

Mysterious Trip to Flight 77 Cockpit

Suicide Pilot's Conversion to Radical Islam Remains Obscure

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TUCSON -- Hani Hanjour was 19 when he arrived here from Saudi Arabia to study English at the University of Arizona in 1991. He lived four blocks from the campus mosque, in a seven-bedroom rooming house covered with cactuses the size of ping-pong paddles. He stayed for over a year and when he returned home his older brother Yasser found him a changed man.

Rather than embracing American pop culture, Hani seemed to have discovered fundamentalist Islam in the Arizona desert. He rejected music and television and grew out his beard, a symbol of piety. He spent long hours in prayer, his only companion the Koran.

Yasser was a Koranic scholar, but even he found his brother's transformation startling. He spoke with Hani for hours, trying to wrench him from his isolation, until over time he came to believe that he was back to normal. Hani remained religious, Yasser thought, but hardly the kind of fanatic who would seize the controls of an airliner and turn it into a weapon of mass destruction.

"We never expected this; we still don't believe it," Yasser said recently in an interview from Taif, Saudi Arabia, his hometown. "We are still waiting for him to come knocking on the door."

To this day, Yasser doesn't know what happened to his brother in Tucson. Neither, it seems, does anyone else. Hanjour's abrupt transformation in the early 1990s is one of many tantalizing, if inconclusive, clues that only hint at why a decade later, authorities believe, Hanjour was in the cockpit when American Airlines Flight 77 struck the Pentagon, killing 184 victims.

Documents and analysis by terrorism investigators suggest that Tucson was one of the first points of contact in the United States for the jihadist group that evolved into al Qaeda. Two group members who preceded Hanjour later became al Qaeda leaders, according to authorities. The city's principal mosque, the Islamic Center of Tucson, held "basically the first cell of al Qaeda in the United States; that is where it all started," said Rita Katz, a Washington-based terrorism expert. However, like other issues surrounding Hanjour, the connection is elusive and it is unclear whether the strain of radical Islam that once ran through here may in some way have shaped him.

Authorities believe the hijacking plot originated in the late 1990s with the other three pilots, Mohamed Atta, Marwan Alshehhi and Ziad Jarrah, who formed part of a terrorist cell in Hamburg, and trained in Osama bin Laden's terror camps in Afghanistan. The other participants were recruited later and authorities suspect they were never fully apprised of their mission, according to U.S. officials.

But Hanjour remains an anomaly, U.S. officials said. Although he clearly was a leader within the plot's overall structure, an official involved in the investigation acknowledged that authorities still don't know how he became indoctrinated into militant Islam or when he was brought into the operation.

In a recent interview with the al-Jazeera network, two alleged al Qaeda planners of the Sept. 11 attacks said Hanjour was present at a summit of the key hijackers in Afghanistan in late 1999. But they did not indicate how or where Hanjour was recruited.

"I think he probably got recruited at one of these mosques or at one of these prayer meetings," a U.S. official said. "It could have been Atta, it could have been someone else, but it was a classic recruitment: He was spotted by someone, he was assessed, he was pitched and he agreed to participate."

An examination of Hanjour's odyssey, drawn from interviews, flight training records, apartment rental applications and other documents, only deepens the mystery about his role.

Hanjour moved around much more extensively than was previously known, crisscrossing the country at a frantic pace. Hanjour, who was 29 when he died, spent tens of thousands of dollars on pilot training but is not known to have held a job. He forged strong ties with other Middle Eastern men who lived, trained, prayed, studied and apparently traveled with him in the years before the attacks. However, no one has been able to offer a definitive portrait of Hanjour, leaving unreconciled a number of seemingly contradictory facts about his life.

After the attacks, for example, aviation experts concluded that the final maneuvers of American Airlines Flight 77 -- a tight turn followed by a steep, accurate descent into the Pentagon -- was the work of "a great talent . . . virtually a textbook turn and landing," the law enforcement official said. Hanjour, in fact, had piled up hundreds of hours of pilot training, but months before the attacks had failed to earn a rating to fly a Boeing 737 (the hijacked plane was a 757). His instructors became so alarmed by his crude skills and limited English they notified the FAA to determine whether his pilot's license was real.

Activist Mosque in Tucson

Another of Hanjour's brothers, Abdulrahman, has said that it was his idea to bring Hanjour to Tucson, where Abdulrahman Hanjour, who imported American cars to Saudi Arabia, had friends at the University of Arizona. Abdulrahman enrolled Hanjour in an English course and found him a room at the house on Fourth Avenue, within walking distance of the Islamic Center.

Arizona has long been attractive to Middle Eastern students, in large part because of the desert climate. Omar Shahin, the imam of the Islamic Center of Tucson, said Tucson is home to about 8,000 Muslims, of which about a fourth belong to the mosque. The current Islamic Center was built in 1990 after the old mosque, a converted house, became so crowded that people were sometimes forced to pray in the parking lot.

Hanjour took intensive English classes from Oct. 14 through Dec. 6, 1991, according to university records, but he is believed to have stayed longer. He held two addresses: the rooming house and an apartment in a cluster of tan stucco buildings north of campus. The landlord at that apartment, who asked not to be identified, said the FBI told her Hanjour may have stayed as long as 15 months.

The experience must have been a shock for Hanjour. According to Abdulrahman's account and other published reports, Hanjour had grown up a reclusive boy in a family of eight children in the Saudi resort town of Taif. His siblings, parents and extended family lived in a two-story villa in the wealthy al-Faisaliya neighborhood. His father owned a string of car dealerships in Jeddah.

One longtime member of the Tucson mosque said Saudi men must go through adjustments that are often more difficult than Arabs from less strict societies. "If you take him from that environment into this environment, a radical transformation is bound to occur," he said.

He also noted that Hanjour arrived in Tucson as U.S. troops were moving against Iraq from their base in Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf War. The American "occupation" of Saudi Arabia inflamed bin Laden and other fundamentalist Muslims who believed it desecrated the land of the two holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina.

That rhetoric began to creep into the Islamic Center, according to one longtime member who asked not to be identified. At the Friday khutba, or lecture, speakers began to focus more intensely on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the expanding U.S. role in the Middle East.

Some speakers, he said, would urge members to "defend our religion" against the "infidels" who threatened Islam. The man said he sometimes protested afterward, saying: "That's not the way to indoctrinate these young people. Most of these people are freshmen, 18 or 19 years old. What does that do to the way they look at the world?"

The Islamic Center had been a source of intrigue for some time before Hanjour's arrival in Tucson. Throughout the 1980s, the mosque provided money, support and, at times, fighters to the forces resisting the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, according to longtime members. Those activities, members noted, were supported by the U.S. government, which also opposed the Soviets. "When the U.S. government stopped, we stopped. We followed our government," said Shahin. He added that the mosque should not be held accountable for former members who may have engaged in terrorism long after they left Arizona.

In 1983 and 1984, the mosque's president, according to state corporation records, was Wael Hamza Jelaidan, a Saudi national who was also president of the Muslim Students Association and a graduate student at the School of Agriculture until March 20, 1985, when he withdrew.

Shortly after, Jelaidan surfaced in Peshawar, Pakistan, where Arab groups supporting the Afghan resistance were based. Authorities said Jelaidan joined forces with bin Laden's mentor, the late Palestinian scholar Abdullah Azzam, in an organization referred to interchangeably as Makhtab al Khadimat, the Alkifah Refugee Center and the Office of Services. That group, according to authorities, later evolved into al Qaeda.

The government has described Jelaidan as a "co-founder" of al Qaeda and its logistics chief. Last week, the Treasury Department ordered Jelaidan's assets frozen after designating him as "a supporter of al Qaeda terror."

Jelaidan left in 1986. Around the same time, Wadih Hage, a Lebanese Christian and naturalized U.S. citizen who had converted to Islam, joined the mosque. Hussan Jordi, who is also Lebanese, said Hage worked as a janitor at the Tucson convention center and showed up at the mosque irregularly because he worked odd hours.

Hage, who was also part of the Afghan resistance in Pakistan, was convicted in 2001 of plotting the simultaneous 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. After leaving Arizona, he served as bin Laden's "personal secretary," according to the government. Before his conviction, Hage was seemingly ubiquitous in terrorism circles, forging close ties not only with bin Laden but also members of a Brooklyn mosque that housed a terrorist cell headed by Omar Abdul-Rahman, a blind sheikh who is serving a life sentence for a foiled plot to blow up several New York City landmarks.

On Jan. 30, 1990, the imam of another Tucson mosque, Rashad Khalifa, was found dead in his kitchen, stabbed more than 20 times.

Khalifa preached a brand of Islam based on numerology that fundamentalists found heretical. Colorado prosecutors later convicted two members of an Islamic sect called Al Fuqra of conspiring to murder Khalifa, but the killer was never found and the investigation remains open, according to Tucson police.

Last year, Hage told a New York grand jury that before Khalifa's murder, he was visited in Tucson by an Egyptian man with a long beard who said he had been sent from New York to spy on Khalifa. Hage testified that he picked up the man, whom he recalled as "Abu something," brought him home for lunch and took him to the mosque. Asked whether he thought it was a good or a bad thing when he heard two months later that Khalifa had been killed, Hage replied: "I think it was a good thing."

Keeping a Low Profile

How much the political and religious turbulence growing within the Muslim world in the early 1990s affected Hanjour is uncertain. His memory seems to have faded completely from this transient culture. No one at the Islamic Center of Tucson said they could recall seeing him. None of his instructors remembered

him even after being shown his picture, according to Sarah Kim, interim director for the Center for English as a Second Language.

Hanjour was wearing his beard long when he returned from Tucson, his brother Yasser said. But as intensely religious as Hani became, Yasser said, he never believed that it was also a political passion. "He was never passionate about any political subject or cause," Yasser said.

As the years rolled by, Hanjour seemed to wear his religion on his sleeve less and less, Yasser felt. He resumed watching television and listening to music and interacted more with his family and others. Hanjour's family occasionally reminded him that he was getting well past the age when Saudi men traditionally started a family. Hanjour responded that he didn't want to get married. He wanted to wait until his life became more stable.

Hanjour applied for a job at the state-owned Saudi Arabian Airlines but was told that he lacked sufficient grades, Yasser told the Wall Street Journal last November. He said the company told him it would reconsider his application only if he acquired a commercial pilot's license in the United States.

Hanjour returned to the United States in April 1996. In a dizzying 18-month sequence, he moved from Florida, to California, to Arizona, to another part of Florida and then back to Arizona.

Hanjour spent his first few weeks in Miramar, Fla., with his brother Abdulrahman's friends, staying long enough to acquire a Florida identification card using their address. A week later he enrolled at a language school on the other side of the country.

Hanjour converted his tourist visa to a student visa and took classes for four months at Holy Names College in Oakland, Calif. Based on his proficiency level at the end of the course, he should have been able to speak, read and write English well enough to convey multiple ideas and develop a topic into a three-to-five paragraph narrative.

Hanjour's itinerary suggests that he wanted to use his English for pilot training. He moved to Scottsdale, Ariz., and enrolled at CRM Airline Training Center, a flight school. He obtained his student pilot certificate in November and finished out the year at CRM, flying solo after three months of training, much longer than the norm.

How Hanjour spent the next 10 months is unclear, but in October 1997 he traveled to Melbourne, Fla., and enrolled in another English course at the Florida Institute of Technology. Hanjour provided neither a visa nor a date of birth. He was joined by another Saudi national, Bandar Alhazmi, who had entered the United States that month. Hanjour and Alhazmi lived separately and it is unclear whether they knew each other beforehand.

Hanjour's host family declined comment, saying the FBI had advised them not to talk.

However, George Steinmetz, a plumber whose family hosted Alhazmi, said Hanjour came over to visit at least three times. He said the students often asked him about his Jewish-sounding name. "They made me go over it several times with them. I kept telling them, 'I'm not Jewish. I'm not Jewish.' I asked them if they had any Jewish friends. They said, 'Oh, no.' You could tell they were very against Israel."

Hanjour and Alhazmi enrolled Nov. 17 for a second four-week course in Melbourne. Neither finished. Instead, on Dec. 9, Hanjour and Alhazmi rented an \$850 furnished suite in North Phoenix, according to rental records. Hanjour left the rental application nearly blank, filling in only his name, date of birth and previous address and checking off that he was single.

Hanjour and Alhazmi stayed three weeks, then bolted without their \$100 deposit or a \$35 deposit for the remote control that opened the front gate.

That same month, Hanjour and Alhazmi enrolled at CRM with another man, Raed Abdullah, of Qatar.

Duncan Hastie, the company's president, said Hanjour and the two others were visited one afternoon by about 10 other Middle Eastern men, all of whom said they planned to be pilots.

After Sept. 11, Bandar Alhazmi could not be located. FBI investigators in Phoenix administered five lie detector tests to Raed Abdullah, then flew him to New York to testify before a grand jury investigating terrorism. He returned home to Qatar voluntarily, according to a close friend, who asked not to be named.

Ruben Martinez, a retired Phoenix FBI agent who now works as a private investigator, interviewed Abdullah for another case involving one of his acquaintances who had been detained after the attacks. Martinez said Abdullah told him that he also had been in Melbourne, Fla., and had met Hanjour and Alhazmi there.

A Mind Focused on Boeing 757s

In April 1999, Hanjour returned to Saudi Arabia. Two of the alleged planners of the Sept. 11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Binalshibh, recently told the Al-Jazeera network that Hanjour was present later that year at meeting of key hijackers in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Also present were the members of the Hamburg cell and Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi, who would join Hanjour on Flight 77.

In 2000, Hanjour applied for another student visa to take English classes at the ELS Language Center in Oakland, where he had studied four years earlier. The visa was approved at the U.S. Embassy in Jeddah. Hanjour returned to the United States in December, entering the country in Cincinnati.

Hanjour never showed up in Oakland. Instead, he phoned Duncan Hastie at CRM Airline Training Center in Scottsdale and said he now wanted to learn how to fly a Boeing 757.

Hastie thought the request unusual, and not only because Hanjour's pilot skills were weak. Normally, a pilot hoping to work for an airline would move first to a small business aircraft or a 737, which would give him or her more options for work.

Hastie explained this to Hanjour.

"No," Hanjour said. "I want to fly the 757."

When Hastie demurred, Hanjour replied, "Is the 737 similar to the 757?"

Hastie told Hanjour they were similar aircraft. But Hanjour "couldn't get the 757 out of his head," Hastie said.

Hanjour ultimately turned to JetTech, a now-defunct flight academy in Phoenix, to train to fly a jetliner. He paid nearly \$6,000 in cash for 737 training, according to Marilyn Ladner, a vice president with JetTech's parent company, Pan Am International Flight Academy in Miami. The Federal Aviation Administration, after JetTech flight instructors raised doubts about Hanjour's pilot and language skills, said it would recommend an English tutor but never followed through. Hanjour flunked out after a month.

In March 2001, Hanjour showed up with Nawaf Alhazmi at the Dar al Hijrah mosque in Falls Church, one of the largest in the Washington area. There, they met Eyad Alrababah, a computer technician who befriended them, helping them find an apartment in Northern Virginia and taking trips to Connecticut and New Jersey, according to an account in the Post last May.

Alrababah liked Alhazmi, but he found Hanjour dark and secretive, frequently interrupting Alhazmi to prevent him from answering questions. "If the FBI says Hani is evil, I would believe it," said Alrababah, who was taken into custody as a material witness, then charged with document fraud after coming forward to report his connection to the hijackers.

The murkiness and ambiguity surrounding Hanjour endured in the days that led up to Sept. 11. Flight

instructors at Freeway Airport in Bowie, where he tried unsuccessfully to rent a plane, questioned his piloting skills. Meanwhile, his family in Saudi Arabia believed that in fact he was already a professional pilot working in the United Arab Emirates for a monthly salary of 7,000 Saudi riyals, or about \$1,866.

Hanjour told his family he would send a permanent address as soon as his life was stable.

Staff researcher Margot Williams contributed to this report.

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