

Killers in the Cockpit: Who and Why?
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Public opinion long ago condemned Osama bin Laden for ordering the September 11 sneak attacks, and all evidence points to fellow Islamic zealots Mohamed Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi as his tactical field generals.

The two led a cabal of killers through planning and training stages to their own fiery deaths — in their minds, at least, martyrs bound for Paradise.

To families, friends and disbelieving apologists they were devout, scholarly, loving family men.

To the rest of the world they were killers in a league of their own.

These 19 slaughtered on a scale previously perpetrated only by governments on war footing.

They killed 2,153 men, 642 women and six children at the World Trade Center. They took the lives of 184 other persons at the Pentagon and 40 more in a pasture at Shanksville, Pa. And they killed themselves.

Americans were shocked at a culture that sends young men on suicide missions, though a similar spirit doomed 2,257 Japanese kamikaze pilots who crashed bomb-laden planes into U.S. Navy ships at the end of World War II, sinking 30 vessels and killing some 5,000 sailors.

Atta, 33, an Egyptian who took seat 8D on American Airlines Flight 11, and Al-Shehhi, 23, a Lebanese who boarded United Airlines Flight 175, managed the finances of their terror cell.

The two men, who flew the planes into the World Trade Center towers, had mastered aviation techniques. They held strategy sessions for the pilots July 1 in Las Vegas and a week later with al Qaeda contacts in Spain. Then they set in motion the hijacking of four fuel-filled passenger planes to be used as bombs.

The others at cockpit controls September 11:

- Hani Hanjour, 29, a Saudi who lived in the United Arab Emirates, steered American Airlines Flight 77 to the Pentagon. The son of a wealthy businessman, he was the only pilot not affiliated with the extremist Al-Quds mosque in Hamburg, Germany.
- Ziad Jarrah, 26, a Lebanese with a U.S. pilot license, held the controls of United Airlines Flight 93 until passengers rebelled and it crashed in Pennsylvania.

Despite receiving nearly universal failing grades for their flying abilities from instructors, the four pilots threaded huge Boeing jetliners unscathed through the nation's most congested airspace. Three of them hit their targets.

If Atta and Al-Shehhi were generals and chief pilots, their first officers and logistics chiefs were Nawaf Al-Hazmi, 25, and Khalid Al-Midhar, 26. Both arrived from Saudi Arabia and, with Atta, were linked by U.S. intelligence to bin Laden.

Midhar also was tied to al Qaeda terrorists who bombed the USS Cole off the coast of Yemen on Oct. 12, 2000, killing 17 sailors, and to those who blew up two U.S. embassies in East Africa on Aug. 7, 1998, killing 224.

Armed with \$325,000 in cash and 27 credit cards, the 19 September 11 conspirators assumed appearances that allowed them to hide in plain sight in South Florida, suburban Maryland, northern New Jersey and Southern California.

Skeptical families

Their leaders portrayed themselves as avenging angels of Allah, guided by the anti-infidel sermons

of an extremist Islamic cleric. Similar messages are echoed by radical groups such as the Islamic Council of Britain, which tomorrow will celebrate what it calls a "towering day in history" at North London's notorious Finsbury Park Mosque.

Speculation throughout the Middle East simmers over whether eight of the hijackers stole the identities they made infamous September 11. Saudi Embassy officials question at least five identifications.

But federal prosecutors say they can prove that all 19 hijackers lived and conspired here under the identities filed in court papers, the spellings of which were used for this article.

The most adamant skeptic is the ringleader's father, Cairo lawyer Mohamed Al Amir Atta Sr., who describes his son as effeminate and nonviolent.

"He's as gentle as a little girl. He couldn't have been involved," said Mr. Atta, who now contends that Israeli intelligence agents killed his son shortly after September 11.

"He still insists his son was a victim of a Mossad plot. Most Egyptians seem to agree with this viewpoint," says Amil Khan, a Cairo reporter for the Middle East Times. "He said his son phoned him after the planes hit the World Trade towers, but [that] the videotape of his son boarding the plane was faked."

Mohamed Al-Shehri of Khamis Mushayt, Saudi Arabia, says he dreads having to believe that sons Waleed, 26, and Wail, 28, both former teachers, were aboard Flight 11 when Atta crashed it into the north tower of the World Trade Center.

"If that turns out to be the truth, then I'll never, never accept it from them. I'll never forgive them for that," Mr. Al-Shehri says of his sons.

Wail Al-Shehri was forced to leave his job as a physical education teacher in Saudi Arabia because of mental illness. Flight 11's manifest showed him in Seat 2A, close to the cockpit.

Beside him, in seat 2B, was brother Waleed Al-Shehri, with whom he shared a hotel room in Newton, Mass., on their last night alive. Waleed quit his own teaching post to consult Islamic holy men about Wail's illness.

The other two hijackers on Flight 11 were Abdulaziz Alomari, 30, and Satam Al-Suqami, 25.

Al-Suqami, whose Saudi passport was recovered from World Trade Center rubble, studied Islamic law at King Fahd University in Riyadh. His Florida driver's license bore the address of the Homing Inn in Boynton Beach, as did Wail Al-Shehri's.

Hijackers who obtained state photo IDs used "real names" matching U.S. visas.

"There was no attempt to hide the identifications, and all these people had legitimate documents, valid foreign passports, or valid visas issued by the United States government," U.S. immigration spokesman Russ Bergeron says.

All but Hanjour, whose F-1 student visa had expired, were here on a B-2 visitor visa as of September 11. Two others had expired visas. Fifteen traveled here from Saudi Arabia, including all the foot soldiers.

Although many had some college education and were progeny of privileged families, they shared occasional lapses in English and manners, particularly in behavior toward women.

Sticking together

The hijackers practiced unusual togetherness in banking. Joint accounts were opened in person by two men at a time; they avoided female bank employees. In each case, one man did all the talking, says Brendan Cohen of the Global Objectives international banking house.

Most deposits were large wire transfers. The men did not make smaller deposits. They would go

together to an automated teller machine and withdraw cash, one by one.

They exercised in groups and ordered out Chinese food and ate doughnuts by the boxful. Seven obtained Florida driver's licenses within a two-week span in early summer, and seven got photo IDs at the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles on Aug. 2. Thirteen bought airline tickets for September 11 as part of a group.

Some saw earlier deployment in Chechnya, including Nawaf Al-Hazmi, whose brother was police chief in Jizan; Salem Al-Hazmi, 20, whose relationship to Nawaf is not certain to investigators despite reports they were brothers; and engineering student Ahmed Al-Ghamdi, a citizen of the United Arab Republic.

Investigators theorize that at least 10 of the hijackers did not know they were on a suicide mission and were aboard flights as enforcers, to keep passengers under control. Most of these followers came from rural Saudi families.

Twelve of the 19 lived in tribal areas of southwestern Saudi provinces, principally Taif and al-Baha along Saudi Arabia's Highway 15, and in the mountains of Asir province. Four were from one town.

Many of the foot soldiers were literate and used computers at libraries and elsewhere to retrieve e-mail from such sites as Hotmail.com, which keep no records. Investigators gathered up hundreds of uncoded e-mails from those computers.

A U.S. immigration official says the hijackers' final gathering was systematic: Eight cell members arrived in May 2001, six followed in June, two in July and one in August. Only Hanjour and Nawaf Al-Hazmi are thought by immigration officials to have been in the United States continuously since 2000.

Hanjour was a "sleeper," living on and off in Arizona since arriving in 1990 to study English at the University of Arizona. He took flying lessons in Phoenix in 1996 and 1997, and again in 2000.

Once the others were here, they worked out at gyms in Florida, Maryland and New Jersey. All five Flight 77 hijackers — Majed Moqed, 24, Al-Midhar, both Al-Hazmis and Hanjour — bought one-week memberships at Gold's Gym in Greenbelt through Sept. 9.

Moqed, son of a Saudi who heads the Baniauf tribe, attended King Fahd University in Riyadh. In Maryland, he trolled for excitement among adult videos at a Beltsville store.

Hanjour visited Freeway Airport in Bowie for three brushup student flights in August 2001. Despite his claim of 600 hours experience, instructors there deemed him unfit to fly solo.

Roots in Germany

Investigators believe the massive crime had its roots in Hamburg, Germany, where in 1998 and 1999 university students found common ground in the teachings of Imam Al-Fazazi, a fiery clergyman at Al-Quds mosque. Those students included September 11 pilots Atta, Al-Shehhi and Jarrah.

Andreas Croll, a senior police official in Hamburg, says four other hijackers had ties to the mosque. Mr. Croll says videotapes circulating among Muslims in Hamburg feature the imam proclaiming that "Christians and Jews should have their throats slit" and urging followers to "fight the Americans as long as they are keeping Muslims in prison."

Atta was born into a middle-class family at Kafr al Sheikh, Egypt, and grew up in Cairo. He attended Mustafa Kamal Middle School in a neighborhood now gone seedy. Two sisters teach at Cairo University.

After a year in Italy, Atta studied urban planning at Technical University in Hamburg. He shed a flowing beard and tunic in favor of a groomed, U.S.-style "Joe College" look with button-down collars and pleated trousers.

"He was critical of big hotels and office buildings," says Matthias Frinken, an acquaintance in Hamburg. Another college associate says Atta showed no interest in Western culture, including "cars, girls, motorcycles or things like that."

While his fellow hijackers drank alcohol and lusted after women, Atta sipped plain cranberry juice. As a teen he stalked out in disgust when Egyptian television showed belly dancers, a cousin said.

In 1999, Atta, Al-Shehhi and Jarrah reported their passports stolen in Munich. They obtained duplicates, obliterating the most obvious record of their travel. They already were scouting U.S. flying schools.

With his new passport and a visa issued in Berlin, Atta entered the United States on June 3, 2000. In Florida he joined Al-Shehhi, who arrived five days earlier, to enroll in a private pilot course at Huffman Aviation in Venice.

When Atta received \$69,985 wired to SunTrust Bank on Sept. 18, 2000, the bank notified U.S. Treasury enforcers of a suspicious transaction.

Atta and Al-Shehhi got their private pilot licenses Dec. 21, 2000. On Christmas Eve, they walked away and abandoned their balky, rented Piper Warrior on a busy taxiway at Miami International Airport. Five days later, the two advanced to jet training, spending \$1,500 to use a Boeing 727 simulator at Opa-locka for six hours.

The two studied together, lived together in Coral Springs and Hollywood, Fla., and relaxed together. Al-Shehhi traveled to Casablanca, Morocco; and Amsterdam, and at least once went to Spain with Atta.

They were at Tarragona last year from July 8 through 11, where they met with another former Atta roommate, Ramzi Bin Al-Shibh, 30. Many analysts believe that the Yemen native would have been the 20th hijacker had he not been rejected twice for a U.S. visa.

Federal investigators say the 20th hijacker was to have been Zacarias Moussaoui, who received \$14,000 from Al-Shibh in August 2001. Awaiting trial in Alexandria, he has admitted conspiring with al Qaeda while denying involvement in the attacks.

Final preparations

The day before the hijackings, Atta visited the World Trade Center to calibrate its exact position into his Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver. Each of the hijack pilots bought a GPS, a handheld satellite device that pinpoints a target and navigates back to that spot.

Atta was joined in New York by Alomari, whose image was captured with Atta's by surveillance cameras at an ATM in Portland, Maine, on Sept. 10 and early the next morning at Portland airport when the two returned to Boston.

Atta left two handwritten documents in a suitcase that he checked at Portland in an effort to avoid being "profiled" as suspicious for traveling without luggage. The suitcase missed connections to the Los Angeles-bound Flight 11 and was opened later in Boston.

In a will, Atta said: "I wanted the people who I left behind to hear God and not to be deceived by that life has to offer and to pray more to God and to be good believers."

Also in the suitcase was the original of a four-page letter written in Arabic on lined paper. The FBI said a photocopy was in Nawaf Al-Hazmi's blue 1988 Toyota Corolla parked at Dulles International Airport, and a damaged but readable photocopy somehow emerged from the debris of Flight 93 at Shanksville.

"Translations of the letter indicate an alarming willingness to die on the part of the hijackers," FBI counterterrorism official J.T. Caruso says.

The letter read in part: "Everybody hates death, fears death. But only those, the believers who know

the life after death and the reward after death, would be the ones who will be seeking death." The letter also reminded recipients to make sure they were not followed and to bring along wills, passports and other IDs, luggage, clothes and knives.

Two hijackers certain to have been included in this detailed coordination were Al-Midhar and Nawaf Al-Hazmi. They attracted the attention of U.S. intelligence at a Malaysia meeting of al Qaeda figures in January 2000. They were photographed with bin Laden aides in the gated, high-rise condo beside a Kuala Lumpur golf course.

Once their identities were known, the CIA passed the information to the FBI. But the conspirators' names weren't added to border watchlists until Aug. 23, 2001, after they were back in the United States. Only after the fact did agents check their San Diego house, where Al-Hazmi's car and license were registered and a telephone number was listed in his name.

Al-Midhar and Al-Hazmi lived at 5401 Mount Ada Road, a suburban, two-story house with a basketball backboard on the two-car garage. They bought season tickets to Sea World, played soccer at a park and prayed five times a day at a mosque. Al-Midhar was married; Al-Hazmi advertised for a Mexican bride.

Newsweek reported that the two visited strip clubs and that Al-Midhar told a fellow Muslim who asked why he had no facial hair: "You'll know someday, brother."

An Al-Hazmi acquaintance said: "He told me once that his father had tried to kill him when he was a child. He never told me why, but he had a long knife scar on his forearm."

Al-Hazmi and Al-Midhar arrived in San Diego in 1999 and enrolled in flight schools, where they practiced on a twin-engine Cessna. Rick Garza, an instructor at Sorbi's Flying Club, called them "Dumb and Dumber."

Al-Midhar paid \$3,000 for the Toyota Corolla and signed it over to Al-Hazmi, who drove it cross-country in the spring of 2001. On April Fools' Day, in Oklahoma's Washita County, Trooper C.L. Parkins's radar clocked Al-Hazmi at 85 mph in a 70 mph zone. The ticket carried a \$138 fine.

Al-Hazmi eventually relocated to Room 7 at the Pin-Del Motel on Washington Boulevard in north Laurel, using a false address in New York. He and Al-Midhar rendezvoused there with other hijackers who stayed at the Valencia Motel on Route 1 in Laurel.

Questions unasked

Immigration records show that Marwan Al-Shehhi, who piloted hijacked Flight 175, returned to the United States for the last time in May 2001. He was trained for hand-to-hand combat in Afghanistan and studied at Technical University in Hamburg.

His cousin, Mohand Al-Shehri, graduated from a religious high school and dropped out of Imam Muhammed Ibn Saud Islamic University in Abha. On Flight 175 Al-Shehri was up front in seat 2B next to Fayez Ahmed, also known as Fayez Banihammad, who quit the same university after one semester.

Ahmed took flying lessons with Atta in Florida. Some files list him as a citizen of the United Arab Republic; his age was not available.

Two of the Al-Ghamdis, Hamza and Ahmed, sat beside each other on Flight 175.

Hamza, 20, from Beljurashi in southern Saudi Arabia, had what he considered a humiliating stockboy job when he was recruited by al Qaeda. Ahmed, whose age could not be determined, lived in the Baha region. He studied engineering in Mecca before going to Chechnya in 1999.

Ziad Jarrah, who took the controls of Flight 93, was a Sunni Muslim born in Al Marj, Lebanon. He was raised in a secular family, son of a civil servant and a schoolteacher. The Christian schools he attended include a Catholic high school in Beirut.

In April 1996, Jarrah moved with a cousin to Greifswald, Germany, where he went out with Aisel Sengun, a Turkish woman described as attractive and "very Western."

The romance was cut short the next year when Jarrah went to Hamburg and entered an aeronautical engineering program at the University of Applied Sciences. His landlady there, Rosemarie Canel, painted a portrait of him that Jarrah gave to his mother for Christmas 1997.

Jarrah visited the United States to attend an aviation seminar in May 2000, then returned on a student visa June 27 to enroll at Florida Flight Training Center in Venice. He went to Lebanon when his father had heart surgery in April 2001, returning here April 13. Immigration records show he was readmitted to the United States one last time as a visitor in August 2001.

During the summer, Jarrah shared apartments in Florida with Ahmed Al-Haznawi, 20, who also was on Flight 93. Al-Haznawi, a Saudi from Hezna, is the son of an imam — a term that can describe a spiritual leader, community leader or political leader — and may have become an imam himself. The pair moved in August to the Pin-Del Motel, then flew to Newark on one-way tickets Sept. 7.

By this point the hijackers were sending leftover cash back to their al Qaeda bankers. A FedEx package containing \$18,260 was shipped Sept. 4 to Dubai, and \$27,000 was transferred by wire Sept. 6.

Jarrah called home Sept. 9, confirming receipt of a monthly \$2,000 check plus \$700 in "fun money." He promised to return Sept. 22 for a wedding.

The other hijackers on Flight 93 were Saeed Al-Ghamdi, 40, who took flying lessons in Vero Beach in 2000, and Ahmed Al-Nami, 25, who studied Islamic law at King Khaled University in Abha. Both came from Khamis Mushayt, hometown of the Al-Shehri brothers.

Al-Ghamdi and Al-Nami made their way to Newark to catch Flight 93 Sept. 7 via Spirit Airlines, inviting security examination by paying cash for one-way tickets at \$139.75 each at Mile High Travel in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea.

The right questions never were asked.