

What are they hiding down in Venice, Florida?

By Daniel Hopsicker

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The real news right now is not in what they're giving us; it's in what they're leaving out. In the two major strands of the investigation as leaked to the press—the German connection which is everywhere, and the money trail—both have the Gulf Coast of Florida anchoring one end of the rainbow.

The Boston Globe has a former CIA counter-terrorism chief fingering Islamic Jihad.

ITEM: The director of an Islamic studies think tank in Tampa was proclaimed the leader of Islamic Jihad in 1996. Afterwards the new think tank chief was held by the government for more than three and a half years on secret evidence, in a Bradenton, Florida, jail.

The man, Mazen Al-Najjar, was eventually released after courts ruled that he could not be detained further without just cause.

On his release, local reporters wrote that the government had reluctantly revealed only the smallest bit of its evidence against him.

ITEM: On the day of the attack, Sarasota police said the Secret Service interrogated four Sudanese men after getting a tip that the men intended to harm President Bush during his brief visit to the city.

That incident was found to be unrelated to the attacks, and ended in the release of the men.

Four Sudanese men? In Sarasota, Florida? It has a surreal quality.

We'd have sooner believed that Katherine Harris was secretly dating Dennis Rodman than that you could ever find four Sudanese gentlemen together in white bread Sarasota, Florida.

What had the Sudanese gentlemen been doing? Pricing retirement real estate? Closing a deal to buy Florida's old election machines on the cheap?

And this is all before we even get to Venice, Florida. The Venice airport, where virtually all of the terrorist pilots trained, is the biggest September 11 crime scene that wasn't reduced to rubble.

Venice is a retirement community sandwiched between the more well-heeled resorts of Naples, Sanibel Island, and Boca Grande, (a Bush family favorite retreat) to the south, and Sarasota

(home of Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris) and Tampa, home of the Bucs, Cuban cigars, and Santo Trafficante, to the north.

What was its attraction to the pilot trainees in bin Laden's terrorist air force?

ITEM: "Investigators are focusing on Mr. Bin al-Shibh," The New York Times reported, "who lived with Mr. Atta and other members of the Hamburg cell . . . (and who) transferred 2,000 Deutschmarks, or about \$4,200, through Citibank to the West Coast Bank in Florida as a down payment at the same flight school attended by Mr. Jarrah."

That's the news they're giving us.

ITEM: That money went to Arne Kruithof, owner of the Florida Flight Training School at the tiny Venice airport.

The New York Times neglects to mention it.

The Los Angeles Times reported that "Atta and al-Shehhi, who were roommates while living in Germany, arrived in the United States within days of each other in mid-2000. They got flight lessons in Florida, but not at the same location as Jarrah."

ITEM: Jarrah got his lessons right next door, at Arne Kruithof's school. All were at the tiny Venice airport. The Los Angeles Times neglects to mention it. Nor did it bother to offer any reason for the apparent affinity of Middle Eastern terrorists for sleepy enclaves filled with widows with blue hair on the Florida Gulf Coast.

ITEM: Almost all of the terrorist pilots received their initial training in Venice, either at Kruithof's or at Dekkers' flight school. Together, these two schools trained the core cadre of foreign terrorist pilots.

ITEM: Atta moved from Germany to train with Dekkers' flight school in Venice, Huffman Aviation. At least four other members of the same terrorist cell followed him.

ITEM: Dekkers was actively engaged in an aggressive European "marketing" campaign at the exact same time Atta and his cadre left Hamburg and moved to Florida. Instead of wandering into his flight school, as Dekkers' has attested, Atta may have been recruited—by Dekkers.

The New York Times neglects to mention it.

Dekkers went on television after the disaster insisting the terrorist pilots had had only the most fleeting of associations with his flight school.

ITEM: When houses were raided in South Florida, two men caught said they were Saudi pilots on a 15-month pilot's course at Dekkers' Huffman Aviation.

ITEM: The FBI was swarming Huffman Aviation by 2 a.m., just 18 hours following the attack. They removed student files from two schools at the Venice airport: Huffman Aviation and the Florida Flight Training Center just down the street.

“The FBI Knew Terrorists Were Using Flight Schools,” reported the Washington Post a week later. It said federal authorities have been aware for years that suspected terrorists with ties to Osama bin Laden were receiving flight training at schools in the United States.

ITEM: Whatever the big secret is, they know about it at the FBI, even if mum’s the word.

ITEM: Dekkers and Kruithof are both Dutch nationals. They bought their supposedly competing flights schools within months of each other two years ago.

The New York Times neglects to mention it.

In all, 27 terrorists were trained to fly, the LA Times said. Rudi Dekkers’ flight schools (he has another down the road in Naples) were training four hundred foreign nationals . . . a year.

ITEM: A Dekkers’ employee named Charlie Voss housed the two ringleaders of the cell when they arrived in this country. Voss was described in press reports variously as an “ex-aviation worker, a “company clerk,” or a” bookkeeper.”

ITEM: Nobody described Voss as an “ex-C130 pilot,” although that would have been accurate too.

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“The FBI told us that individuals who crossed our path were involved in the tragedy,” Voss said.

He is no longer with the company.

Dale Kraus was Dekkers’ second-in-command. We reached him by phone at home, to ask about his association with Dekkers.

He is no longer with the company.

The Wall Street Journal yesterday that George H.W. Bush, the father of President Bush, works for the bin Laden family business in Saudi Arabia through the Carlyle Group, an international consulting firm.

By the time they reach him for comment, Bush may no longer be with the company.

ITEM: Press accounts from before the tragedy reveal both Kruithof and Dekkers to be spending large sums of money out at the airport.

“We have plans to spend \$2 million to \$3 million in the next two years to boost jets to half of our business,” Rudi Dekkers, president of Huffman Aviation, told the local Venice Gondolier. “Jets bring wealth.”

Arne Kruithof, owner of The Florida Flight Training Center, was building a new multi-million dollar hangar, as well as launching a new charter air service. Jets bring wealth.

In the aftermath of the attacks, Dekkers was everywhere on television, like a designated “interviewee.” Yet, despite all the “face time” Rudi got, he didn’t have anything much to say. He liked one of them, the chubby one, Alshehhi. “He was a teddy bear. He was friendly. I have found out, in my life, that chubby guys are always a little bit more friendly.”

He didn’t like Atta. “If you see the picture in the newspaper, you see the face, tell me what you think,” he said. “I just didn’t like the face. I have no explanation.”

With 5,000 more or less vaporized bodies, chubby guy Rudi Dekkers holding forth on Larry King on his theories of the jolly nature of chubby guys everywhere was more than just a little beside the point. But they let him get away with it.

ITEM: The money trail leads directly to Venice, Florida. Investigators following the money trail connect Atta and another Hamburg-based hijacker, Marwan Al-Shehhi, to a Syrian businessman in Germany, Mamoun Darkazanli. Darkazanli told the Associated Press he worked for the man accused of being bin Laden’s financial wizard, but had no contact with him since a business deal fell through in 1995.

“He just paid for my work,” Darkazanli told reporters at his apartment in Hamburg. “Afterwards, I never heard from him again.”

“He just paid for my work.”

Atta and al-Shehhi alone paid Dekkers’ school more than \$38,000. Dekkers, who knows it, defended having trained anyone who walked up to his counter.

“I don’t need anything from you, just a check to start flying,” said Dekkers, who likened flying lessons to shopping for groceries. “We’re just a business,” he said.

“We’re just a business.”

Experts have been wondering how a conspiracy of such size and duration could have gone unnoticed by US intelligence agencies and law enforcement.

At least 15 of the far-flung network of terrorist pilots got their money from the same (so far-unnamed) source. While in the Venice area last year, the terrorist suspects opened checking accounts during the summer.

We called someone who used to work at something like the CIA. “How could the agency not have known about 15 foreign pilots all paid from one source?”

He chose his words carefully. “I would assume that they did know. It would seem almost impossible for them not to.”

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