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Torture program scarred many people

By CHRISTINA COWGER

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New ideas about Johnston County's involvement in torture emerged from an April 8-10 conference at Duke University.

Over the past decade, we North Carolinians have experienced war, counterterrorism and trauma in many forms. Our sons and daughters have fought on the frontlines in Afghanistan and Iraq, and often returned home bearing painful burdens.

Other North Carolinians have taken part in sensitive national security operations, including Special Forces deployments and "extraordinary rendition" flights. And many of us feel outraged at the now-disavowed policies of secret detention and torture.

In Johnston County, interactions over torture have often been adversarial – understandable when so much is at stake. But at the recent conference, it became apparent to us that while North Carolina has played a critical role in the implementation of torture, perhaps there is more to unite us than to divide us.

At the conference, we learned that a European investigation uncovered chilling details of a secret program based on bilateral agreements between the United States and most European nations.

After leaving their base at the Johnston County Airport or the Kinston JetPort, Aero Contractors jets would stop in Washington, D.C., to pick up CIA "snatch teams." Around the globe, detainees were handed over to those teams in secret to be stripped, beaten, hooded, diapered, shackled, handcuffed and rectally sedated – all in the presence of Aero crews.

Aero Contractors personnel operated aircraft on "rendition circuits," in which prisoners were secretly shuttled among pickup points, foreign jails and secret CIA secret torture facilities. Joining in a systematic coverup, Aero pilots disguised flight plans to help the CIA avoid detection.

Binyam Mohamed, a United Kingdom resident transported to Morocco by Aero Contractors for

the CIA, was reportedly held in secret for 18 months and subjected to brutal beatings and slicing of the genitals and torso. He was “rendered” again by Aero Contractors pilots to the “Dark Prison” in Afghanistan, held for many months in complete darkness and kept awake for days at a time by continuous loud sounds.

After years at Guantanamo, Binyam was released without charges – and without acknowledgment or apology from our government.

Some “rendered” detainees disappeared and may have died as a result of torture. Others remain at Guantanamo indefinitely, without a trial. Those eventually released without charges have never received an apology, restitution or any support in trying to make new lives.

Although this history is appalling, the employees of Aero Contractors were not the authors of the “extraordinary rendition” program. They were the pilots, the mechanics and the crew, some of whom themselves may be affected by their involvement with torture.

It is the officials who planned, authorized and justified such unlawful conduct in our names – in contradiction to our proud history of protecting civil and human rights – who should be held accountable. To do that, we need transparency at all levels.

There must be both justice and healing for all those scarred by extraordinary rendition, and we hope that employees at Aero Contractors can join us on this path.

We at N.C. Stop Torture Now have played our part in adversarial relations with the employees of Aero. While extraordinary rendition has caused serious damage to those who were kidnapped and tortured, as a state and a nation we are all harmed. The United States’ walk on the “dark side” of torture and secret detention has robbed us all of our most precious birthrights: the rule of law and our basic value of respect for human life.

Across our differences, what unites us is our desire to be proud of our communities and our country. We all want safety and peace for our children. We all value human life and are ready to stand up for democracy.

Together, we can acknowledge what went wrong and bring it to the light of day. We can seek out those who were harmed, learn what they need, offer apologies and begin to make amends.

Christina Cowger is executive director of N.C. Stop Torture Now. For information about the group’s recent conference, visit www.accountabilityfortorturenc.org.