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AFTER THE ATTACKS: THE INVESTIGATION

AFTER THE ATTACKS: THE INVESTIGATION; BIN LADEN TIE CITED

By DAVID JOHNSTON and JAMES RISEN
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 12— The hijackers who commandeered commercial jets that attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were followers of Osama bin Laden, the Islamic militant who has been blamed for some of the bloodiest attacks against Americans, federal authorities said today.

The authorities said they had also identified accomplices in several cities who had helped plan and execute Tuesday's attacks. Officials said they knew who these people were and important biographical details about many of them but declined to provide their names or nationalities.

Separately, government officials disclosed that at least two people believed to be associates of Mr. bin Laden, and who may have been involved in the attack, entered the United States recently, slipping into the country before the Immigration and Naturalization Service was told to prevent their entry.

Acting swiftly today, investigators obtained warrants and searched businesses and homes in New Jersey, Massachusetts and Florida. They made no arrests but interrogated several people, compiling an outline of the terror group's structure. They prepared biographies of each identified member of the hijack teams and began tracing the recent movements of the men.

Attorney General John Ashcroft said that each flight was seized by three to six hijackers who boarded as passengers, then, with knives and boxcutters, overwhelmed the crew.

Officials said the hijackings featured many elements of previous operations sponsored by Mr. bin Laden: small teams; a coordinating commander who arrives on the scene at the final moment; and logistical support by local sympathizers. Investigators were focusing on

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possible confederates in Boston, metropolitan Washington and Union City, N.J. -- near the three airports from which the hijacked planes departed.

Mr. Ashcroft said that the hijack teams included pilots who had been trained in the United States, at least two of them at a commercial flight school in Florida.

Officials said that a breakthrough came when a witness alerted the authorities to a rental car parked at Logan International Airport in Boston. The vehicle yielded an Arabic-language flight manual and other documents that contained a name on the passenger list of one of the flights. Also from the car search, officials said, investigators found names of other suspects.

Separately, officials said a group of about five men were now under investigation in Union City, suspected of assisting the hijackers. In addition, the officials said the men had apparently set up cameras near the Hudson River and fixed them on the World Trade Center. They photographed the attacks and were said to have congratulated each other afterward, officials said.

Investigators were reviewing the activities of Mr. bin Laden's associates around the world in recent months. A senior federal official said that American intelligence had recently identified several people believed to be linked to Mr. bin Laden and his organization and had told the immigration service that they should be placed on a watch list to prevent them from entering the United States. "There was intelligence that these guys were potential problems," the official said.

After a check following that notification, immigration officials responded that at least two of those identified people were already in the United States, the official said. The F.B.I. was told, and began a search for them, the official said. The official, who did not provide their names, said that it is possible the people were involved in Tuesday's attacks.

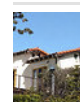
"Of course, just because they were possible associates of Osama bin Laden doesn't tell you that the World Trade Center is about to be attacked," the official added.

Another official said that one passenger aboard American Flight 77, which left from Dulles International Airport and struck the Pentagon, had been placed on the list after entering the country in June through Los Angeles. It was unclear whether the man, who traveled using a Saudi passport, was one of the bin Laden associates cited in the report.

With 4,000 F.B.I. agents and 3,000 support personnel on the case, Mr. Ashcroft called the inquiry "the most massive and intensive investigation ever conducted in America."

Officials said that each of the four hijacking teams had a leader but worked independently, though the teams appeared to be aware that their actions were being closely coordinated with the other groups.

At least one team entered the United States via Canada and made its way to Boston, where the flights of the two aircraft that struck the World Trade Center originated.



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Each team was aided by confederates in Newark, Boston and Virginia, who were responsible for logistical support, including money, rental cars, credit cards and lodging, law enforcement officials said today.

In addition to the flights from Boston that struck the trade center and the one from Dulles which crashed into the Pentagon, a fourth flight, departing from Newark International Airport, crashed in a field in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Officials also said the teams were coordinated by one supervising commander who has not been identified, but who apparently helped select the flights and targets and orchestrated the attacks to occur at roughly the same time. The whereabouts of the commander are unknown.

The officials said they reached that conclusion after assembling information from the flights' passenger lists; pay telephone records; phoned reports from passengers aboard the hijacked flights and evidence taken from the rental car found at Logan Airport.

Robert S. Mueller III, the director of the F.B.I., said the bureau was investigating the activities of several suspected hijackers who were known to have lived for months in Florida and attended flight training school.

As of tonight, several people, whom the authorities declined to identify, had been detained on immigration violations and were being questioned.

In Massachusetts, law enforcement officials said they were investigating whether several hijackers crossed the border from Canada and flew from Portland, Me., to Boston.

At Logan Airport, F.B.I. agents and the local police seized a car that was registered in Virginia. A witness reported the car to authorities, recalling two men having an argument next to the car on Tuesday morning.

In Maine, a spokesman for Gov. Angus S. King Jr. said that the F.B.I. had determined that two suspected hijackers took an early-morning commuter flight from Portland to Logan on Tuesday, before boarding a flight that was hijacked.

At the request of the F.B.I., the local police impounded a rental car the men left at the Portland airport, according to John Ripley, Governor King's spokesman.

Early today, F.B.I. agents searched Huffman Aviation in Venice, Fla., where they believed two suspected hijackers learned to fly commuter jets last year.

Rudi Dekkers, the company's president, said that agents asked him about two former students, Marwan al-Shehhi and Mohammed Atta.

Mr. Dekkers said that both men attended his flight school from July until November 2000 for training on single- and multi-engine small jets. Mr. Dekkers said they completed the course and graduated to training for larger jets, but he did not know where they conducted that training.

"We gave the F.B.I. the files and passport copies and everything," Mr. Dekkers said. "We hold them for every student." He added that the authorities "suspect they had something to do with the hijackings."

The school has conducted flight training for 20 years. Mr. Dekkers said that thousands of students from around the world attend it. "I am mad as you are about what happened," he said. "There is no way of knowing what they had in mind."

State-owned television in Abu Dhabi reported today that two suspects connected to the flights from Logan were Wa'el Mohammad al-Shihri and Ahmad Ibrahim Ali al-Hazzouni. The network said that the pair carried Saudi passports.

The police in Coral Springs, Fla., said that F.B.I. agents also searched an apartment there late on Tuesday.

Federal authorities released a bulletin for two vehicles -- a 1989 two-door red Pontiac with license number D79 DDV or DVD, and a tan four-door Oldsmobile with license number VEP 54N.

A senior crash investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board said it would be a huge challenge to find the voice and data recorders -- the "black boxes" -- from the planes that hit the trade center.

First, he said, the sonic pingers that let searchers home in on boxes only function in water.

Then, he added, "The airplanes are probably so fragmented, and with all the other debris there, that coming up with those boxes is going to be a very difficult task, assuming they even survived the blast and fire."

Photos: Police officers in Venice, Fla., removed boxes of student records yesterday from Huffman Aviation, a flight school where two suspects in Tuesday's hijackings had been students. (Photographs by Bill Speer for The New York Times); Rudi Dekkers, owner of Huffman Aviation, where two suspected hijackers took flying lessons. He is cooperating with investigators. (Bill Speer for The New York Times); A car with Virginia license plates was towed yesterday from a parking garage at Logan International Airport in Boston after investigators found documents that they said included a flight manual written in Arabic. (Associated Press)(pg. A4)

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