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30-DAY STORY SEARCH 

NATION/WORLD

Germany tipped U.S. on hijacker in '99
CIA was given lead, asked to track suspect who flew a jet into World Trade Center.

The New York Times
February 24, 2004

WASHINGTON -- U.S. investigators were given the first name and telephone number of one of the Sept. 11 hijackers two and a half years before the attacks on New York and Washington, but the United States appears to have failed to aggressively pursue the lead, according to U.S. and German officials.

The information -- the earliest-known signal that the United States received about any of the hijackers -- has now become an important element of an independent commission's investigation into the events of Sept. 11, officials said Monday. It is considered particularly significant because it may have represented a missed opportunity for U.S. officials to penetrate the German terror cell that was at the heart of the plot. And it came roughly 16 months before the hijacker showed up at flight schools in the United States.

In March 1999, German intelligence officials gave the CIA the first name and telephone number of Marwan al-Shehhi, and asked the Americans to track him. The name and phone number in the United Arab Emirates had been obtained by the Germans by monitoring the telephone of Mohamed Heidar Zammar, an Islamic extremist in Hamburg who was closely linked to the important plotters behind the Sept. 11 attacks, German officials said.

After the Germans passed the information on to the CIA, they never heard back from the Americans about the matter until after Sept. 11, a senior German intelligence official said. "There was no response" at the time, the official said. After receiving the tip, the CIA decided that "Marwan" was probably an associate of Osama bin Laden, but never tracked him down, U.S. officials say.

The information concerning al-Shehhi, the man who took over the controls of United Airlines Flight 175, which flew into the south tower of the World Trade Center, came months earlier than well-documented tips about other hijackers, including two others who were discovered to have attended a meeting of extremists in Malaysia in January 2000.

The independent commission investigating the Sept. 11 attacks has received information concerning the 1999 al-Shehhi tip, and is actively investigating the issue, said Philip Zelikow, executive director of the commission.

U.S. intelligence officials and others involved say they are uncertain whether al-Shehhi's phone was ever monitored.

The terrorist was an important member of the al-Qaida cell in Hamburg at the heart of the Sept. 11 plot. The suspected plot leader, Mohammed Atta, was al-Shehhi's roommate.

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