

Hijackers Had a Tough Time with Flying Lessons

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - For the two would-be suicide hijackers, the flying lessons didn't get off to a great start.

With their limited English, they seemed unable to follow instructions. Their knowledge of aviation was so sketchy that when asked to draw a plane, one man got the wings backward. And when one student attempted a landing in a single-engine Cessna, the other became frightened and began loudly praying to Allah.

Their instructor at a San Diego flight school flunked them, and later described the men as "Dumb and Dumber."

Then again, Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi never needed to develop any skill in landing planes. They just needed to learn how to crash them into buildings - a goal they achieved Sept. 11 when American Airlines Flight 77 plowed into the Pentagon.

"Yeah, these guys were pretty crude," said terrorism expert Michael Gunter, a professor of political science at Tennessee Technological University. "But we were even dumber in not being able to ferret them out."

In fact, the FBI was looking for Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi, who appeared to have spent most of the past two years together in the United States.

But the search didn't begin until Aug. 23. That left investigators just 19 days to scour our vast nation for two men who muddled their trail by using names, passing out fake addresses and buying things with cash.

Investigators aren't even entirely sure that Almihdhar and Alhazmi are the men's real names - or that several people weren't using those names as aliases. They have used several spellings for both Almihdhar and Alhazmi since the attacks, and some newspapers and television stations briefly mixed up Almihdhar with Khalid al-Mihmadi, a Saudi exchange student who lived in Daytona Beach until last May.

But assuming the names are genuine, the pair's travels appear to outline a path linking terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden and the attacks that killed more than 6,000 people in New York and Washington.

In Malaysia: The two men - described as around college age, possibly childhood friends, maybe from Saudi Arabia - both attended a terrorist summit at a Kuala Lumpur hotel in December 1999 or January 2000, according to law enforcement sources.

Others at the meeting included members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the leader of Osama bin Laden's bodyguards, who would later be suspected of masterminding the attack on the destroyer USS Cole in October 2000.

Malaysian security forces secretly videotaped the gathering and alerted the CIA. But U.S. intelligence agents say they didn't realize the significance of the meeting until they learned of the Cole connection sometime around August 2001.

In San Diego: The pair appeared in early 2000, blending in with the city's large Islamic population and eventually rooming in the home of a local Muslim leader. Besides flunking flight school, Alhazmi unsuccessfully searched the Web for a Mexican wife.

Occasionally their paths crossed with Hanjour, who later joined them on Flight 77.

Almihdhar and Alhazmi also paid \$3,000 cash for a 1988 Toyota Corolla, registering it under a false address but scrupulously following the law on emissions testing.

A day after the Sept. 11 attacks, the FBI towed a car matching the same description from Dulles International Airport in Washington. The car, registered to Nawaf Alhazmi, contained a list of instructions for the hijackers, telling them to "strike as the heroes would strike ... and then you will know all the heavens are decorated in the best way to meet you."

In Washington: The five Flight 77 suspects bought weeklong gym memberships in the Beltway area in August - much like their compatriots in south Palm Beach County. They got driver's licenses in Virginia using fake addresses, taking advantage of that state's lax laws on what proof of identity is required.

On Sept. 11, either Almihdhar or Hanjour may have piloted the hijacked jetliner into the Pentagon, according to investigators quoted in conflicting news accounts. Some accounts say Almihdhar was the one who gave the passengers a chilling message around 9:30 a.m.: Phone home, because you are all about to die.

Who were these men? That's still a mystery.

The FBI has given no age for Almihdhar and Alhazmi but says they may be Saudi nationals. Alhazmi may have trained at camps Afghan camps tied to al-Qaeda, according to investigators quoted in news reports. The reports don't say when the training occurred.

Investigators have also speculated that Almihdhar may be part of the Islamic Army of Aden, a group in Yemen that is affiliated with bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. The Islamic Army was one of three groups to claim credit for the USS Cole bombing.

The Islamic Army was formerly headed by Zein al-Abidine al-Midhar, who was executed in 1999 for kidnapping Western tourists. Despite the similarity in last names between Almihdhar and al-Midhar, experts have cautioned that Arabic names are often more complex than most Westerners realize, and that similar names can be shared by many unrelated people.

In another link, investigators say the suspects' meeting in Malaysia nearly two years ago included an encounter between Almihdhar and a Yemeni-born man named Tawfiq bin Atash, also known by the nickname "Khallad." Bin Atash controls bin Laden's bodyguards, helped coordinate the Cole attack and is a suspect in the 1998 bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa, investigators believe.

But U.S. intelligence had no grounds to nab Almihdhar or Alhazmi at that time, investigators say.

"Here was a bunch of guys who we believed were dirty, but we didn't have anything on them," a U.S. intelligence official told the Los Angeles Times.

Not until Aug. 21, at least 19 months later, did the CIA tell the Immigration and Naturalization Service to place Almihdhar on a terrorist "watch list" in case he tries to enter the country.

Around the same time, the agency had begun receiving information suggesting that bin Laden was increasingly determined to strike on U.S. soil.

Too late - Almihdhar had already entered the United States.

The FBI began looking for both Almihdhar and Alhazmi Aug. 23. But the FBI office in San Diego, where the two had spent so much time the year before, didn't get the word until two days after the bombing.

San Diego: A diverse place to blend in.

Investigators say Almihdhar and Alhazmi first entered the United States through Los Angeles International Airport in late 1999 or early 2000. On immigration papers, they listed their intended address as a Sheraton hotel in LA.

Instead, they surfaced in San Diego, which offered numerous advantages to an Arab seeking to blend in. The area is culturally diverse - much like South Florida - and boasts a large Muslim community. Its closeness to the Mexican border allows a quick escape if one is needed. It's a haven for illegal immigration, spawning an industry in fake identification documents.

First the men lived at the Parkwood Apartments, a town house complex near a busy commercial strip. Neighbors said the men had no furniture but often carried briefcases and seemed to speak on cell phones a lot.

They spent time at the Islamic Center of San Diego, the local mosque, and after a few months moved into the home of the center's founder, an Indian-born Muslim leader named Abdussattar Shaikh.

Shaikh said he and the pair prayed together five times a day, but they shared little conversation because of the men's difficulties with English. They paid rent, although he offered to let them stay for free, and didn't express any hatred of the United States.

"They were nice, but not what you call extroverted people," Shaikh told the San Diego Union-Tribune. Still, he told reporters he bonded with Alhazmi, helping him open a bank account and place a personal ad on the World Wide Web.

"He told me that he wanted to marry a Mexican girl," Shaikh told the Los Angeles Times. "The problem was that he didn't know any Spanish. So I taught him a few Spanish phrases, like, 'Que pasa.' "

Almihdhar, the more reserved of the two, said he and Alhazmi were childhood friends from Saudi Arabia. He said he had a wife and children there.

Shaikh said he thought the two were students from Saudi Arabia studying English. The FBI has scoured student records at colleges and universities throughout California but has declined to say what it found.

The pair took a half-dozen flight classes at Sorbi's Flying Club nearby, but chief flight instructor Rick Garza has said their poor English skills disqualified them. Garza said Almihdhar and Alhazmi started out wanting to fly Boeing jet aircraft, but he steered them to Cessnas instead.

"I told the FBI they seemed like 'Dumb and Dumber,' " Garza told the Union-Tribune.

Almihdhar moved out of Shaikh's home in the fall of 2000, supposedly to return to Saudi Arabia. Alhazmi left in December 2000, saying he planned to attend school in San Jose. But a month later Shaikh got a phone call from Alhazmi, who said he was in Arizona.

The FBI has said repeatedly that Shaikh, a retired educator, is not a suspect in the terror attacks. But since Sept. 11, authorities have arrested three other boarders in Shaikh's house as material witnesses.

Washington: Paid \$100 for ID documents.

Authorities believe Almihdhar left the country. He returned July 4 on Saudi Arabian Airlines Flight 53, carrying a Saudi passport and a business visa due to expire Oct. 3. He gave his intended address as a Marriott Hotel in New York. (As investigators would eventually learn, Marriott operates 10 hotels in New York City.)

Instead, he and Alhazmi popped up near Washington, D.C.

In August, the pair got state identification cards from the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles in Springfield, southwest of Washington, D.C. So did the rest of the Flight 77 suspects, along with Abdulaziz Alomari and Ahmed Alghamdi, who rode separate planes that struck the World Trade Center, as well as Ziad Jarrah, whose hijacked flight crashed in Pennsylvania.

Unlike many other states, Virginia at the time didn't require people to use such documents as passports or leases to verify their identity and residency. Until the loophole was closed Sept. 21, they could simply submit notarized forms co-signed by a lawyer and a Virginia resident.

Federal investigators say Almihdhar and another Flight 77 suspect, Hanjour, drove to a northern Virginia convenience store and paid \$100 to Luis Martinez-Flores, an illegal alien from El Salvador, to sign a document falsely certifying the men's address. They in turn signed documents allowing some of the other terrorists to get their licenses.

Authorities have since jailed Martinez-Flores and a Falls Church law office employee on charges of illegally helping Hanjour and Almihdhar get ID cards, essential for boarding a commercial plane. Two others also were arrested on similar charges.

On Sept. 5, Almihdhar and Moqed bought their airline tickets with cash at Baltimore-Washington International Airport. They had booked the tickets on the American Airlines web site. Almihdhar used a Daytona Beach address and a frequent-flier number he had established the day before. Almihdhar had seat 12 B, Moqed the window seat beside him.

Despite their presence on the terrorist watch list, Almihdhar and Alhazmi raised no alarms when they arrived at Dulles before the scheduled 8:10 a.m. departure Sept. 11. They and their three cohorts entered through Gate D26.

Eight days after the planes went down, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. distributed a "special alert" to its member banks asking for information about 21 "alleged suspects" in the attacks. The list said "Al-Midhar, Khalid Alive," raising the possibility that the real Almihdhar never died on the plane. But one Justice Department official called the listing a "typo."

This report includes material from The Associated Press, The San Diego Union-Tribune, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune and the Washington Post.

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