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FBI's 9/11 Team Still Hard at Work

Dwindling Group Wants to See Probe Through to the End

By Dan Eggen

Washington Post Staff Writer
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The name was little more than a scribble, entered in a shaky hand on a U.S. visa application by Ahmed Alnami. In the space for traveling companions, he scrawled: "My frind MOSH A BAB." It was April 2000, 17 months before Alnami would help commandeer the United Airlines flight that crashed in Pennsylvania on Sept. 11, 2001.

After the attacks, FBI investigators puzzled over the entry. Was Alnami's mysterious friend part of the terrorism plot? And were there others?

The discovery came in the spring after the attacks. A search through thousands of visa applications revealed that MOSH A BAB was Moshabab Hamlan, a Saudi national who had obtained a U.S. visa on the same day and in the same place -- Jeddah, Saudi Arabia -- as Alnami. Saudi authorities interviewed Hamlan and his family and sent back a report: He was meant to be part of the hijacking mission, but his mother confiscated his travel documents when he lost his nerve and decided to drop out of the plot, said those familiar with the case.

Hamlan's identification, which has not been revealed previously, is one of numerous discoveries made over the past 33 months by PENTTBOM, the FBI's sprawling investigation into the Sept. 11 attacks.

Working from the basement of the J. Edgar Hoover Building, next to the fumes and clatter of a print shop, a dwindling team of FBI agents and analysts has conducted the largest criminal investigation in U.S. history, a probe that continues to this day. Until now, members of the team have not publicly discussed their work.

For nearly three years, the team has endured the tedium and frustration of chasing thousands of dead-end leads in pursuit of information about the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history. The group has shared the anguish of the families of attack victims, quietly briefing them on their discoveries and returning personal items from the wreckage.

"The victims are really what keep us going," said Joan Marie Turchiano, 34, who became head of the team earlier this year. "We want to see it through. We've been here since the beginning, and we'd like to see some sort of finality."

Originally numbering more than 70 people, the team chased more than a quarter-million leads in the months after the attacks, dispatching thousands of FBI agents worldwide. FBI agents have conducted more than 180,000 interviews, and reviewed millions of pages of immigration records, parking receipts, airline manifests, al Qaeda membership rolls, interrogation transcripts and other documents.

The team's job, said FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III, is to "find the needle in a haystack. . . . You spend most of your time disproving the theories that people are postulating."

Two other panels that have investigated the terrorist attacks fault the PENTTBOM team for not pursuing some aspects of their probe aggressively enough, and for discounting some information because it could not be thoroughly proven. The team has also feuded with the CIA and other agencies over access to information.

Now, as the independent commission investigating the attacks prepares to reveal its findings about the plot Wednesday, the FBI's team is down

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A wall in the PENTTBOM room bears a poster of the terrorists who hijacked United Flight 175, which crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center. (Photos Tracy A. Woodward -- The Washington Post)

— Correction —

A June 14 article on the FBI team investigating the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks misstated the month in which hijacker Ahmed Alnami and a potential accomplice applied for visas to enter the United States. The applications were made in October 2000, not April 2000.

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to 10 regular members who are exploring the remaining mysteries of that day. The team's leaders said investigators have identified new al Qaeda associates, helped prevent attacks and shed light on how the terror network functions.

PENTTBOM agents still comb through daily military and CIA intelligence reports; work closely with prosecutors in the Zacarias Moussaoui case; and analyze interrogation reports from the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and other U.S. facilities where suspected al Qaeda operatives are being held.

"Every single thing that we can learn about al Qaeda, whether [it is] how they behave, how they act, what their modus operandi is, is a little bit more ammunition in the war on terrorism," said Mary Galligan, 42, who headed the PENTTBOM team until January. "We don't know six months from now what might be important."

Still, there is much they do not know. Why did the lead hijackers decide to pass through Las Vegas? Why did terrorist leader Mohamed Atta and another hijacker start their day in Portland, Maine, nearly missing the flight from Boston to Los Angeles that they crashed into the World Trade Center's North Tower? Are there still undiscovered accomplices?

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