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A NATION CHALLENGED: THE SUSPECTS; Mohamed Atta in Close Call In Incident at Miami Airport

By JIM YARDLEY

For Mohamed Atta, the meticulous and intensely disciplined figure who is believed to have helped organize the Sept. 11 attacks, mistakes did happen, or at least nearly did. One of them came on Dec. 26 at Miami International Airport.

There, Mr. Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi, another man the F.B.I. identifies as one of the 19 hijackers, taxied a small private plane toward a runway when, unexpectedly, it stalled.

Unable to restart the engine, the two men shut the plane down, flipped off the lights and, by one account, walked off. Flight controllers, according to airport records, guided the waiting passenger airliners around the stalled aircraft until it was towed away 35 minutes later.

The incident, which occurred on a busy travel day at the country's ninth-busiest passenger airport, is especially notable because of how close it brought the two men to official scrutiny.

One former flight instructor said a Federal Aviation Administration official placed an angry call on Dec. 27, threatening to investigate the maintenance record of the plane as well as the two pilots.

"Whatever came of that, I don't know," said Dan Pursell, who was then the chief instructor at Huffman Aviation in Venice, Fla., the flight school where Mr. Atta and Mr. Shehhi earned their pilot's licenses and had rented the Piper Cherokee that day. "They said I'd hear back from them, which I never did."

A spokesman for the F.A.A. refused to comment on whether any official investigation had ever been started against the two men, citing the criminal investigation into the hijackings.

An employee at Huffman confirmed that the flight school did send the agency the plane's maintenance records. As it turned out, the employee said, a spark plug had needed tightening and the two pilots had probably flooded the engine.

The incident joins the short but tantalizing list of near-miss encounters involving Mr. Atta. In January, after flying from Miami to Madrid, he was allowed to re-enter the United States despite overstaying his previous visa. In April, he was ticketed in South Florida for driving without a license. He failed to show up for court and a bench warrant was issued for his arrest. But with more than 200,000 warrants pending on minor offenses in Broward County, he was never picked up.

Mr. Pursell described the incident at the Miami airport as a nuisance more than a serious violation, an assessment shared by many others in general aviation. But, he agreed, it raised a host of questions, most notably one that remains unanswered: Why were the two novice pilots flying into a heavily trafficked airport on such a busy day?

Mr. Pursell later posted a sign inside the flight school forbidding novice pilots from flying into Miami International.

The timing of the incident also apparently came near the end of the time Mr. Atta and Mr. Shehhi spent in Venice and the start of the months they spent in South Florida before the attacks.

Dale Kraus, then the general manager at Huffman, recalled a telephone call that came within minutes of the incident in Miami from an irritated official in the flight tower.

The official, Mr. Kraus said, said the two pilots had abandoned the plane without radioing the tower and were walking across the airfield toward the main hanger used for general aviation.

"A guy said, 'Hey, some of your pilots are down here and they left the plane on the causeway,'" Mr. Kraus recalled. "Any time the tower calls, they are not in the best of moods."

Mr. Pursell, meanwhile, had already gotten a cellphone call from Mr. Atta and Mr. Shehhi. He said they wanted advice on trying to restart the plane. He assumed that they had already radioed the tower so he advised them to go to the offices of Signature, the private general aviation operator at the airport. He also said he assumed that they had taxied the plane back to the hangar; he was not aware, he said, that they apparently abandoned the plane and walked away.

Mr. Pursell said that because the airport was secured, the two men could not have simply left undetected. He said he later called Signature to arrange to retrieve the airplane and was told that they did pass through the company's offices, at least briefly, before renting a car to return to Venice. Officials at Signature did not respond to several telephone requests to find out whether anyone at the company remembered Mr. Atta or Mr. Shehhi.

An airport incident report indicates that the Piper Cherokee stalled at 5:45 p.m. and was removed from the taxiway by 6:20 p.m. The

report suggests that incident was an inconvenience but did not result in major delays. "Tower seemed to have no trouble taxiing around it at a busy time," the handwritten report reads.

Mr. Kraus and Mr. Pursell said that the breakdown could have happened to any pilot on any airfield, but that the response by the two men was wrong. When they later returned to Huffman, Mr. Pursell said, they were reprimanded. Mr. Kraus said Mr. Atta and Mr. Shehhi told him they had not been aware that they needed to radio the tower for instructions.

Mr. Kraus noted that the two men had been trained on smaller, "uncontrolled" airports that operate without flight towers. Miami International is controlled, that is, the tower controls the movement of all airplanes on the airfield.

Mr. Pursell, meanwhile, said the two men never explained why they chose to fly to Miami or apologized for the costs incurred by the school. He would soon post a note forbidding pilots from flying into Miami International.

"They were more concerned about being reimbursed for their rental car," he recalled. "I told them to forget it."