

Did terrorist pilots train at U.S. military schools?

By Daniel Hopsicker

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In addition to having been inducted into the U.S. flight training program by two Dutch-owned flight schools in Venice, Florida, as many as six of the terrorists accused of hijacking four airliners on Sept. 11, including ringleader Mohammed Atta, also received training at U.S. military facilities, according to a flurry of stories between Sept. 15 and 17 in the Washington Post, Newsweek, and Knight Ridder newspapers.

The story had an extremely short life.

Newsweek reported that “U.S. military sources have given the FBI information that suggests five of the alleged hijackers of the planes used in Tuesday’s terror attacks received training at secure U.S. military installations in the 1990s.”

Knight Ridder’s news account was more specific. It said Mohamed Atta had attended International Officers School at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. In addition, Abdulaziz Alomari had attended Aerospace Medical School at Brooks Air Force base in Texas, it reported, and Saeed Alghamdi had been to the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey, California.

If true, these reports would have dealt a blow to the consensus portrait then emerging of the terrorist cadre as puritanical Islamic fundamentalists.

Indeed, if foreign nationals who would eventually become terrorist pilots were training at the Pensacola Naval Air Station, or going through the U.S. Air Forces’ International Officer’s School at Maxwell Air Force Base, they would most likely have had connections to Arab governments considered friendly to the United States.

Official denial was swift, but strangely worded: “Officials stressed that the name matches may not necessarily mean the students were the hijackers because of discrepancies in ages in other personal data.”

“Some of the FBI suspects had names similar to those used by foreign alumni of U.S. military courses,” said the Air Force in a statement. “However, discrepancies in their biographical data, such as birth dates 20 years off, indicate we are probably not talking about the same people.”

“Probably not talking about the same people” does not quite strike the right note of decisive certitude that we would expect when discussing the identities of the people who have just been responsible for the deaths of 6,000 more or less vaporized Americans.

But Air Force spokesmen are apparently more persuasive in person than when reading a press release over the telephone, because Newsweek, the Washington Post and Knight Ridder all dropped the story.

Nothing has been reported about this since. Nada. Niente.

Could a cover-up be underway? Could the original information that “leaked out” in early press reports have been true . . . and then suppressed in America’s free press?

Or is this just six separate but innocent cases of mistaken identity?

Did (terrorist pilot) Mohamed Atta attend International Officers School at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama? Did (terrorist) Abdulaziz Alomari study at Aerospace Medical School at Brooks Air Force base in Texas? Was (terrorist) Saeed Alghamdi at the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey, California?

It seemed easy enough to find out. Deploy MadCow Team Coverage. Find out.

Here’s the answer: “Nobody knows.”

News reports Sept. 16 had asserted, “Officials would not release ages, country of origin or any other specific details of the three individuals.”

Over three weeks later, nothing has changed.

When Newsweek’s Internet site reported that three of the hijackers received training at the Pensacola Naval Station in Florida, Senator Bill Nelson faxed an indignant note to Attorney General Ashcroft demanding to know if it were true.

A former Navy pilot had told Newsweek that during his years on the base, “we always, always, always trained other countries’ pilots. When I was there two decades ago, it was Iranians. The shah was in power. Whoever the country du jour is, that’s whose pilots we train.”

We called the office Senator Nelson’s Florida office. We were hoping to hear more about the country du jour.

The senator has not yet received a reply.

“In the wake of those reports we asked about the Pensacola Naval Air Station but we never got a definitive answer from the Justice Department,” said a spokesman for Senator Nelson. “So we asked the FBI for an answer ‘if and when’ they could provide us one. Their response to date has been that they are trying to sort through something complicated and difficult.”

“If and when.”

“Speaking for Senator Nelson,” concluded the spokesman, “we still do not know if three of the terrorists trained at one time in Pensacola or not.”

“Complicated and difficult.”

We reached a major in the Air Force's Public Affairs Office who was familiar with the question, she said, because she had read the initial Air Force denial to the media.

"Biographically, they're not the same people," she explained to us patiently. "Some of the ages are 20 years off."

"Some" of the ages? We told her we were only interested in Atta. Was she saying that the age of the Mohamed Atta who attended the Air Force's International Officer's School at Maxwell Air Force Base was different from the terrorist Atta's age as reported?

Um, er, no, the major admitted. Still, she persisted. "Mohamed is a very common name."

We asked if the registrar of the International Officer's School might provide us with the name and address of this second Mohamed Atta, so that we might call him and confirm that there were really two Mohamed Atta's of about the same age pursuing flight training in the U.S. at about the same time.

"I don't think you're going to get that information," the major replied.

On Oct. 10, FBI Agents were ordered to curtail their investigation of the Sept. 11 attack in an order describing the investigation of the terrorist hijackings as "the most exhaustive in its history."

"The investigative staff has to be made to understand that we're not trying to solve a crime now," said one law enforcement official, speaking on condition of anonymity

The order was said to have met with resistance from FBI agents who believed that continued surveillance of suspects might have turned up critical evidence to prove who orchestrated the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Officials said FBI Director Robert Mueller, who was sworn in last month, believed that his agents had a broad understanding of the events of Sept. 11.

It was now time to move on.

Did some of the hijackers receive training in U.S. military exchange programs for foreign officers? Was terrorist "ringleader" Mohamed Atta a puritanical Islamic fundamentalist or an Arab double agent?

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