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'You Never Imagine' A Hijacker Next Door

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They were smart, technically proficient, and ambitious in their own peculiar way. They were comfortable with the Internet and the modern modes of business travel. They were the kind of people who could have succeeded in America if they hadn't wanted to destroy it.

Theirs was a soft, subtle presence in this country for many months, in some cases years. They didn't blend in, exactly, but they stayed out of trouble. One suspected ringleader, Mohamed Atta, got a ticket in April for driving without a license, and failed to show up for his court hearing, but police never followed up on a bench warrant for his arrest. Other than that his only slip-up came a couple of years ago in Germany, when he failed to return three rented videos ("Ace Ventura," "Vampires" and "Storm of the Century") and the movie rental company turned to a collection agency.

These conspirators didn't creep into the country in the dark of night. They were welcomed in daylight. At least some, if not all, arrived legally, with visas, though two were later put on a government "watch list" of suspected terrorists. One graduated from a prestigious flight school in Daytona Beach, Fla. They played by the rules well enough to obtain, in some cases, Social Security numbers, driver's licenses and frequent-flier accounts.

They tended to pay for things with wads of cash. At times they could be standoffish, and made people nervous. Neighbors sometimes had an uncomfortable feeling -- why didn't they talk more? Why did this man claim to have no home phone number? Why were these people holding meetings so late at night?

Even so, as the names of the suspected hijackers have been made public, you don't hear people saying they saw it coming. No one says, "We always thought that guy was a terrorist."

The failure of this country to detect a massive terrorist conspiracy in its midst -- at its flight schools, at the rental car counters, at the computer console of the Kinko's copy center, boarding commercial jets bound for the West Coast -- may take months to explain fully. Some familiar explanations will surface, from the bungling of intelligence-gathering agencies to the cultural fragmentation of a country where so many people are transient and so few know their neighbors.

But as the details of the conspiracy emerge, it is clear that the terrorists took great pains to conceal their plans and their identities. They listed nearby Mail Boxes Etc. outlets as home addresses. They moved every two or three months. They may have assumed the identities of others. They skittered across the surface of a large and diverse nation with hardly a snag.

They were young men, mostly, the youngest just 20. Some were loners. One told his landlord he hoped to find a Mexican bride; they made good wives, he thought. A few were married, with small children who played with American kids in their neighborhoods. They favored motels and apartments and rented homes in beachfront communities near the flight schools in Florida. Their locations -- Delray Beach, Vero Beach, Daytona Beach -- have been famous for retirees and race cars, never terrorists. At times they landed elsewhere: Phoenix, San Diego. One lived briefly just outside the Beltway, taking English classes and computer training at Tysons Corner.

"To me, they acted like normal human beings, nothing abnormal," said Henry George, who taught two suspected hijackers, Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi, in Dade County last year. "They were polite, maybe even shy."

Charles Lisa, who rented apartments to two of the men in South Florida, told the Miami Herald that they were the kind of young men you'd want to take to a baseball game. When they moved out, the landlord asked for a forwarding address. One of the men smiled and said, "I'll send you a postcard."

Without a Single Bullet

It was the most spectacular crime in American history. Although a body count is incomplete, it appears that the casualties in Tuesday's attack may exceed the 4,435 Americans officially listed as having died in combat in the Revolutionary War. The terrorists achieved their goal without firing a single bullet.

They may have used plastic knives and box cutters, the latter of which could have been assembled with razor blades in toiletry kits that passed easily through airport baggage scanners. But the key weapons were airplanes, once considered exotic, even physics-defying, but in the modern world as innocuous and familiar as sparrows. The terrorists turned them into guided missiles.

Fully loaded, ready for takeoff, the American Airlines Boeing 767-200 jet, serial number 22332, weighed 351,000 pounds. That would be the first bomb. Its fuel tank holds 20,450 gallons of jet fuel, which is similar to kerosene. At ideal conditions it can burn at 3,500 degrees. It's not as volatile as gasoline, but molecule for molecule it packs more punch. A single gallon can produce 125,000 BTUs of energy. What thousands of gallons can do when splashed on a skyscraper and ignited is now common knowledge.

For most Americans, the attacks on the twin towers and the Pentagon came literally out of the blue. The enemy was invisible and inscrutable. No one claimed responsibility. People asked: Why had they done this? What did they want?

The U.S. government has said the prime suspect in the attack is Osama bin Laden, a radical Saudi multimillionaire who funds a worldwide network of terrorists. If he's responsible, Tuesday's attack is the continuation of a five-year-old war that hadn't fully consumed American attention until Tuesday.

Bin Laden wants to cleanse the Muslim world of Western influences and return it to an idealized state that he believes existed a thousand years ago. He's enraged by American support of Israel and the presence of American soldiers -- infidels -- on his home soil of Saudi Arabia. He declared war on the United States in 1996, and later issued a *fatwa*, or religious edict, that assures his followers that they will ascend to heaven for killing the enemies of Islam.

Terrorists linked to bin Laden have attacked American military barracks, warships and embassies. They bombed the World Trade Center in 1993. They have dreamed of increasingly elaborate operations. Bin Laden has said of Westerners, "They violate our land and occupy it and steal the Muslims' possessions, and when faced by resistance, they call it terrorism."

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That's the general framework of the conspiracy that led to Tuesday's attack. The Americans surrounding the hijackers, living next door to them, giving them lessons at flight schools, didn't think they were terrorists. The hijackers didn't think so, either.

Dedicated to Their Mission

Many were Saudis. Their names, to American ears, might seem like minor variations on a theme: Alhamzi, Al Suqami, Alghamdi, Alshehri, Alhaznawi, Alnami, Alomari, and so on. The men changed the spelling of their names as they moved from place to place, increasing the difficulty of nailing down the true identities of the conspirators.

Officials believe that some received training in Afghanistan, bin Laden's base of operations. Others, officials suspect, were members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a radical Muslim group that's part of bin Laden's network. The officials believe that one conspirator, Khalid al-Midhar, is a Yemeni member of the Islamic Army of Yemen, another bin Laden affiliate.

There's no doubt that they were utterly dedicated to the mission. No one ratted out the group.

Among the 19 hijackers identified by authorities was Mohamed Atta, a globe-trotter, someone who was born in Egypt, received a degree at the Technical University in Hamburg, Germany, and most recently lived in the suburban Fort Lauderdale, Fla., community of Coral Springs. Atta is thought to have piloted American Airlines Flight 11, the first to slam into the World Trade Center.

A letter written by Atta, left in his luggage at Boston's Logan Airport, said he planned to kill himself so he could go to heaven as a martyr. It also contained a Saudi passport, an international driver's license, instructional videos for flying Boeing airliners and an Islamic prayer schedule.

Some reports have said the letter was dated 1996, adding to the evidence that the operation was years in the planning. In 1996 Atta was in Hamburg, believed to be a major European center of operations for followers of bin Laden. Atta wrote his university thesis on urban renewal -- how to improve a city. His thesis adviser, Dittmar Machule, described Atta as "a very nice young man: polite, very religious and with a highly developed critical faculty."

In Hamburg he lived with Marwan Al-Shehhi, 11 years his junior. Atta and Al-Shehhi would be largely inseparable for years to come -- until the day they boarded separate planes in Boston and hijacked them to New York City.

The chief federal prosecutor in Hamburg, Kay Nehm, said that Atta and Al-Shehhi had organized a terrorist cell in the city "with the aim of launching spectacular attacks on the institutions of the United States." Neighbors say the men hosted meetings late at night. Another man who lived in their apartment, they say, was Ziad Jarrahi, who was aboard the flight that crashed in Pennsylvania.

After coming to America, Atta and Al-Shehhi diligently pursued flight lessons. They turned first to Huffman Aviation, in Venice, Fla., where they paid a total of \$38,000 for lessons. They rented a bedroom in a house nearby and slept in twin beds. Their landlords, Charles and Drucilla Voss, thought the men were arrogant, and could have been tidier. But they detected nothing sinister. "I just could not believe what the FBI confronted us with yesterday morning," said Drucilla Voss. "You could not believe they were in your house."

The men racked up 260 hours of pilot training but still didn't have any experience with something as technologically advanced as a commercial jetliner. They turned to SimCenter Inc., in the Dade County municipality of Opa-locka, which offers training on a Boeing 727 full-motion flight simulator. They took one three-hour course, then came back for another.

The conspirators apparently did their plotting face to face, in meetings late at night at rented homes. Some of the people associated with the group may still be at large. Authorities are looking for Amer Kamfar, who lived in Vero Beach with his wife and four children. He has an FAA license, with extensive qualifications as a pilot, flight engineer and mechanic. Neighbor Hank Habora said about two or three weeks ago Kamfar left Vero Beach in a hurry.

"They took all their stuff and put it out by the trash: clothes, furniture, pots and pans," he said.

There was one pronounced link between the conspirators and the rest of American society: Their children. They did not have to participate in the jihad. In Vero Beach, Lisa Dubose's 6-year-old son was best buddies with the son of a man named Abdulaziz Alomari -- who later boarded American Airlines Flight 11 with Atta.

The adult Alomaris didn't socialize much. A wave now and again. They spent time with another Muslim family -- clannish behavior that the American neighbors assumed was normal. Theirs was a nice home, rented for \$1,400 a month.

The only problem with the Alomaris were the late-night meetings. Next-door neighbor Betty Egger said that as many as a dozen cars would be parked outside, some on her own lawn. It rattled her to see car headlights flashing through her windows at 2 in the morning.

Alomari told his landlord in August that the family would soon be moving back home, to Saudi Arabia. Then, just before Labor Day, something unusual happened: The Alomaris threw a party for all the neighborhood children. "They invited all the kids, even ones they'd never seen before," said neighbor Andrew Krease.

They served pizza and Happy Meals. Where they come from, Alomari's wife told the neighbors, it is customary to throw a party before moving -- to leave nice memories.

Across the country, the hijackers kept a similarly low profile. Two, Nawaq Alhamzi and Khalid Al-Midhar, lived at one point in Lemon Grove, a quiet residential neighborhood just east of San Diego, renting rooms from Abdussattar Shaikh, a retired English professor at San Diego State University and co-founder of San Diego's Islamic Center. The FBI identified Alhamzi and Al-Midhar as two of the five hijackers who crashed American Flight 77 into the Pentagon on Tuesday.

"They seemed like nice, normal people," neighbor Denise Adair said. "You never imagine that you have a hijacker living next door."

Another suspected hijacker, Hani Hanjour, believed to have been the pilot on the plane that hit the Pentagon, appears to have lived in Arizona for the past five years and received pilot training at CRM Airline Training Center in Scottsdale, Ariz., according to company official T. Gerald Chilton Jr. For three months in 1996 and in December 1997, Hanjour received private instruction to become a pilot of a single-engine aircraft.

But Hanjour, Chilton said, "never completed the course. He was not believed proficient enough to obtain a license." Then, he said, Hanjour called last year to get more training, this time on multi-engine planes. He was turned down.

"He just wasn't a good student with the dedication we see in U.S. Air Force pilots that train there or European airline pilots," Chilton said. "Not that he was rude or impolite. He was just described as a difficult student."

Many details of the plan remain unknown, but its execution began no later than Aug. 25, when the hijackers began buying plane tickets. In many cases they used Internet travel agencies, such as Travelocity.com. Money was apparently no object. Two of the men paid \$4,500 each for one-way first-class tickets on United Airlines Flight 175 -- putting them close to the cockpit.

Why they picked Sept. 11 is unknown. Possibly they selected it because it was a Tuesday, a light day for cross-country travel. Fewer passengers would mean easier crowd control. The technology-savvy terrorists could easily have shopped for less-crowded flights by examining the airline Web sites.

On Aug. 26, Marwan Al-Shehhi and another man checked into the Panther Motel in Deerfield Beach, Fla., Room 12. They paid \$500 in advance. The motel's owners, Diane and Richard Surma, noticed that the men didn't go to the beach, but rather preferred to spend their time around the motel's small swimming pool. A third man visited often. The impression they made was, as always, fairly innocuous: "They were very neat and very polite," said Richard Surma.

One day, the owners noticed that the men had used a towel to cover a picture of a woman in their room. The model wore a dress that exposed one of her shoulders.

When the men left on Sept. 9, Richard Surma looked through the trash. He found illustrated books on martial arts -- karate and jujitsu. There was a German-English dictionary and a box-cutter knife. There were FAA air traffic maps. And finally there were flight training textbooks, including information on flying Boeing passenger jets.

Last Friday night Atta, Al-Shehhi and a third man spent hours drinking and playing video games at Shuckums, a Hollywood, Fla., sports bar. Atta played video Trivial Pursuit and blackjack with great determination. "He looked nervous," manager Tony Amos said. "He kept putting dollars in and he was really focused."

Al-Shehhi and the other man had about five drinks each, he said -- Captain Morgan rum and Coke, and Stolichnaya vodka and orange juice. At one point they argued. "There were a lot of hand gestures and Al-Shehhi was definitely upset," Amos said.

The bartender feared that Al-Shehhi might leave without paying his \$48 tab. The manager intervened, asking if there was a problem. Al-Shehhi, glaring, pulled out a wad of cash and said: "There is no money issue. I am an airline pilot."

The terrorists appear to have put greatest emphasis on Flight 11. Multiple hijackers on that plane had flight training. They also went out of their way to bypass security at Logan Airport. Officials believe that Atta and Alomari rented a car in Boston, drove to Portland, Maine, and took a room Monday night at the Comfort Inn south of town. They then flew on a short flight Tuesday morning from Portland to Boston, changing to Flight 11. By going through security at the small airport in Portland -- at the groggy hour of 5:44 a.m. -- they avoided the tougher security checkpoint in Boston.

Roger Quirion and Vincent Meisner, making business trips to the West Coast, flew with Atta and Alomari on that first flight Tuesday. "They were joined at the hip," recalled Quirion. The two men struck him as clean-cut, wearing slacks, dress shoes and causal shirts, and carrying dark shoulder bags. Their hair was closely cropped. They had no facial hair. In short, they looked like typical businessmen. Unmenacing.

One of the hijackers took a seat in the fourth row. As Meisner passed to take the seat behind him, his luggage bumped the suspected hijacker's shoulder.

"Excuse me," Meisner said.

The man merely hunkered lower, putting his head down.

Meisner thought, "Well, he hasn't had his coffee yet, so I'll leave him alone."

When Atta and Alomari boarded Flight 11 in Boston they sat in the eighth row, across the aisle from David Angell, producer of the TV show "Frasier." Elsewhere on the plane were three more hijackers.

What happened in the coming minutes and hours on the four hijacked planes is still being pieced together, the forensic evidence largely obliterated. Cell phone accounts from passengers indicate that, on some planes at least, the hijackers stabbed members of the crew. Cockpit doors are supposed to be locked, but they are too flimsy to be much of an obstacle to determined men.

What's certain is that they had trained for this moment. They lacked the skills of real airline pilots, but they knew what they would see in the cockpit, what the console would look like, how it would feel to grab the control yoke of a jetliner. Atta and Al-Shehhi had spent most of their time on that flight simulator in Opa-locka working on one thing in particular: turning.

They didn't have to know how to land.

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