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Hanjour a Study in Paradox

Suspect's Brother: 'We Thought He Liked the USA'

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Of the four men believed to have been the pilots in the hijacking conspiracy that claimed nearly 5,000 lives, Hani Hanjour stands out as the most unlikely -- certainly, the most enigmatic -- terrorist.

He was so unambitious that, as a teenager in Saudi Arabia, he thought of dropping out of high school to become a flight attendant. Short and slight, he was so shy that, as a houseguest of family friends in Florida, he would not confess that he had forgotten a toothbrush. Even as he pursued the flight training he would need for his final act, instructors found him withdrawn, slow to pick up a feel for the cockpit.

Hanjour, 29, shared the piety of Islamic extremists. The most religious among seven children, he prayed and attended mosque regularly at home and in the United States. But his seemed an inward devotion, not an overtly political zeal.

Even today, his family cannot fathom his alleged role in the plot. They recognized his photograph as the person who investigators say crashed American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon on Sept. 11.

"We are in shock," his eldest brother, Abulrahman Hanjour, said in a recent telephone interview from Saudi Arabia. "We thought that he liked the USA. . . . I would think he would give his life to save lives, not to do this."

A month after the attacks, only one of the 19 suspected hijackers has come into focus. Mohamed Atta, most likely the leader of the plot, is clearly etched in the public mind as an intense, arrogant man who became an Islamic radical while a university student in Germany.

Now, an image of Hani Hanjour is emerging as well, from public records and interviews with his brother and people who encountered him in the United States over more than a decade.

It is a paradoxical picture.

Hanjour's meek, introverted manner fits a recurrent pattern in the al Qaeda network of unsophisticated young men being recruited as helpers in terrorist attacks. FBI agents have told people they have interviewed about Hanjour that he "fit the personality to be manipulated and brainwashed."

Yet on the morning of Sept. 11, investigators have said, Hanjour was not one of the foot soldiers brought into the conspiracy merely to cow passengers in the cabin of the Boeing 757 as it streaked from Dulles International Airport toward Washington and the Pentagon.

He was in the cockpit.

Barely over 5 feet tall, skinny and boyish, Hanjour displayed a temperament and actions that were out of sync with those of his fellow pilots in several ways. Hanjour first arrived in the United States years before the others, and was one of just two suspected hijackers who held a student visa. He was the only alleged pilot who does not appear to have been part of an al Qaeda cell in Europe.

And while the three other suspected pilots -- Atta, Marwan Al-Shehhi and Ziad Jarrah -- had lived together in Hamburg, Germany, it remains unclear when and where Hanjour was folded into the plot.

In comparison to the more brazen Atta, who appears ubiquitous in the conspiracy, Hanjour casts a pale figure. For about a year in the late 1990s, Jose Salazar lived next door to the house Hanjour rented with a few other Middle Eastern men in Scottsdale, Ariz. Salazar remembers his neighbor as utterly unfriendly. One day, Salazar tossed a ball with his brother-in-law that rolled straight into Hanjour's path as he walked into his house. Hanjour did not even look up.

Over five years, Hanjour hopped among flight schools and airplane rental companies, but his instructors regarded him as a poor student, even in the weeks before the attacks.

Federal Aviation Administration records show he obtained a commercial pilot's license in April 1999, but how and where he did so remains a lingering question that FAA officials refuse to discuss. His limited flying abilities do afford an insight into one feature of the attacks: The conspiracy apparently did not include a surplus of skilled pilots.

Wes Fults, the former manager of the flight simulator at Sawyer School of Aviation in Phoenix, gave Hanjour a one-hour orientation lesson when he arrived as a new member of the school's "sim club" in 1998. "Mr. Hanjour was, if not dour, to some degree furtive. He never looked happy," Fults recalled. "He had only the barest understanding what the instruments were there to do."

Visiting the U.S.

Hanjour grew up in Taif, a popular resort city of 400,000 in a mountainous Saudi region. His father worked in a food-supply business. The middle child of seven, Hanjour was quiet, an average student with modest goals.

In an interview from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Abulrahman Hanjour recalled worrying about his brother's desire to become a flight attendant without a high school degree. He persuaded him to aim higher.

More religious than anyone else in the family, Hani Hanjour regularly visited the mosque near his family's home. But if he was involved in radical groups -- at home, in the United States or anywhere else -- no one in the family knew of it, his brother said.

It was Abulrahman Hanjour, 11 years older and far more worldly, who in 1990 gave Hanjour his first experience of America. Traveling frequently to the United States as part of his business exporting used American cars to Saudi Arabia, Abulrahman had stayed a few years earlier in Tucson, where some of his Saudi friends were University of Arizona students.

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He signed up his younger brother for an eight-week English course at the university, and rented him a room nearby, taking care to choose a place near a mosque.

Hanjour's first stay in the United States was brief. After three months in Arizona, his brother said, he went home. For the next five years, he managed his family's lemon and date farm near Taif. He sometimes did common labor, at times filling water into irrigation tanks.

He did not, his brother believes, travel abroad during that period. He worked on what had been his grandfather's farm during the day and slept at his parents' house at night.

Hanjour's precise path from family farm to terrorist plot remains obscured. But by early 1996, he somehow had developed a desire to learn to fly in the United States.

It was a period when other members of the al Qaeda network were becoming pilots. Two years earlier, the Armed Islamic Group, which would fuse with al Qaeda, hijacked an Air France plane in Algeria with the intention of crashing it into the Eiffel Tower. They were stopped by French special forces at the Marseilles airport.

For his second trip to the United States, Hanjour's path was, once again, prepared by his brother. Abulrahman Hanjour placed a call from Saudi Arabia to Miramar, Fla., to ask a couple he had known from Tucson whether they would be willing to put him up.

Hani Hanjour stayed with Susan and Adnan Khalil for about a month during the spring of 1996 before beginning a series of unsuccessful stints at flight schools out west. Susan Khalil remembers him as socially inept, with poor English and "really bad hygiene. I had to have my husband get after him about bathing and changing his clothes." Khalil noticed a greenish film on Hanjour's teeth after a few weeks; he had been too timid to ask for a toothbrush.

He prayed frequently, at their home and at a nearby mosque. Susan Khalil was struck by how different he was from his older brother, who liked parties and drinking.

'Quiet, Introverted'

Hanjour moved from Florida to northern California, where he lived from late April to early September, said Andrew Black, a spokesman for the FBI's San Francisco office. For most of that time, he studied in an intensive English program at the ELS Language Centers on the campus of Holy Names College in Oakland, said Mike Palm, a spokesman for the school.

The school arranged for Hanjour to live with a host family. FBI officials who have interviewed that family and others who knew Hanjour in Oakland say he is remembered as a "quiet, introverted individual."

While in Oakland, he enrolled at the Sierra Academy of Aeronautics. He attended a 30-minute class on Sept. 8 and never came back. Dan Shaffer, the academy's vice president for flight operations, speculated that Hanjour was intimidated by the school's two-year training regimen and \$35,000 price tag.

The next month, he turned up in Arizona, a magnet for aspiring pilots because of its clear weather and relatively affordable flight schools. Hanjour paid \$3,800 by check and \$1,000 in cash for lessons at CRM Flight Cockpit Resource Management in Scottsdale.

During three months of instruction in late 1996, Duncan K. M. Hastie, CRM's owner, found Hanjour a "weak student" who "was wasting our resources." Hanjour left, then returned in December 1997 -- a year later -- and stayed only a few weeks.

Over the next three years, Hanjour called Hastie about twice a year, asking to come back for more instruction.

"I would recognize his voice," Hastie said. "He was always talking about wanting more training. Yes, he wanted to be an airline pilot. That was his stated goal. That's why I didn't allow him to come back. I thought, 'You're never going to make it.'"

The last time Hanjour called, sometime last year, he was asking to train on a Boeing 757, the kind of aircraft he is believed to have crashed into the Pentagon.

Rebuffed by Hastie, Hanjour went elsewhere. In 1998, he joined the simulator club at Sawyer, a small Phoenix school known locally as a flight school of last resort. "It was a commonly held truth that, if you failed anywhere else, go to Sawyer Aviation. They had good instructors," said Fults, the former simulator manager there.

Sawyer's simulator is in a closet-sized room that students and pilots alike use to practice the basics of instrument flight. Fults remembers Hanjour as "a neophyte. . . . The impression I got is he came and, like a lot of guys, got overwhelmed with the instruments." He used the simulator perhaps three or four more times, Fults said, then "disappeared like a fog."

As he had been at CRM, Hanjour was alone as he trained that year at Sawyer. But in a sequence of events that is intriguing in retrospect, Hanjour missed by less than a month another Middle Eastern man who joined Sawyer's simulator club. Lotfi Raissi never mentioned Hanjour, Fults said. Raissi often came in with three or four Arabic men, who crammed into the simulator and seemed to be his protégés. Fults, who left Sawyer early last year, is unsure who the men were, but says Hanjour was not one of them.

Today, Raissi is being held in London on a U.S. extradition warrant, accused of training Hanjour and three other hijackers. British prosecutors have said that Raissi and Hanjour attended the same flight schools and that a computer seized in Raissi's apartment in England contained a video clip of the two men. During the past two summers, they were together at the Sawyer simulator, according to various employees who worked there after Fults had left.

Hanjour's training at CRM also overlapped with that of another man who investigators are looking at closely: Faisal M. Al Salmi. A federal indictment unsealed Friday in Arizona alleges that Al Salmi spoke with Hanjour several times and subsequently lied to investigators. But the indictment does not accuse Al Salmi of a role in the plot.

That plot was in high gear by the second week of August, when Hanjour arrived in the Washington area for what appears to have been his final preparation -- this time, at Freeway Airport in Bowie. Instructors once again questioned his competence. After three sessions in a single-engine plane, the school decided Hanjour was not ready to rent a plane by himself.

A Faint Impression

Exactly how much time Hanjour spent in the United States between 1996 and this year remains hazy.

Unlike Atta, who is remembered vividly by many who encountered him for his boorishness -- his haggling over prices, his sullen attitude toward women -- Hanjour left a faint impression.

His known activity was mundane: He rented several cars in New Jersey starting last July, visited Las Vegas at least once over the summer while other conspirators may have been there and bought a week's gym membership in Greenbelt with the four other suspected terrorists who would board the Dulles flight less than two weeks later.

For at least part of last year, Hanjour appears to have been in Saudi Arabia, because it was there that he obtained a student visa to take another English course. He applied in September 2000 for another four-week course at the same Oakland language school he attended four years earlier.

He did not show up, and the school contacted its representative in Saudi Arabia who had handled his application, according to Palm, the school spokesman. Palm said the Saudi person did not know Hanjour's intention, and the school decided he was among the 10 percent of its students who fail to appear.

INS documents say that Hanjour entered the United States last December, a month after the class began.

According to his brother, Hanjour was last in touch with his family early last spring. He told his mother he was calling from a pay phone in the United Arab Emirates, where his family believed he had gone in 1999 to find a pilot's job.

That phone call appears to have been placed about the same time that Hanjour was in Paterson, N.J., shopping for an apartment with a younger man who would, months later, allegedly board the plane with Hanjour and force it into the Pentagon.

During that final conversation, Hanjour told his family he would telephone again when he had his own phone number. He might, he said, come home for a visit in about a month. But the man who so often seemed to fade in and out once again didn't appear.

Staff writer Justin Blum and Research Director Margot Williams contributed to this report.

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