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REVEALED: AL QAEDA HELD 'DRY RUN' AT NEW YORK AIRPORT

By VINCENT MORRIS and BRIAN BLOMQUIST

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July 25, 2003 -- WASHINGTON — Two members of Osama bin Laden's terror team sneaked past checkpoints in a "dry run" at a New York airport as part of a plan years before Sept. 11 to hijack planes and attack U.S. targets, a congressional report revealed yesterday.

The CIA said in December 1998 that an al Qaeda member was "planning operations against U.S. targets," according to a once-"top secret" timeline contained in the congressional 9/11 report. "Plans to hijack U.S. aircraft proceeding well," it continued.

"Two individuals . . . had successfully evaded checkpoints in a dry run at a N.Y. airport," the report added.

The following sentence was completely blacked out in order to protect intelligence sources.

The 9/11 report by the House and Senate intelligence committees didn't mention which New York airport the terrorists practiced on, and a top congressional source told The Post yesterday during a briefing that she could not offer any more details on the terror training exercise.

Another U.S. official said yesterday that the intelligence received by the CIA at the time wasn't specific and couldn't be confirmed, but the CIA told other federal agencies that there had been a "dry run" at a New York airport by the terrorists.

In the same time period, CIA Director George Tenet put out a memo saying "we are at war" with bin Laden, and reports said al Qaeda was "considering a new attack, using biological toxins in food, water or ventilation systems of U.S. embassies."

When the 9/11 attacks occurred more than two years later, the hijackers smuggled boxcutters and other items through checkpoints at airports in Boston, Newark and outside Washington, D.C. — but none of the flights originated in New York. Just a few months before word of the "dry run," intelligence agencies got a report saying that bin Laden "is planning attacks in the U.S. . . . says plans are to attack in New York and Washington."

Such intelligence could have come from communications intercepts, spies, an al Qaeda informant, or from a foreign government.

The new Sept. 11 report, released after months of negotiations between the Bush administration and the congressional intelligence committee, said the hijackers who committed the horrific attacks "were not as isolated during their time in the United States as has been previously suggested."

The report, almost 900 pages long and portions of it left blank at the insistence of the CIA and FBI, found that law enforcement came tantalizingly close to cracking the 9/11 plot before it happened, but never could quite nail it down.

For instance, five of the 19 hijackers were known to FBI, thanks to contact with other terror suspects.

Those 14 suspects include Omar al-Bayoumi, a San Diego man who got hundreds of thousands of dollars from Saudi Arabia and gave cash to several hijackers, served as their translator and even called a flight school in Florida to help arrange lessons.

"Despite the fact that he was a student, al-Bayoumi had access to seemingly unlimited funding from Saudi Arabia," the report says.

Another San Diego businessman, who hired one of the hijackers, caught attention after the FBI spotted him getting into a car with a brother of a known bin Laden operative.

But the FBI closed the case when they called the businessman and he declined to come meet with them in Los Angeles or to answer any questions about his home or business.

Despite all the bungling by U.S. national security agencies, the joint inquiry didn't find any proof that the CIA and FBI missed a single, obvious "smoking gun" that would have prevented the attacks.

Instead, "There were one or two instances that should have sent the bells ringing," said Sen. Richard Shelby (R-Ala.), who was formerly the top Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Rather than focus on a single, glaring screw-up by U.S. intelligence agencies, the long-awaited report strikes at a repeated series of missed opportunities — which taken together might have prevented 9/11.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) yesterday criticized the White House for refusing to declassify more than 26 pages of the report that deal with Saudi terror links.

"The Saudis have been duplicitous for too long," said Schumer. "Why is there a constant coddling and cover-up when it comes to the Saudis?"

New York Reps. Eliot Engel, Joe Crowley and Anthony Weiner yesterday sent Bush a letter yesterday urging him to allow a fuller declassification of the terror report.

A senior congressional official who is familiar with the report said staff battled for months with the White House, FBI, CIA and others over how much of their study could be made public.

The official said the Bush administration insisted on censoring the report in two ways.

In some cases, they refused to let investigators even mention a subject. Other times, they forced changes in a description.

An official who helped prepare the report said that staff opted not to speak with President Clinton or with President Bush on the grounds that neither leader was likely to be familiar enough with the issue. A separate, independent 9/11 commission has indicated that it might question both Clinton and Bush.

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