

The New York Times

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September 13, 2001

THE SUSPECTS

Hijacking Trail Leads F.B.I. to Florida Flight School

By DANA CANEDY with DAVID E. SANGER

HOLLYWOOD, Fla., Sept. 12 — Patricia Idrissi would not have noticed the customer at that table she was waiting on at the Shuckums restaurant here on Friday, except that he drank Stolichnaya vodka for three hours and then seemed not to want to pay his \$48 bar tab.

The man's response when Ms. Idrissi called her manager to help settle the dispute seemed unremarkable at the time. But that changed late Tuesday when federal agents arrived at the seafood restaurant and bar and flashed pictures of the man and one other who they said were suspected of being involved in the terror attacks on the United States that morning.

"Of course I can pay," the restaurant workers recall the man saying. "I'm a pilot."

As the federal investigation into the attacks began to unfold today, agents zeroed in on Central and South Florida, where some of the pilots believed to have hijacked the planes that carried out the attacks were thought to have ties.

F.B.I. agents descended on flight schools, neighborhoods and restaurants in pursuit of leads.

The authorities would not confirm where they were conducting the investigation or about whom they were seeking information. But several people in South and Central Florida contacted by the F.B.I. said agents gave them the names of two men whom they identified as suspects: Mohammed Atta, the man who was drinking vodka, and Marwan al-Shehhi, who was drinking rum.

Some people contacted by the F.B.I. said agents had told them the men were on the flights that departed from Boston.

"They just said these guys were on the manifest on a flight out of Boston, and I

knew what it meant," said Anthony Amos, the Shuckums manager. "They said the guys were dead."

If the two men were indeed on the plane or involved in the hijacking, something the F.B.I. has not declared, then their education in how to fly aircraft took place in a low-slung building off a small airstrip in Venice, Fla., about 80 miles south of Tampa, at Huffman Aviation, where a green sign next to the front door reads "Learn to Fly Here!"

The F.B.I. arrived at Huffman at 2:30 this morning and walked out with all the school's records, including photocopies of the men's passports. Rudi Dekkers, owner of the school, remembers the two men — one slight, the other large — as "walk-ins" who arrived in July of last year and stayed until they passed an F.A.A. test in November.

"They paid by check, about \$10,000 each," said Mr. Dekkers, 45, a Dutch native who today suddenly found himself dealing with clamoring reporters and satellite trucks parked in front of his small school.

The two men were clearly from the Middle East, he said, and they complained that they had begun instruction elsewhere but didn't like the school. "They spoke quite good English," he said, but unlike the many other foreign students who come to Huffman for instruction, they did not socialize.

"They were by themselves, not hanging out with other students," he said. "Most of our students from other countries go to bars and take their time. They were strange birds."

A current student at Huffman Aviation, who spoke on the condition that he not be named, said he knew both men. He said Mr. Atta was from Egypt and Mr. al-Shehhi was from the United Arab Emirates.

Mr. Dekkers said the two men quickly picked up on the elements of flying — one already had some instruction, he said — and by November they were ready for their test. That enabled them to fly small twin-engine planes, but they were trained chiefly on the kind of prop planes that Mr. Dekkers uses for instruction at the school.

"I've been flying for 20 years," Mr. Dekkers said. "But if I ever sat up in the cockpit of a commercial jetliner — well, it is completely different."

With 15 or 20 hours of instruction in jet aircraft, he thought, they could become

proficient enough to fly them, and he heard, but did not know for sure, that the men were headed to a school elsewhere in Florida for training on larger planes.

Investigators apparently focused some attention on a much more advanced aviation school in Daytona Beach, the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. School officials would not confirm any F.B.I. involvement, but students said investigators were there within hours of Tuesday's attacks.

Police officials nearby said that agents searched an apartment building where a person named Mohammed Atta lived several years ago.

Mr. Dekkers said he had debriefed the instructor who worked with the two men but declined to give the instructor's name.

"He's horrified," Mr. Dekkers said. "He had no hint, nothing," of what the men might plan to do with their flying skills.

Also today, F.B.I. agents visited the home of Charles and Dru Voss, who rented the flight students a room in their house while the men attended the flight school. Their guests, the Vosses told the authorities, were rude and secretive, so they asked them to leave after a week.

"They mainly kept to themselves, and we had very little conversation, if any," Ms. Voss said. "It was 'good morning, have a nice day.' They were very arrogant and made very smart remarks."

In addition to their attention on Hollywood and Venice, the F.B.I. also searched an apartment in Coral Springs, where Mr. Atta is believed to have lived recently. Neighbors said as many as 50 agents descended on the three-story apartment complex, Tara Gardens, where two-bedroom furnished apartments rent for \$1,200 a month.

The F.B.I. would not comment on the specific sites, though officials said that several in Florida were being searched and that numerous people were being questioned.

In Vero Beach, about 70 miles north of West Palm Beach, F.B.I. agents searched four homes in three neighborhoods, according to The Associated Press. In one neighborhood, agents searched two houses for 12 hours, leaving with several garbage bags of evidence. Officials towed away two cars from the houses, which were next to each other. A neighbor, Everett Tripp, said a Middle Eastern family with four children moved out of one of the houses last weekend.

The landlord of the other house, Paul Stimelind, identified the tenant as Adnan Bukhari, who told Mr. Stimelind that he worked for Saudi Airlines and was training at Flight Safety Academy in Vero Beach. Mr. Bukhari arrived with family in June 2000 and planned to move out in mid- August, Mr. Stimelind told The A.P.

In addition, agents asked Hank Habora about a neighbor, Amer Kamfar, 41. Mr. Kamfar was licensed as a flight engineer to fly turbojets and listed a Saudi Airlines post office box as his address in F.A.A. records.

Mr. Habora said the family moved into the house in February and recently left abruptly, The A.P. reported. "They threw out everything they had: clothes, dishes," he said.

Here in Hollywood, about 30 miles north of Miami, agents arrived late Tuesday evening and began interviewing employees at several bars and shops, including the Shuckums Oyster Pub and Seafood Grill.

"They came in about 10:45 last night and asked if we could identify the two gentlemen who were on the pictures," Mr. Amos, the Shuckums manager, said, referring to the F.B.I. agents who questioned his staff. "My bartender and my server could identify both of them."

The Shuckums workers said they specifically recalled Mr. Atta, who was joined by the other suspect and a third man. "He was sitting with the third gentleman," Mr. Amos said. "The F.B.I. did not show me a photo of this third guy. They were talking back and forth all night, and the Mohammed guy was really upset at what the other guy was saying."