



The Terrorist Motel

JIM CROGAN | JULY 24, 2002 | 12:00AM

What happened at the nondescript roadside motel outside Oklahoma City was just a fleeting encounter during the twisted cross-country odyssey of the terrorists who would carry out the September 11 attacks. Mohamed Atta, alleged leader of the plot, and two companions wanted to rent a room, but couldn't get the deal they wanted, so they left.

It was an incident of no particular importance, except for one thing. The owner of the motel remembers Atta being in the company of Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called "20th hijacker," who was arrested prior to September 11 and now faces conspiracy charges in connection with the terror assaults.

If this recollection is correct, the entire incident, and its absence from the public record, raises new questions about the FBI investigation of Moussaoui and even the 1995 destruction of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Already the FBI has endured a withering political and media critique for failing to aggressively investigate Moussaoui and his contacts during his four weeks in custody prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Some FBI officials have responded by characterizing Moussaoui as only a minor player. But the report from the motel owner, if proven, could change that. And it also could force the FBI to reopen its investigation of Middle Eastern connections to the 1995 Oklahoma City blast, because convicted bombers Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols reportedly stayed at the same motel, interacting with a group of Iraqis during the weeks before the bombing.

At press time, the erratic Moussaoui, who is representing himself, was attempting to plead guilty and bring his trial to a close. The 34-year-old French citizen of Moroccan descent had previously filed some 94 hand-scrawled, rambling motions attacking the government's case and its right to prosecute him.

But that circus obscures a conundrum of a different sort. The government's case, as outlined in its new six-count conspiracy indictment, is largely circumstantial, lacking any definitive link between Moussaoui and the 19 hijackers identified by federal authorities. All of which makes the apparent shelving of the Moussaoui-Atta sighting all the stranger. In fact, even though multiple sources contend that the FBI interviewed the motel owner, there's no indication that prosecutors were told. It's possible that the FBI found the motel owner's identifications wrong or his story unreliable. But it's still odd that, in interviews with the Weekly, Justice Department prosecutors seemed to know nothing about the motel encounter, especially because agents reportedly told the motel owner they would pass the information on to Moussaoui's defense team.

The motel co-owner, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the incident occurred around August 1, 2001, just six weeks before 911.

"They came in around 10 or 11 a.m. and started talking to my desk clerk," he said. Even though he was working about 10 feet away from the trio, the owner didn't really pay any attention at first. "They were asking my clerk, who no longer works here, about a weekly rate for our rooms." (The former clerk could not be reached for comment.)

The motel, explained the owner, sets aside some rooms with small kitchenettes to rent on a weekly basis. "But they were all taken." He said the clerk explained the situation, but the visitors were persistent. "Finally, my clerk asked me to talk to them."

The motel owner said that Moussaoui and a man who appeared to be Marwan al-Shehhi -- who helped crash a jetliner into the south tower of the World Trade Center -- were friendly and said a few things, but Atta was clearly the leader. "He did most of the talking and seemed very serious," said the owner, adding, "I was standing face to face, about two feet away from Atta, and talked to the three of them for about 10 minutes. Atta asked if he could rent one of the other rooms at a weekly rate, and I told him no.

"I asked him what they were doing here in the area. And Atta told me they were going to flight school. I thought he meant [Federal Aviation Administration] training in Oklahoma City. But Atta told me no, they were taking flight training in Norman.

"I said I didn't understand why they wanted to rent one of my rooms, since we were about 28 miles from Norman and there are a lot of reasonably priced motels a lot closer. But he said they had heard good things about my place and wanted to stay there. I told them I was sorry, but we couldn't accommodate them. Atta finally said okay. Then they all thanked me for my time and left."

After the attacks, said the motel owner, he recognized his visitors in photos from television reports. "I was really stunned," he said. Then he decided to call the FBI hot line. The motel owner said he didn't hear right back from the FBI. In the interim, he also spoke to a former law-enforcement officer who was investigating reported sightings of Mujahid Abdulquaadir Menepta at the same motel during the mid-1990s. Menepta, reportedly a friend of Moussaoui's, was arrested 30 years ago in Colorado for aggravated robbery and served more than three years in prison.

After September 11, Menepta publicly defended Moussaoui, calling him a "scapegoat." The FBI arrested him as a material witness and subsequently charged Menepta with a federal gun violation. He pleaded guilty and in April 2002 was sentenced to 15 months in federal prison. He was never charged with any terrorism-related crime. But during the preliminary hearing on the gun charge, Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Agent Jeffrey Whitney testified that a confidential source placed Menepta at a meeting of a radical Islamic group in St. Louis where he allegedly threatened to shoot any police officer who entered the mosque. Menepta's attorney challenged the credibility of this report in court.

A former desk clerk at the motel -- a different clerk from the one who purportedly dealt with Atta and Moussaoui -- told the Weekly that he remembered Menepta because in 1994 and 1995 -- prior to the Oklahoma City attack -- Menepta frequently visited the motel office. There, he bought coffee and talked for hours to this clerk.

The clerk and his wife, who both formerly worked at the motel, said they picked Menepta's picture out of a photo lineup prepared by a law-enforcement officer who had interviewed the motel owner.

This officer, who also spoke to the Weekly on condition of anonymity, said that after the motel owner told him about the Moussaoui sighting, he contacted a member of Oklahoma's Joint Terrorism Task Force, which includes the FBI.

The FBI finally acted on the tip. The motel owner said that on December 19, 2001, he went to FBI offices in Oklahoma City for a formal interview, where he was debriefed by an FBI agent and by Oklahoma City Police Sergeant Jerry Flowers. "We talked for several hours, and I told them everything I knew." The motel owner said he would have taken a polygraph exam but was not asked to do so. The Weekly's law-enforcement source corroborates the December 19 interview.

The motel owner never heard from prosecutors in Moussaoui's case but got one more call from the FBI several weeks later. "The agent told me they had passed on a copy of my statement to Moussaoui's defense team, and I might be getting a call from them. But I was under no obligation to talk to them. However, I don't know if that was the truth. Since then, I have never heard from anyone connected to Moussaoui's case."

One reason for the FBI's apparent lack of interest might be this motel's alleged connection to Timothy McVeigh and a group of Iraqis who worked in Oklahoma City. According to the motel owner and other witnesses and investigators interviewed by the Weekly, McVeigh and several of these Iraqis were motel guests in the months preceding the 1995 bombing. Witnesses also claimed they saw several of the Iraqis moving barrels of material around on the bed of a truck. The motel owner said the material smelled of diesel fuel and he had to clean up a spill. Diesel fuel was a key component of the truck bomb that blew up the Federal Building.

The motel owner said he and his staff reported this information to the FBI in 1995. "We did have an ATF agent come out and collect the originals of the room registrations for that period, but we never heard back from them. And I never could get the registrations returned." He added that his previous experience with the FBI made him reluctant to contact them about Moussaoui. "But I decided it was my duty to tell them what had happened. So I did."

Former Oklahoma City TV reporter Jayna Davis also interviewed motel staff and former guests. In the process, she collected signed affidavits about their contacts with McVeigh and the Iraqis. She tried twice to give the Bureau this information, but the FBI refused to accept her materials. (The Weekly first reported on her investigation in an article published in September 2001.)

The Weekly's law-enforcement source said he has reviewed Davis' material and considers it credible. "Last December I personally took the documents to the Joint Terrorism Task Force," he said. "I told them they should do their own investigation." The response was not encouraging. He said he was later informed that the Bureau brought in an analyst, "but I was told it would probably go nowhere. They were afraid the whole Oklahoma City bombing can of worms would be opened up and the FBI would have to explain why they didn't investigate this material before."

The Weekly contacted numerous local and federal investigators and agencies, including the Oklahoma task force, the U.S. Attorney's Office, the FBI and the Justice Department. All declined to comment. Prosecutors on the Moussaoui case also declined official comment, but their reactions suggested they knew nothing of the motel encounter.

After being told about the motel owner's interview and allegations, Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Spencer responded with a one-word question about the sighting: "When?" Spencer then declined further comment. Another Moussaoui prosecutor, David Novak, also declined comment. But Novak wanted to know the name of the motel owner.

Other substantial connections already tie the Sooner state to Moussaoui and, separately, several 911 hijackers.

According to the Moussaoui indictment, on September 29, 2000, Moussaoui made e-mail contact with Airman Flight School in Norman. Then, on February 23, 2001, he flew from London to Chicago and then to Oklahoma City. What he did in the next few days is unknown or at least not accounted for in the indictment. But on February 26, Moussaoui opened a bank account in Norman, depositing \$32,000. From February 26 to May 29, he attended flight school in Norman. Then he suddenly quit the school. Between July 29 and August 4, Moussaoui made calls from public pay phones in Norman to Germany. On August 1 and 3, Ramzi Bin al-Shibh wired Moussaoui a total of about \$14,000 from two train stops in Germany to somewhere in Oklahoma. This wire transfer does imply a connection to terrorist plotters because al-Shibh, an alleged al Qaeda member, wired money to other hijackers. On August 3, Moussaoui purchased two knives in Oklahoma City. And on August 10 or 11, an acquaintance drove Moussaoui from Oklahoma to Minnesota for enrollment in a new flight school. Authorities arrested Moussaoui in Minnesota on August 17 on an immigration violation. As has been widely reported, Moussaoui attracted attention because he said he was interested in flying a plane but not learning how to take off or land. He was in federal custody when the 911 attacks occurred.

As for the terrorists who took part in 911, Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi visited the Airman Flight School in Norman in July 2000, according to the Moussaoui indictment. (The motel owner identifies al-Shehhi as the third person with Atta and Moussaoui when they allegedly inquired about a room.) And on April 1, 2001, Nawaf al-Hazmi, who helped hijack American Airlines Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon, was stopped for speeding in Oklahoma and given two tickets. The Oklahoma state trooper found no outstanding warrants and turned al-Hazmi loose. The media has since reported that the CIA had been tracking al-Hazmi, but never told the immigration service or the FBI that he was a suspected terrorist during his 21-month U.S. stay. Authorities have never publicly accounted for Atta and al-Shehhi's whereabouts during the time of the alleged motel encounter.

The Moussaoui indictment lays out a tantalizing possible association between Atta and Moussaoui, but never puts the two in the same place at the same time. The link could exist, however, along a dusty Oklahoma roadside, off Interstate 40, at a small motel that is indistinguishable from hundreds of others, except for its possible connection to terrorists.

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