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Al-Jazeera offers accounts of 9/11 planning

September 12, 2002 Posted: 10:42 PM EDT (0242 GMT)



Ramzi Binalshibh

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, (CNN) -- In the second part of a documentary aired by the Arabic television news network Al-Jazeera, two al Qaeda terrorists wanted by the United States give an account of their planning of the September 11 attacks and describe the actions of some of the main hijackers in their final days.

The documentary contains accounts and quotes attributed to Ramzi Binalshibh, described in the documentary as the "coordinator of the September 11 operation," and Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, a Kuwaiti who is on the United States' "most wanted" terrorist list and is believed by authorities to be one of the primary planners.

Binalshibh told Al-Jazeera he hoped to have been one of the hijackers but could not obtain an entry visa to the United States.

Al-Jazeera says the two were interviewed in Karachi, Pakistan, and sources familiar with the interviews told CNN both men were interviewed this summer. The tape provided to CNN has English subtitles provided by Al-Jazeera.

The documentary is titled "Top Secret: The Road to September 11," narrated by Al-Jazeera journalist Yosri Fouda.

Timeline stretches back to 1996

The timeline outlined in the documentary begins when some of the terrorists move to Hamburg, Germany, in 1996 and 1997 to study. At this time Mohammad Atta, the operational leader of the attacks, goes to a mosque, "not to pray but to sign his death will," according to Fouda.

At the end of 1998, Fouda says, Atta and several other planners moved to 54 Marienstrasse in Hamburg, which he describes as "the kitchen of the September 11 operation."

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed says, "We had a large surplus of brothers willing to die as martyrs. As we studied various targets, nuclear facilities arose as a key option." Fouda says nuclear targets were dropped for fear they could "get out of hand."

Binalshibh and Mohammed say that when al Qaeda forces attacked the USS Cole in Yemen in October 12, 2000, leaders of the organization were already preparing for a larger operation they knew would kill large numbers of civilians.

In that year, some of the hijackers began taking flight lessons in Florida and Arizona, acquiring just enough training to fly large planes into their targets.

Security breakdowns

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At this point in the documentary, Fouda discusses security breakdowns, including one that allowed Khalid Al-Mihdar, a Kuwaiti who was on the U.S. "most wanted" terrorist list, to enter the country two months before the attacks. He was on the plane that crashed into the Pentagon.

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He also describes the failed efforts by an FBI agent in Minneapolis to alert her superiors to accused terrorist Zacarias Moussaoui, and a memo from an Arizona agent who reported an unusual number of Arabs taking flying lessons, which was not acted upon.

About three weeks before September 11, targets were assigned to four teams, with three of them bearing a code name: The U.S. Capitol was called "The Faculty of Law;" the Pentagon became "The Faculty of Fine Arts;" and the North Tower of the World Trade Center was code-named by Atta as "The Faculty of Town Planning."

One of the terrorists, Abu Abdul Rahman, pretended to send a love message via an Internet chat room to his German girlfriend, who was actually Binalshibh. It contained more code for the attacks:

"The first semester commences in three weeks. Two high schools and two universities. ... This summer will surely be hot ...19 [the eventual number of hijackers] certificates for private education and four exams. Regards to the professor. Goodbye."

Soon after, Fouda says, the hijackers began "moving fast," picking the flights to be hijacked, choosing ones involving large planes with "maximum volume of fuel and best punctuality."

Seats in business class were chosen for some to allow for "mobility and maneuverability," according to Binalshibh.

Atta calls with a puzzle

Binalshibh gives an account of an early morning phone call from Mohammad Atta, who said he needed help solving a puzzle:

"He [Atta] said, 'Two sticks, a dash and a cake with a stick down. What is it?' I said, 'Did you wake me up to tell me this puzzle?' As it turns out, two sticks is the number 11, and a dash is a dash and a cake with a stick down is the number 9. And that was September 11."

At this point, over graphic images of the September 11 attacks and related events, the documentary has quotations from some of the hijackers bolstering their courage with quotes from the Quran and expressing assurances that they will be rewarded as martyrs.

Binalshibh describes watching the attacks with others: "The brothers shouted, Allah-u-Akbar, thanks to God, and cried. Everyone thought that this was the only operation. We said to them, 'Wait, wait.'"

"Suddenly our brother Marwan was violently ramming the plane into the [World Trade Center] in an unbelievable manner! We were watching live and praying: God ... aim ... aim ... aim."

At the close, Professor Dittmar Machule, a former teacher of Atta, says, "The first thing I would say to Mohammed: 'Why?'"

The question is followed by a quote attributed to Osama bin Laden: "We treat them in the same way. Those who kill our women and innocent, we kill their women and innocent, until they refrain."

Finally, Fouda appears on camera saying: "Westerners, Americans in particular ... should now question what would drive a group of young men, some of them highly educated ... some among the richest of Arabs, and all in their youth, to voluntarily throw themselves into what Americans see as perishment, but to them is paradise."

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