

FLIGHT SCHOOL GETS PAPERS ON HIJACKERS' VISA APPROVALS

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Body

Exactly six months after terrorists Mohamed Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi flew two jetliners into the World Trade Center, the Florida **flight school** that trained the men received paperwork showing that their student **visas** had been approved.

The two suicide **hijackers** had applied for the **visas** through their **flight school**, Huffman Aviation International, in August 2000. But because of backlogs and an antiquated processing system at the Immigration and Naturalization Service, documentation of the **approval** did not arrive at the Venice, Fla., **flight school** until Monday.

Atta and Al-Shehhi trained at Huffman in July 2000. U.S. authorities say Atta was aboard American Airlines **Flight** 11, which struck the north tower, and that Al-Shehhi was aboard United Airlines **Flight** 175, which struck the south tower 17 minutes later.

The two initially entered the United States on visitor's **visas** but applied for an M-1 student **visa**, given to immigrants attending U.S. technical **schools**.

A spokesman for the immigration service, Russ Bergeron, said the INS already had notified the men and the **school** last summer about the **approvals**.

The INS approved Atta's request in July and Al-Shehhi's request in August, Bergeron said.

"The important thing to recognize is the decisions to change their status were made ... before Sept. 11, and at the time there was no information made available to INS regarding these people and their link to terrorism," Bergeron said.

Both men were cleared to stay in the United States until Oct. 1, 2001, according to the forms, which were provided to The Associated Press by Rudi Dekkers, the **school's** owner and president.

Bergeron attributed the embarrassing delay to a backlog of documents at a federal paperwork processing center in London, Ky.

Rep. John Conyers, the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, said the **visa** notice was a sign of the Bush administration's "misguided focus in pursuit of homeland security."

"I am astonished that while the INS is fixated on detaining and rounding up countless Arab-Americans without any justification, it has failed to take basic steps to ensure that **visas** are not issued to known terrorists," said Conyers, D-Mich.

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Dekkers said Atta and Al-Shehhi completed the paperwork on Aug. 29, 2000, just before they began their six-month **flight** instruction program at the **school**.

Dekkers, who said he faced scrutiny in the media after the attacks for admitting the students, said the forms showed he had followed the law.

Notes

WAR ON TERROR

Graphic

PHOTO; (1) Photo headshot -(Mohamed)Atta, Aboard American Airlines **Flight** 11; (2) Photo headshot - (Marwan) Al-Shehhi, Aboard United Airlines **Flight** 175

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