to NBC, she was harshly criticised after 9/11, when it was revealed that a subordinate had discovered beforehand that two al-Qaeda suspects who later joined the hijack team had entered the country, but failed to notify the FBI. She went on to become a "key architect" of the enhanced interrogation methods used to attempt to extract information from suspects.

She attended the waterboarding at a so-called "black site" in Poland of Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, the al-Qaeda No3 who masterminded the 9/11 attacks, even though she had no reason, as an analyst, to be there.

She wrote enthusiastically that Mohammed was "going to be hatin' life on this one", but accidentally fed the wrong information to his interrogators, who used it to extract a false confirmation.

The information - that there was an al-Qaeda cell of African-Americans operating in the US - led to a manhunt for black Muslims in Montana.

She also demanded the rendition of a German citizen named Khalid al-Masri, who was arrested in Macedonia and flown to Afghanistan for interrogation, though the man of the same name the CIA was hunting did not have a German passport.

He was released as a victim of mistaken identity five months later and compensated.

Despite these errors, she was promoted, and in 2007 gave evidence to Congress on the use of "enhanced interrogation" in which she insisted: "There's no question, in my mind, that having that detainee information has saved hundreds, conservatively speaking, of American lives."

That was the key CIA claim for the torture programme which the Senate's latest report dismissed as "wrong".

"She wrote the template on which future justifications for the CIA programme and the CIA's enhanced interrogation techniques were based," the report concluded.

The CIA, meanwhile, is continuing to insist that the woman not be identified because of a "climate of fear and retaliation".

Mayer said the real purpose was to protect the CIA's reputation.