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Friday, October 29, 2004

AMERICA'S ORDEAL

Tracing Trail Of Hijackers

By Thomas Frank
WASHINGTON BUREAU

September 23, 2001

Washington - Before they were hijackers, they were suburbanites.

They roomed together in a motel, worked out together at a gym, and one even visited an adult bookstore in the Washington suburbs in the weeks before smashing a plane into the Pentagon on Sept. 11. The hijacker believed to have steered American Airlines Flight 77 on its fatal path toward the Pentagon recently honed his rusty flying skills at a small Maryland airport, and more than a year ago sought training at a flight school in Arizona.

"They did not stand out in any way," said Jim Collins, spokesman for the police in Laurel, Md., where the hijackers had apparently lived. "It just shows how you can infiltrate a society."

Details of the hijackers' final weeks are emerging as the FBI investigates who is behind the attacks. Although the FBI said none of the five Flight 77 hijackers lived permanently in the Washington area, agents have been questioning countless merchants in the suburbs, some at random.

"They are looking at every motel," said Yogi Patel, manager of an Econo-Lodge in Laurel, a middle-class city of 22,000 people about a half-hour north of Washington where the hijackers were spotted. Patel said FBI agents have come to his hotel twice, first to inspect the guest register and then with a list of the hijackers' names to see if any of them had stayed at the hotel. Patel said there were no matches, although the FBI cautioned that some hijackers may have been using false or stolen identifications.

At Freeway Airport in Bowie, Md., 20 miles west of Washington, flight instructor Sheri Baxter instantly recognized the name of alleged hijacker Hani Hanjour when the FBI

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On Wall Street

released a list of 19 suspects in the four hijackings. Hanjour, the only suspect on Flight 77 the FBI listed as a pilot, had come to the airport one month earlier seeking to rent a small plane.

However, when Baxter and fellow instructor Ben Conner took the slender, soft-spoken Hanjour on three test runs during the second week of August, they found he had trouble controlling and landing the single-engine Cessna 172. Even though Hanjour showed a federal pilot's license and a log book cataloging 600 hours of flying experience, chief flight instructor Marcel Bernard declined to rent him a plane without more lessons.

In the spring of 2000, Hanjour had asked to enroll in the CRM Airline Training Center in Scottsdale, Ariz., for advanced training, said the center's attorney, Gerald Chilton Jr. Hanjour had attended the school for three months in late 1996 and again in December 1997 but never finished coursework for a license to fly a single-engine aircraft, Chilton said.

When Hanjour reapplied to the center last year, "We declined to provide training to him because we didn't think he was a good enough student when he was there in 1996 and 1997," Chilton said.

Hanjour apparently went to the center after living in Hollywood, Fla., in early 1996 with a couple who knew his older brother. Susan Khalil said she recognized Hanjour in photos the FBI recently showed her and recalled him as "painfully shy" with "really poor hygiene" when he lived with her family for two months in 1996.

Despite Hanjour's poor reviews, he did have some ability as a pilot, said Bernard of Freeway Airport. "There's no doubt in my mind that once that [hijacked jet] got going, he could have pointed that plane at a building and hit it," he said.

The only thing that seemed odd about Hanjour, who paid the \$400 flying bill in cash, was his address: a motel in Laurel.

At the Valencia Motel on a hardscrabble stretch of Route 1 in Laurel, long-term residents say they know each other well. The five men who stayed in Room 343, a two-room suite, in early September, were an exception, they said. The men drove an old four-door Toyota with California license plates and said nothing.

"They kept way to themselves," said Charmain Mungo, who lives in Room 342 and said she identified Hanjour and Majed Moqed, another suspected Flight 77 hijacker, from an FBI photo.

Moqed apparently visited a nearby adult video store three times between late-July and mid-August, said the store manager, who would not give his name but said he picked Moqed out "immediately" when the FBI showed him the surveillance photo among seven or eight other photos.

"He was extremely uncomfortable," said the manager, who recalled paying attention to Moqed because he wondered whether the man was studying the store for a possible robbery. Moqed visited three times, always between 10:30 p.m. and 1:30 a.m., the manager said, adding that he looked at magazines and movies but didn't buy anything.

When Moqed, Hanjour and the three other suspected hijackers - Khalid al-Midhar, Nawaq Alhamzi and Salem Alhamzi - used weight machines at a Gold's Gym in a nearby shopping mall, "they seemed not to really know what they were doing," said Gold's regional manager Spero Courtis.

Three of the men bought \$30 one-week passes on Sept. 2, paying from a large wad of cash. They came in three or four times that week, once with Moqed and Hanjour, who paid \$10 for daily passes. All of the men signed the register, which the FBI took Sept. 14, Courtis said.

At the Pin-Del hotel in Laurel, owner Suresh Patel gave the FBI a registration card showing that Nawaq Alhamzi spent the night of Sept. 1 in Room 7, a dank \$43-a-night setup with a TV bolted to the ceiling and two queen-sized beds. The registration card shows that as identification, Alhamzi gave a New York State driver license, listing 161 Lexington Ave. in Manhattan as his address. The building is a hotel whose records show he never stayed there. The New York State Department of Motor Vehicles said it had issued no license to someone with that name.

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"He was very polite," said Patel's wife, Indira, recalling that Alhamzi arrived late and left early. "Whatever I said, he said, 'OK, OK.'"

Staff correspondent Monte R. Young in Florida contributed to this story.

Sites hijackers visited in weeks before the attacks

- 1) Valencia and Pin-Del motels in Laurel, Md.
- 2) Gold's Gym in Greenbelt, Md.
- 3) Freeway Aviation Flight Training Center in Mitchellville, Md.

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