

The New York Times

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October 5, 2001

A NATION CHALLENGED: THE NIGHT BEFORE

A NATION CHALLENGED: THE NIGHT BEFORE; A Mundane Itinerary on the Eve of Terror

By PAM BELLUCK

SOUTH PORTLAND, Me., Oct. 4— For their last night on earth, the pair of terrorists stayed at a Comfort Inn on a sterile strip of gas stations and fast-food joints here.

Driving a silver-blue rented Nissan Altima, Mohamed Atta and Abdulaziz Alomari spent at least part of the evening in the most pedestrian of pursuits, mostly along a broad suburban stretch of asphalt called Maine Mall Road: 15 minutes at a Pizza Hut, a quick stop at a gas station and about 20 minutes at a Wal-Mart in Scarborough, the next town.

They also stopped at two automated teller machines. At one, surveillance cameras show Mr. Alomari grinning, while Mr. Atta, who is believed to have been a ringleader of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, was stone-faced and sober.

"They did nothing different than almost any other person who visits the state of Maine from out of state," said Stephen McCausland, a spokesman for the Maine Department of Public Safety. "They went to eat, they gassed up their car and they visited Wal-Mart.

"It is eerie to know that these two central figures in this horrific event were here doing those things the night before," Mr. McCausland said.

Jeff Jordan, the city manager of South Portland, noted that the confirmed presence of the two men in town had "hit a lot of us. It makes it more real to a lot of people."

It is the collision between the humdrum night-before errands of the hijackers and their hellish mission the next day that resonates in the photographs and the terse chronology that was released today by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The bureau hopes these facts help yield more information about the terrorists and their support network. With investigators trying to assemble as complete a portrait of the killers as they can, nothing -- not even the most mundane recollection of a gas station attendant -- is considered insignificant.

"If this jogs anybody's memory," said Charles Prouty, the special agent in charge of the F.B.I.'s Boston office, who released the information, "please give us a call."

The bureau also released photographs of the men enlarged from the surveillance cameras at the A.T.M.'s; the Jetport Gas Station and the Wal-Mart in Scarborough.

In the photographs at the gas station, Mr. Atta's shirt has a distinctive pattern -- two-thirds black and one-third white -- and Mr. Prouty suggested that people who saw him, like the customers he passed in Wal-Mart that night -- might remember him by his clothes.

The information provided by the F.B.I. is quite specific: a visit to the Key Bank A.T.M. at 8:31 p.m., a car with Massachusetts license plates 3335VI. But it also seems to suggest, more than three weeks into the investigation, just how little is known about why and how four teams of terrorists came to hijack four jets and crash them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the Pennsylvania countryside.

It is not clear, for example, why Mr. Atta, who is believed to be a leader of the hijackers, and Mr. Alomari came to Maine at all, driving the Nissan they rented in Boston the afternoon of Sept. 10. They most likely drove I-95, passing as they entered the state a sign that said, "Maine: Worth a Visit, Worth a Lifetime."

They spent barely 12 hours here, checking out of a second-floor no-smoking room at the Comfort Inn at 5:33 a.m., according to the F.B.I. Within 12 minutes, they drove less than a mile to Portland International Jetport, parked the rental car on the first floor of the parking lot near the airport entrance, checked in at a US Airways counter and passed through airport security to take Flight 5930 to Logan International Airport in Boston. There, they boarded American Airlines Flight 11, the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center.

"The best educated guess we have is that they did this to split the group up, so they didn't all arrive together at Logan at the same time," Mr. McCausland said.

There are also many gaps in what is known of the men's time in Maine. The F.B.I. chronology accounts for only a fraction of it, mostly between 8 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. on Sept. 10.

Even during that period, painfully few details are available. Employees at the Wal-Mart and Pizza Hut have been instructed by the F.B.I. not to comment on what the men bought or ordered. The banks have not released how much or even if Mr. Atta and Mr. Alomari withdrew money from the A.T.M.'s.

Today in South Portland and Scarborough, employees at the Comfort Inn, Pizza Hut and other places in the chronology said they had been told not to talk. Most said they had no recollection of the men anyway.

"It was shocking to the employees that they were in the parking lot and in our store, but nobody has come out and said they saw anyone," said Cheryl Giordano, a photo lab technician at Wal-Mart.

"If anybody knows anything," added Pamela Towne, manager of Wal-Mart's portrait studio, "they're being told not to say anything."

Some clues to how the men spent at least part of their night in Maine may come from a four-page document found in Mr. Atta's luggage.

It lists instructions for "the last night," including "shave excess hair from the body and wear cologne" and "making an oath to die and renew your intentions."

Other clues may be gleaned from the rental car, which was impounded to the state police lab in Augusta. Inside, maps of Massachusetts and New England were found, and what appeared to be loose tobacco.

Another mystery is whether the terrorists spent time in the Portland area before Sept. 10, as some residents contend.

Spruce Whited, the head of security for the Portland Public Library, distinctly recalls seeing Mr. Atta three or four times in the spring of 2000. Mr. Whited said when he saw the F.B.I. picture, he recognized Mr. Atta as a man who had used the library's computer and spent time in the periodicals section, which has newspapers in Farsi.

Investigators have not said whether they think Mr. Atta or any other hijackers were here before, but it appears to fit what they say is a pattern of the hijackers' visiting other cities and using library computers to communicate.

People in the Portland area are acutely aware of the role their towns may have played in the disaster. And while employees at the establishments the men visited are not talking, other symbols speak for them.

The Comfort Inn billboard declares "God Bless America." A sign outside the Jetport gas station says "Be Strong"; inside, behind the counter, is a picture of Osama bin Laden made up like a shooting gallery target.

"At first you feel you betrayed someone by not catching this," said Carl Jensen, assistant manager at a Portland copy center. But, he said, now people realized, "this was just one stop" for the hijackers.

Photos: Twelve hours before flying a plane into the World Trade Center, Abdulaziz Alomari, foreground, and Mohamed Atta, rear at top left, were captured by a security camera at an A.T.M. in South Portland, Me. (F.B.I., via Reuters)(pg. A1)
Chart: "Tracking the Terrorists" The movements of Mohamed Atta and Abdulaziz Alomari in and around Portland, Me., before the World Trade Center attacks.
Monday, Sept. 10 5:43 p.m. COMFORT INN, SOUTH PORTLAND Atta and Al-Omari check in. 8/9 p.m. PIZZA HUT, SOUTH PORTLAND Sometime from 8 to 9 p.m. two Middle Eastern men are seen. 8:31 p.m. KEY BANK A.T.M., SOUTH PORTLAND Both men were photographed near a drive-up A.T.M. in a blue 2001 Nissan Altima rental car with a Mass 2/3a 2/3chu 2/3setts license plate, 3335VI. 8:41 p.m. FAST GREEN A.T.M., SOUTH PORTLAND Both men photographed at an A.T.M. located in the parking lot of Pizzeria Uno. 9:15 p.m. JETPORT GAS STATION, SOUTH PORTLAND Both men photographed. Atta is wearing a light- and dark-colored shirt. 9:22 p.m. WAL-MART, SCARBOROUGH Both men photographed entering the store and exiting about 20 minutes later. Tuesday, Sept. 11 5:33 a.m. COMFORT INN, SOUTH PORTLAND Atta and Al-Omari check out. 5:40 a.m. PORTLAND INTERNATIONAL JETPORT, SOUTH PORTLAND Blue 2001 Nissan Altima enters and parks on the first floor directly across from the airport entrance. 5:43 a.m. PORTLAND INTERNATIONAL JETPORT Both men check in at US Airways counter. 5:45 a.m. PORTLAND INTERNATIONAL JETPORT Both men pass through airport security. 6 a.m. PORTLAND INTERNATIONAL JETPORT Both men depart on Colgan Air en route to Boston.
Photos Map of Maine highlighting Portland International Jetport. (Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation)(pg. B7)