

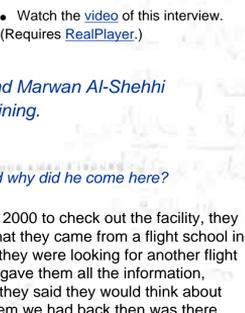


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Rudi Dekkers

Florida, Sunday 21 October, 2001



Rudi Dekkers
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Producer Quentin McDermott travelled to Venice, Florida to interview Rudi Dekkers, the president of Huffman Aviation where Mohamed Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi completed their flight training.

When was Mohamed Atta here and why did he come here?

Mohamed Atta came here July 1st, 2000 to check out the facility, they stated to my student co-ordinator that they came from a flight school in the area, they were not happy and they were looking for another flight school, so my student co-ordinator gave them all the information, prices, the way we work here. And they said they would think about and will come back. The only problem we had back then was there was no sleeping place for them, we had no space because normally the students are not coming and say we need a room when they come from here, most of the time when they come from Europe we'd know where to help them, we'd have space. Anyway, July 3rd they came back, Mohamed Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi and stated they wanted to do business with us and stated that they needed a place to stay. We told them you can attend here in the flight school, you need to pay \$1,000 down per person and we will check if we can find a room, we called the hotels, there was nobody decent price and then I said to my employees because I knew that some of my employees were renting rooms out, is somebody available? Charles Voss my bookkeeper was available to rent out some space and he did. This is how it all started. Now - Atta had a private licence already, he needed to do the single, multi-engine commercial course and instrument rating, the same as Marwan Al-Shehhi. Al-Shehhi had only a few hours so he practically did the whole course and he paid \$20,800, he paid that by every week putting a cheque down, hardly any cash, we don't like cash, especially when it's from foreigners because you're not allowed to take a lot of cash with you over the border, so they paid with cheque, Atta paid \$18,800 due to the fact that he already had some hours.

Now what exactly was the course that they were taking?

As I said, Atta had his private pilot licence, he wanted to be a commercial, multi-engine, IFR-rated pilot, the same as Marwan Al-Shehhi.

How long was the course?

Depends - you can work on it every day, then you can do it between three and six months. In most cases the people who are coming over to do the professional course stay four, five, six months and that was the case with them, they came July 3rd to train and December 21st they did their check-ride with the designated examiner from the FAA and it took them, by the way, five months.

So when they left, what qualifications did they leave with?

They left with a commercial, single, multi-engine IFR rating, up to a maximum of 12,000 lb airplane, that means small airplanes, they flew the Seneca II, that's a two engine, six seater airplane, you're not capable to fly a jet airplane if you have this licence. But they went for the full course, they didn't come in here and said we only want to steer left and right, and have control of the airplane, they came for the full course, because if you do an exam with the FAA, the FAA is not going to say we'll just test you for steering left and right, they test you for everything.

Were they good students?

I have heard from the instructors that they were average students, the examiner told me the same, Mr Whitman designated examiner from the FAA. We had some problems in the beginning with Atta that he was not listening, so at the beginning he was certainly not a good student, he was not listening to the instructors, had an attitude he felt like he was standing above everybody here. I have spoken with him on numerous occasions because when I see a face on a regular basis in my facility, I tend to ask him, "oh who are you and where are you from" because as the president of the company I don't know all my customers, but I try to know them. I think that's publicity for the company, its PR and so I ask him where are you from, what are you doing and what are your goals and Atta was really not a nice person to talk to, but anyhow he told me, I think back then he told me he was from Egypt but I can't tell exactly any more, I didn't remember that, but he told me that he wanted to get the commercial multi-licence to obtain further training in his country to get to the commercial airlines and I said to him, "but you're a little older already, most students are a little younger", he's says "well I have an opportunity to get into the airline if I get my licenses" and it happens, it's not out of the ordinary that that doesn't happen up to 40 years old people change their profession.

So he said he was from Egypt and he said he wanted to fly in commercial airlines?

Yeah, I thought he said Egypt I can't take an oath on that any more, because I have heard so many things from him in the five months time that they were here, this is not important data for me to remember, so I tend to forget things that I don't need to know.

Now there have been stories that he presented himself as an Arab prince, is that correct?

Well, no. If he was a prince, yes or no, I can't state that because we never heard them talking about that, we never heard anything, we have heard that one of my students who was here in the same time that Atta and Al-Shehhi was here, and I think it was Miss Greaves, that she stated in the London newspaper that he was a prince, that their clothing was expensive and that Al-Shehhi was his guard. Nothing of that we have seen here in the five months they were here, they were absolutely low profile, they clothed themselves like we all do, jeans and sneakers, there was nothing else. My personal feeling was Atta was an asshole first class, and Al-Shehhi was a very nice, likeable person, he had fun, he was laughing, he took the jokes very talking about, this is a male environmental, so we talk about girls, planes but Atta was never socialising.

Why do you say Atta was an asshole?

Well, when Atta was here and I saw his face on several occasions in the building, then I know that they're regular students and then I try to talk to them, it's kind of a PR - where are you from, are there more people from where you're from who need to be trained, and I tried to communicate with him. I found out from my people that he lived in Hamburg and he spoke German so one of the days that I saw him, I speak German myself, I'm a Dutch citizen, and I started in the morning telling him in German, "good morning, how are you, how do you like the coffee, are you happy here", and he looked at me with cold eyes, didn't react at all and walked away. That was one of my first meetings I had, or coffee break meetings, and I just didn't like the guy, I talked to him several occasions, the way he looked, the way he was, was to me like I don't like the guy. Sometimes you have that impression from when you meet people in the field and that was my first impression, no - did I have an impression that he was a terrorist or to become terrorist? Of course not, because if that was the case as I have stated all over the world, I would kill him with my own bare hands, but he was just an asshole first class, he had an attitude towards everybody, towards the instructors, towards Charles Voss where he was staying for a week, and we didn't like the guy, but he was a customer, he was here to do a professional course, after the first month when he had problems with the instructors, the chief flight instructor took him separate, discussed the problems and we have said, if you do not listen to the instructors instruction, then you're out of here, we'll just kick you out and then he's he's changed, he listened to the instructions and I still didn't like him but he is a customer and he paid the bills and there was nothing else that we could have know, could have seen that he was up to, what he did.

You make him sound as if he was very arrogant.

Yes he was a very arrogant person. He was very arrogant, his last name started with Atta and that that is probably attitude - it start for a bad attitude, he had a bad attitude and we just didn't like him.

Did he give any indication of why he had this bad attitude?

No, we never talked about it, you don't talk to somebody and say you got a bad attitude when he's a customer, we left him alone, he did only his studying and he never did any socialising with any of our customers or instructors, so we didn't care, just do what you've got to do and get out when you're done.

You mentioned earlier that he had quite cold eyes and other people have mentioned this...

Well if you look at his picture which you have seen in the newspapers you can see probably what I mean, cold, no life in his face, no expression in his face, if I am happy I smile, when I'm angry I look angry - this guy had just a cold face and I wish we had a signal that what he was up to, I wish we had that, but unfortunately we didn't, I got 48 employees here and most of them have seen him and talked to him for a brief moment - nobody knew this and Al-Shehhi, he was a likeable, young people, 23 years old, had fun, was laughing, every day he had fun.

Can I just be clear about the aircraft they were flying - I've been told Cessna 172 that he did 40 hours in and 15 in Piper Cherokee - is that correct?

If I had the invoice in front of me I can tell you if it's correct or not, they they flew about 250 hours here because when you obtain a commercial licence you need to fly 250 hours, they have done a lot of flight hours in a two seater Cessna a 152 or 150, and after that they have flown 172s, they have flown Warriors and they have flown the Pied Piper Seneca - I think the majority of the flight time is done in single engines, it could be Warrior, 172. I can give you a copy of the invoice and then you can see it yourself (view the invoice).

Now, knowing what eventually occurred, would the training that they received here have been sufficient to allow Atta to steer a commercial airliner into the World Trade Centre?

Well I have heard this question numerous times and I am proud in the fact that we try to deliver a good product. I'm not proud that this was a student running us, although we know that there is no blame for Huffman Aviation, but I can reverse the question and ask you, you have a drivers license, are you capable to steer in a big truck, you probably can steer - but now you need to do something, turn, descend, then I don't believe it's possible - I believe everybody with some skills and a pilot licence can steer, but they had to steer 90 degrees to the left, they had to descend, they had to do - hit a target, that is kind of difficult, I think and I have said this in the first day after September 11 that they had other training because I don't believe it was possible without any other training. They did get some hours in a simulator, I believe it was a 727, and I think that's what you have to have before you know a little bit how it feels - if you go out of my airplanes, directly into a Boeing, I don't think you make it, but here again - when you and I are stepping in an airplane we want to go back to our wives, our children, because we want to survive, we don't want to kill ourselves. I don't understand that Atta and Al-Shehhi went for a licence, that is a hard licence to get when they fly themselves against a building - they were just trying to get experience, why do you need a licence, we don't understand it, it doesn't fit with what their plan was. But to come back on the question, I don't believe that that you can steer a Boeing, you need to have additional instruction.

Some people have speculated that that the reason they were able to steer so accurately is because they were able to influence GPS information. Is that possible, and were they learning any of that here?

No, we do not have simulators, we do not have any information toys of these planes, I have learned also with all the interviews, because I became kind of a data bank from all the reporters, they tell me information and so I get more information, what happened outside my facility, is that they bought flight simulator from Microsoft Windows - you can get a copy on your screen at home, on your monitor from the computer and you can learn the GPS, so it could be possible that they had knowledge about the avionics equipment in that plane. It is a bold step what they did, but again they went with a different mission, they didn't go with the mission I want to go home to my wife and kids, they went with a different mission, and I don't know how people think if they go with a mission like that.

How did you feel when the aircraft hit the World Trade Centre?

On September 11 at 9 o'clock in the morning or maybe a little bit before I had Washington on the line, one of the departments for one of my other businesses and I was talking to a lady and she screamed, "oh they hit the World Trade Centre", and I said "you're joking", and then she said, "I'm not joking, somebody flew against the WTC". I said, "you're joking" and she became mad, and I said "OK, I'll hang up and have a nice day". Then we watched the television and we saw what happened and we were shocked, I mean everybody here was like, how the heck is that possible, then 15 minutes later, we saw the second building hit with the plane that we saw that was banking like enormously, immediately we were standing there with at least 15 pilots, inermously I said, how can the captain do this, immediately the reaction in the group was, no captain would do this, so immediately in the group we said somebody hijacked the plane, but that person almost missed the target because they were banking at least 30, 40 degrees and they were missing it - so we knew as pilots that there was somebody in the cockpit who had some experience but they were missing almost their target - what we wished they missed their target, but we felt terrible, we felt terrible, I mean, we had some tears, especially when the building collapsed it was even worse, but that day I didn't know that I was involved as Huffman Aviation, till the next morning 7 o'clock I had a phone call on September 12th from my manager here in Huffman Aviation and said that, since 2.30 that morning, the FBI was here to ask for two files, they couldn't find them right away, so I went over to Huffman Aviation, I live 16 miles away from here, and I talked to them, they found the file in the meantime and they explained to me that they were suspected hijackers who went into the World Tower Centers and we were shocked, I mean now the problem was at my doorstep and not 2000 miles away, so we were shocked. Incredible feeling, but I didn't feel worse than the day before due to the fact we knew that we did a legit job, we didn't have any clue, I had questions from reporters, they said, "don't you feel betrayed?" I said, no, because only a loved one can betray me, the customer cannot betray me, do I feel bad, shoot, yes, I feel terrible, I mean I feel like every other American here and I'm a Dutch citizen, but I feel like the Americans, this is a terrible and the bastards who did this need to get punished and I have stated, you know, if they would walk here, I would kill them with my bare hands, if I had any clue that these animals were up to this, I'm an extrovert, that means I'll take action, this is terrible, this is besides the financial stress we have all over the world because of this, this is something that goes beyond our thinking.

But despite Mohamed Atta's attitude you were never suspicious of his motives?

No. No. No. I'm 45 years old, I'm doing about 25 years business, I meet all kinds of people I have easy and quick opinion about people and 90% of the time I'm right and sometimes you're not right, I just didn't like the guy - but does that mean that it's stamped on his face that he's a terrorist? No. His behaviour was not abnormal for me versus other Muslim students we had in the years. Huffman Aviation doesn't do a lot of Muslim students, five, six, seven a year, but they all are by themselves, they all are a little different than we are and it was not different than any other behaviour, he was just not a likeable person.

Did the instructors tell you that Atta and Al-Shehhi were particularly interested in those kinds of banking manoeuvres?

I did not hear from my instructors that Atta and Al-Shehhi were specifically interested in one section of their flying. They have to do everything to obtain the licence. I have not heard that, not even after the fact we knew what they did, and I've spoken with the two instructors, Gerry and Mark, who flew with them and they didn't say to me that they were specially interested into turn and banking, no.

Can you tell me the story about Atta and Al-Shehhi landing a plane which stalled and which they abandoned?

We had a phone call on December 26 from Signator Flight Support on Miami International that one of our planes with the two suspected hijackers — we didn't know that back then of course, Atta and Al-Shehhi — landed about 3 o'clock in the afternoon on Miami International, they went off the runway and then they had a problem with the plane that either it had too much fuel or they did something, but the engine stopped, on the taxi-way. Now that can happen, they tried to restart it, they were not able to restart it. Now they did something foolish. They cut off communications with ground, they shut off the master switch of the plane and now Miami International had a problem, there was a plane sitting on a taxi-way, no communications, nothing, so they make quite a mistake there. December 27 we had a phone call from the FAA and they stated to us, was it our plane, can we send the maintenance records, etc etc, this is what we found out, but what I don't understand when you obtain December 21st, your licence as a pilot, commercial pilot, that still go to Miami International — I fly 20 years and for me it's still kind of stress to go to Miami International, so what were they doing there, I don't understand that and then they make that big mistake. Then they drove back with a cab from Miami to Venice, and that's 200 miles and they want us to pay for the bill, so we didn't do that, but this is the attitude that they had and they were abusing people around this.

So was the aircraft your aircraft?

It was my aircraft, they rented that after their licenses, they rented the plane for that day and went to Miami International without my knowledge and they would not have that plane rented with my permission if we knew they went to such a big airport.

It seems to me that to have done that is a serious breach of the rules. Shouldn't they have lost their license?

No, I don't think so. When pilots make mistakes the FAA will investigate that and will issue either a first warning with a two year probation or a fine, the FAA is not that difficult, they understand if you're a pilot that you can make mistakes like you can make a mistake in traffic with your car, and they don't take your licence right away. If you're drunk behind the wheel, yeah they'll take your licence and that's the same as in an airplane, so the FAA is always trying to work with the people, no problem, but they were just curious why students actually pilots already just shut off the master switch and that is a no no.

How did they pay for their course?

They paid with \$1000 down bank cheque from some trust here in Florida and they paid about every week \$1000 and the total for Atta was about \$18800 and Al-Shehhi was about \$20,800.

That information presumably has been quite useful to the FBI?

Yeah, we have given of course the whole invoice, every day that they'd been flying, we noticed also when we looked at the invoice that sometimes there were two or three days gone and the instructor was waiting for them but there was no Atta and Al-Shehhi and we bitched about that to them but they came back and they did the course and they told us sometimes that they, Atta want to take a day off and that is an understandable issue, now we know that they went all over Florida to have contacts, etc etc.

Now you have another site down in Naples, tell me about that and tell me about the significance of of the people who've been students there?

Yeah, we have another flight school 16 miles south from here, Ambassador Airways in Naples, and do only foreigners. We do foreigners and Americans here but in Ambassador we do 90% foreigners and I had at the moment of a week before September 11, I had one student there with a Muslim background who broke his course a week before September 11, stated to us that he wanted to go to Boston because he was doing a cruise or something, and he just stopped his course.

He came from England when he attended the flight course in Naples, but he lives in Italy. His father works for the NATO, his mum came over when he was sick in the first two weeks that he attended our flight school and she was completely Muslim dress, you know, we didn't understand why a mum comes over when a 20-year-old or 19-year-old boy is sick with just the flu, we didn't understand that. Then there was money wired to the flight school from an official address like it had to do with the NATO or something, we didn't understand it, so this was a weird situation, then the person left a week prior finishing his course to Boston and also a week prior to September 11, all these things together is too many co-incidences and we don't believe in co-incidence any more, so I reported this to the FBI and the FBI is looking into it and the boy's name did not appear on the list of hijackers, or the 19 or 21 suspects total, but he is not home yet, so it is kind of strange, very strange.

What job does his father do in NATO?

We don't know, he bragged about the fact that his father was doing something with NATO but we don't know. Now it could be all legit, it could be all right, but as I say, too many coincidences are not right.

As a result of this, what if anything have you changed in your systems of operation?

Hardly anything, the FBI when they came in here they asked us if we had the files from these two people and they were surprised to find in the files a copy of their passport and a copy of their INS immigration stamp — that is not something we have to do, but due to the fact that these people were from overseas, we wanted to have a copy, due to the fact if something happens, we want to go to their home and have information. Now the government here is talking about that they wanted the flight schools do a background check — well, I think that's ridiculous, we are a flight school, we are nothing else, and a business who rents out space or sells fuel or sells groceries and if you pay for it you get it. Of course if we have knowledge about a person with wrong doing we will report that, we will not work with these people, but I have noticed, I'm here about 10 years now, I have noticed that the government agencies here do not work together so well, yes now they do in this distress situation but, for example, Atta was apparently a known terrorist because he had a bus bombing involvement in 1987 or 86 in Lebanon. He was on a list, yet he lived in Germany without a problem, yet he comes into the country here, he gets a licence from the motor vehicle department to drive car, then he does a test, a flight test, he gets a temporary ticket for 120 days to fly, the information goes to Oklahoma, this is a Federal Agency and they type him out a licence without checking. I would say to the government we need to find a system that we do not have this any more and we need to help each other. I'm not trying to bitch here, I'm trying to help, it makes no sense to let these people into the country and tell the flight school you need to do a background check. I suggest that the government agency is checking one database computer with all the information about people. I am a nobody but I know one thing, flight schools doing background checks, they're not the border, they're not immigration.

We've heard this story about a bus bombing in in Israel, but we haven't heard confirmation of it. Do you know it to be true?

All I know is the information I get from sources. I have heard from several sources, New York Times, reporters, in the internet you can find also his name that he is involved, suspected to be involved, let me put it that way, suspected - would it not be a question mark for the government if you have a suspecting person? Let the FBI, CIA, FAA, DMV, all the agents work together and let's get one central computer where all the names are, and will this cost us our freedom, no. Because if you have nothing to fear and your name is in there you don't mind. I think that they're doing a lot of things after the fact that could be prevented before. We have heard on the news also here that the director of the FBI wrote a report to the president a couple of days before the bombing that he suspected there was a terrorist attack on his way. Unfortunately this was too late, the guy did a good job but unfortunately was too late, but when we link the computers together as a government here, I think that we're doing the right thing then.

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