

CHAPTER ONE

WELCOME TO VENICE

This is the story of Mohamed Atta, a black-hearted psychopath, in Florida, a pirate's paradise. If either had been different, September 11th might never have happened.

We started with two simple questions: Why Atta? Why Florida?

Except to point out his cold stare and unfriendly manner, little attention has been paid to the personality of Mohamed Atta, the man authorities quickly dubbed the 'terrorist ringleader.' 'J-Lo and Ben' receive more in-depth coverage in a week than the man who engineered the murder of 3000 people.

Based on the accounts of eyewitnesses to Atta's actions in Florida, he exhibited behavior that can only be described as psychotic. In fact, far from deserving the heroic mantle placed on his shoulders by Arab radicals, self-respecting Islamic fundamentalists should be ashamed that he sprang from their number.

Mohamed Atta wasn't a hero. He was a psychopath.

Before illustrating why Atta richly deserves that label, we want to first take a look first at the 'Florida as pirate's paradise' part of the equation. What attractions were there in the Sunshine State that made it the Hamburg cadre's overwhelming choice for 'home

away from home?’

Something has been struggling to emerge into our national consciousness concerning the physical location of most of the terrorist conspiracy’s activities in the U.S. Mohamed Atta and his inner circle were in *Florida* for most of the time while pursuing their murderous designs. The plot was masterminded from Florida.

What to make of this choice? The answer to that question is another question: “What’s up in Florida?” Although media attention kept pointing away from the state—to Phoenix, San Diego, and Minneapolis—14 out of the 19 hijackers voted with their feet and hung their terrorist shingle out in a state which has been governed since 1999 by the current President’s brother.

With an entire continent seemingly at their disposal, the terrorists chose Florida to be their American beachhead, and then base.

Why did Mohamed Atta, a man described by many who met him as a really ‘natty dresser’ lead his cadre from a bustling European metropolis with an internationally-famous red light district to a retirement community in a place where the only “action” involves senior citizens looking to get in on the early bird special?

It’s an odd choice. It’s not as if Florida reminded young Arab men from desert kingdoms of the trackless wastes back home. The state that made Don Johnson, Elian Gonzalez and pink flamingos famous is as far from being a desert kingdom as it gets.

There’s the weather, for one. While a mecca for Northerners during winter, Florida in early July, when the FBI says Atta arrived in Venice, is a steamy place. Even the natives head north until it cools off...

“Florida,” wrote one early Spanish explorer, “is full of bogs and poisonous fruits, barren, and the very worst country that is warmed by the sun.”

Some people will tell you not much has changed.

Yet 14 of the 19 hijackers based themselves in the Sunshine State. And since 15 of the 19 were Saudis, the story of the terrorist conspiracy is, perforce, a story about *Saudis in Florida*.

The conspiracy which took down the World Trade Center is a story about young Arab men practicing ‘touch and go’s’ at obscure Florida airports, like the one in Venice, and checking in and out of hotels in Florida destination resorts like Orlando.

In the weeks after Sept. 11 the nation began to ask questions of Florida. Television commentators spoke of a “Florida curse.” In truth, strange news had been emanating from that steamy underworld of alligators and pink flamingos for quite some time.

The connection between Florida and most of the hijackers in the deadly attacks had state leaders questioning whether the Sunshine State had become a haven for international terrorists, where the world’s nefarious characters feel free to congregate in a modern-day Casablanca.

“My God, Florida is always involved in these things,” said Oscar Westerfield, a retired FBI official who specialized in foreign counter-intelligence and is now a security consultant in Tampa. Florida Governor Jeb Bush disagreed. After the attack, Gov. Bush defended the flight schools as “victims of fanatics.”

After moving to Venice, we received a missive from someone who minced no words in his explanation for the attractions of Florida to the terrorists:

“You reside in a druggie mobbed-up state that also houses a lot of foreign unfriendlies with ties to various international bad guys, is run by a Bush, and where people become alligator bait and get lost in the swamps quite frequently,” wrote our friend. “Additionally, there seems to be a major overload of para-military types floating in.”

If you think that sounds a little extreme, listen to what one of the state’s own Senators had to say. Florida long has been “a lair for spies and now terrorists,” said U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, D-Fl., chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, in the Sept. 14 Orlando Sentinel Tribune.

Graham said: “Florida itself is a significant crossroads of international intrigue and clandestine collection.”

What Graham is referring to is explained by a conversation be-

tween two lawyers outside the federal courthouse in Miami, one local and one from Washington.

“You know the most wonderful thing about Miami is its location,” said the local lawyer.

“What do you mean?” the visitor asked.

“It’s so close to the United States.”

So while Mohamed Atta and Florida are a surrealistic pair, they also make a certain sense together. He always drove a Pontiac Grand Am, in a rainbow of colors. Atta was an Arab Don Johnson, starring in his own Miami Vice, and he looked and sounded, said eyewitness Brad Warrick of Pompano Beach, who rented several cars to Atta, “as if he’d been in this country for a long time.”

Atta and his cadre of terrorists lived in Florida, drank in Florida, and stuffed \$20 bills down stripper’s g-strings in skin joints all up and down the state.

And they learned to fly in Florida, too, mostly in the tiny town of Venice. It made nary a ripple when news first surfaced, though only briefly, that three of the four terrorist pilots learned to fly in a retirement community on Florida’s Gulf Coast.

Mohamed Atta and sidekick and bodyguard Marwan Al-Shehhi were the ones identified as having been flight students there. Then it was reported—in a strangely muted tone for what was big news—that others of the terrorists had been in Venice as well, including Siad Al Jarrah, said to have been at the controls of the plane that went down in western Pennsylvania.

Three of the four 9/11 pilots learned to fly at two flight schools at the tiny Venice Airport. Three out of four... a terrorist trifecta out at the Venice Airport. That makes Venice, Florida the biggest 9/11 crime scene that wasn’t reduced to rubble. But it hasn’t been treated that way. And no one has offered any reason why.

Both flight schools were owned by Dutch nationals. Both had been recently purchased, at about the same time. A year later terrorists began to arrive, in numbers greater than we have so far been told about. All of this must be just a freak coincidence, according

to the FBI. Its called the “Magic Dutch Boy Theory.”

How had the FBI known the exact identities of the hijackers less than 24 hours after the attack? If their files had been so readily in hand, why hadn't they apprehended them *before* they killed thousands? And when conscientious FBI agents did try to raise alarms about known Al Qaeda sympathizers at U.S. flight schools, why were they ignored?

The only answer ever given by the FBI to why the terrorists came to the U.S. to learn to fly was the FBI's vague ‘because flight training is cheaper in the U.S.’”

But Atta and Marwan ended up paying more than double what flight training costs elsewhere, according to aviation experts. So price was apparently not the object. And besides, in Florida alone there are over 200 flight schools.

What inducements led them to the two in Venice?

Flight school owner Rudi Dekkers said Atta and sidekick Marwan Al-Shehhi paid \$28,000 each for what the chief flight instructor at a nearby flight school, Tom Hamersley of Jones Aviation, explained to us was available at his school—as well as dozens of others—for a fraction of this price.

Were the inflated prices Atta and his minions paid some kind of ‘terrorist surcharge?’

As days and then weeks passed with no word as to why so many terrorists had been in Venice, we grew increasingly suspicious.

The ugly truth was that there had been no official explanation for why terrorists beat a path from the Baltic Sea to Florida's Gulf Coast.

Was it that no one knew? Or was it that they *did*?

Venice, Florida, is an unlikely center of intrigue. But the Venice Airport, set beside an unsuspecting population of golf-playing retirees, is another story, we discovered. It's been a free-booting port of call for an international cast of Lear jet-setting rogues, spies, villains and terrorists.

Most of the key terrorists, for example, had Venice connections.

Hamburg cadre member Ramzi bin al-Shibh, a candidate for 20th hijacker, was on his way to Venice until he was denied a visa.

Ramzi's replacement as the so-called 20th hijacker, Zacarias Moussaoui, we discovered, had also been in Venice, with Arne Kruithof, one of the two Dutch national flight school owners there.

Kruithof told a local aviation executive he'd been grilled for two days at the Sarasota, FL Courthouse about his connections to Moussaoui, by an Assistant Attorney General from the Justice Department accompanied by top-level officials from the FBI, in town taking depositions from potential witnesses in Moussaoui's upcoming trial.

Even if it stopped right there, wouldn't it seem Venice would be fertile soil for investigative journalists looking for "behind the scenes" reports about the terrorist conspiracy's activities?

Yet when we rolled into town two months after the attack though, we didn't find ourselves rubbing elbows with Mike Wallace or Bob Woodward at Clocks Restaurant downtown. And we weren't tripping over clusters of hard-drinking journalists to get to the bar at the Crow's Nest on the Gulf.

In fact, there were no investigative reporters nosing around in Venice when we got there. Speculation about why the terrorists found a tiny retirement community on Florida's Gulf Coast so congenial to their plans has not been voiced in the major media.

We find this passing strange.

But then, we knew quite a bit about Venice before we got there, since our parents have had a winter house there since retiring almost 25 years ago. The family gets together there almost yearly for a few days of quality 'family time' in the balmy Gulf breezes. It was partly because of this personal history we began to doubt the official explanation, or lack of same.

Venice is on Florida's sleepy Gulf Coast, sandwiched among the better-heeled resorts of Naples, Sanibel Island, Boca Grande—a Bush family favorite—and Sarasota, home to Katherine Harris.

Popular pastimes include shuffleboard, golf, and leafing through

magazines in doctor's waiting rooms. Restaurant traffic peaks a half-hour before the end of the early-bird special. Crosswalks allow extra time to get across the street, and have that beep feature in case you can't see.

The town's claim to fame—till now—was that every year Venice hosts the “Sharks Tooth and Seafood Festival,” said to be a unique event showcasing “the shark tooth capital of the world.”

When it comes to shark teeth, all that can be said is that they don't get many people real excited. The gee-gaw shops lining Venice's main drag get them in with the sharks teeth, and move them on to something else. Those few who go wild for sharks' teeth suffer from either a paucity of imagination or have altogether too much time on their hands.

Venice's only real distinction is that it has the second oldest population in the entire United States. The median age is 69. Naturally local advertising skews a bit towards ads for wheelchairs, home health care, funeral directors, specialist physicians, and estate planning. Commercials for “The Clapper” play in heavy rotation.

So by billing itself as the shark tooth capital of the world, the city fathers may just be putting their best foot forward. There's no cachet in being known as “the assisted living capital of the world.”

Despite the elderly population, one thing felt familiar to Atta when he got to Venice, oddly enough. When he was a student at Technical University in Hamburg studying—supposedly—electronics and construction engineering, he hung out at a place called Sharky's Billiard Bar. After moving to Venice he hung out at a restaurant and bar just across from the Venice Airport, also called Sharky's.

Small world.

Atta was seen at the Venice Sharky's just two weeks before 9/11 meeting with flight school owner Rudi Dekkers, although Dekkers testified he hadn't seen Atta in many months.

Stuck in the sweltering middle of nowhere, 30 miles of mangrove swamps from the nearest real town, a retirement community of overwhelmingly white people does not appear to have much to offer healthy 30-something men, even if they were terrorists.

So, why *did* young men choose to spend their final year on the planet in a town where handicapped parking spaces at the supermarket fill up fast? Why would healthy young men gravitate toward a retirement community *anywhere*? 'Cuz it ain't Hamburg. There's no red light district, unless you count the traffic signal downtown.

And it doesn't seem like an ideal place to hide an operation comprising several dozen dark-skinned foreign nationals.

One possible answer is that bivouacking in Venice was someone *else's* decision. If Mohamed Atta and his Hamburg cadre didn't just wander in Rudi Dekker's flight school door, we have an entirely different story than our government has so far been telling.

When we rolled into Venice two months after 9/11 the town was quiet on the surface, but jittery underneath, a discovery made after being pulled over by the local Venice Police twice on our first day in town. In 25 years of visiting the parents we don't remember even seeing a cop.

The Venice Airport was under around the clock 24-7 surveillance. A police cruiser roved the perimeter. Although this stretched the resources of a small department, there seemed no reasonable explanation for it. Were local officials expecting the terrorists to make a vengeful return appearance? More likely, the terrorist would be sending a postcard saying "Thanks for the help! Wish you were here!"

It made little sense. Later on we learned that all three of the top city officials filed for concealed weapon's permits at about the same time. It still didn't make sense, but now it seemed more serious.

On each of the two occasions we were pulled over, we identified ourselves as a visiting journalist, and since neither stop resulted in a ticket, but just a friendly wave, we concluded they were some kind of local law enforcement custom. A 'meet and greet.'

On the second occasion, we asked the officer if it would be prudent to pay a courtesy call on the Police Chief. He allowed that it might. So we did, stopping at the new Police Headquarters to say

hello. And we're glad we did, because the Sergeant on duty proved congenial, which gave us a chance to ask a few questions about Rudi Dekkers, the owner of Huffman Aviation, who had been everywhere on television during the days after the attack.

It was a simple question, really. We wanted to know if Dekkers had any local 'priors.' But it made Sergeant Marty Treanor sigh. Then he started to say something, thought better of it, and sighed again.

Finally, he said he couldn't tell us if Dekkers had been in any trouble in Venice, because all of his files were gone.

"Gone?"

"The FBI took all our files, everything. They loaded the files right outside this window," said Treanor, indicating a parking lot outside the station, "into two Ryder trucks, then drove them right onto a C-130 military cargo plane at the Sarasota airport, which took off for Washington with Jeb Bush aboard."

We will come back to visit the question of the Governor of Florida's national security responsibilities, or scandal-averting responsibilities. The important point was that *taking* files was a lot different than *copying* them. We were learning that the FBI wasn't taking any chances.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Venice City Manager George Hunt said to reporters, "It's really just coincidence that terrorists chose such a place (as Venice) to be their training ground for the unspeakable."

Was that true? Determining whether it was or not would be complicated by the fact that the FBI had dutifully confiscated anything that looked remotely like evidence.

What the FBI was doing with it was anybody's guess.

Our suspicions that there was something wrong with the official story would grow steadily. But the first indication we had that they might be correct came in that first encounter with local law enforcement. Something left us puzzled. The police spokesman seemed troubled that he lacked the ability to respond to questions about the possible criminal background of flight school owner Rudi

Dekkers.

We thought it sounded as if he would have *liked* to. He sounded none too happy about the fact that all police files pertinent to 9/11 were gone. At the time we wrote it off as just stepped-on toes, a little resentment by local law enforcement when they were brushed aside by federal agents.

But maybe it was something more. After a week we realized in some horror that the terrorists had been flying right over our parents house several miles east of the airport. There were lots of them flying at one time, too, apparently, in virtual squadrons, according to the local Venice Gondolier, in a story written while Atta was at the Venice Airport.

The City Council heard numerous complaints from residents, upset about student pilots taking off at the Venice Municipal Airport and flying low right over their homes, as each circled the Airport, and practiced landings, again and again, in a maneuver called a 'touch and go.'

One local resident, Walter Fife, a clearly indignant fellow, told the Council he had counted 90 student flights over his house in a two hour period. There were, he figured, about 15 planes flying overhead six times each.

Fifteen planes. A terrorist squadron. Bin Laden Air.

When Fife's wife Gerda contacted Huffman Aviation, reported the Gondolier, an employee there suggested the Fifes could move out if the noise bothered them.

The City Council took no action. They didn't even vote to reprimand the school's employees for being rude to Walter Fife's wife Gerda, although we bet they wouldn't like it if somebody was talking trash to their mom.

Huffman Aviation had some juice in Venice.

Unraveling the connection between the terrorists and the unlikely place to which they flocked became our major endeavor. It would take more than a year before any answers became clear.

On the other hand, the answer to our *second* question—why-Atta?— came all at once after we had finally been successful in a

months-long quest to track down Mohamed Atta's erstwhile American girlfriend, who wasn't eager to be found.

We believe we learned from her what it was about Mohamed Atta that made him uniquely qualified to fly into a skyscraper without flinching.

Our search for the terrorist ringleader's girlfriend is fully covered later. Suffice it for now that after a lengthy process of digging we found the young woman named Amanda Keller who local news accounts stated had lived for a short time with Mohamed Atta.

When she 'hooked-up' with Atta, Amanda Keller was a willowy 20 year-old 'lingerie model' and stripper with spiky pink hair. She worked nights for an escort service called Fantasies & Lingerie which catered to a mixed crowd of politicians, judges, high-rollers and socialites of both sexes, just down the street from Cheetah's, a strip club Atta was known to frequent.

Amanda was Mohamed Atta's live-in girlfriend in Venice for more than two months. And while the full story of her experience awaits a later chapter, one supremely horrific experience she had with Atta should be brought up now, because it so clearly shows him to have been someone capable of driving a Boeing 767 airliner into tons of steel and glass.

The two went out almost every night, during their brief time together, Amanda told us, to clubs like Area 51 and Margarita Maggie's in Sarasota. They were, as she described it, part of a whole scene. "When we went out we would meet pilots from Africa, Germany, and there were always lots of Arabs," she said.

But, the good times didn't last long, and after just two months, Amanda was ready to move on. But instead of clueing him in during a quiet dinner in a restaurant somewhere, she dumped him in a humiliatingly public fashion, in a night club where they were partying with a bunch of Atta's friends.

Amanda met a good-looking long-haired party animal who she noticed dancing bare-chested near her. We'll let her tell the story...

"We were at Margarita Maggie's in Sarasota near the Quay," she began. "Angelina, Olivia, Timothy, Juerigan, Sabrina, Mohamed,

Wolfgang... they were all there.”

“And Mohamed, like a dumbass, was standing on top of a speaker dancing. The man could not dance to save his life, he was real stiff, just kind of shaking, doing that old ‘Roxbury head bob’ thing, you know? He embarrassed me instantly when we got there, and I pretended I didn’t know him,” Amanda said.

“I was dancing onstage, because onstage the guys can’t come up and dance with the girls. I was up there with a whole bunch of other girls and Angelina. And this cute guy was dancing right below us, and the light was hitting him, and he had this long beautiful hair, and he looked at me, and I got real embarrassed.”

The ‘cute guy’s name was Garret.

“I had seen Angelina hug him earlier in the night, and I said to her, ‘You’ve got to introduce me to him.’ Mohamed was just a few feet away watching, and I didn’t give a damn,” she said.

“And we finally started dancing and he handed me his shirt, and Mohamed got really pissed. He (Garret) wrapped his shirt around my legs and was dirty dancing with me, and he slid me down off the stage and began brushing his lips against mine, and kissed me,” she said.

“Mohamed came over and tapped me on my shoulder, and I said, ‘What the hell do you want?’ And he said, ‘What are you doing?’” she said, mocking Atta’s apparently British-accented English.

“And I said, ‘I’m dancing!’ Garret walked over to get himself a beer, and Mohamed said, ‘I’m leaving.’”

“And I said, ‘See ya.’ And he said, ‘When are you leaving?’”

“And I said ‘Whenever I feel like it!’”

He asked me about Garret, saying, ‘Who’s that?’”

“And I said, ‘I guess he’s the new one.’ And I stayed until the club closed.”

That night Amanda went home with her new beau. Things were never the same between her and Atta again.

“The day I stopped liking him,” she mused aloud, “was when I saw him for the first time out at the pool, wearing a lime-green

Speedo. He had a flank-y ass.”

A lime-green speedo, when we thought about it, was one of those perfect details that make sense instantly. It was the shock of recognition: that’s exactly the kind of Euro-trash look someone like Atta would affect, we thought, when we heard it.

Mohamed Atta wore a lime-green speedo at the pool, revealing a flank-y ass. We didn’t know exactly what that was, but it didn’t sound good.

There’s nothing exceptional in this story... so far. Another half-sad half-comical ‘hook-up’ gone wrong. But events now began to spin out of control. Although Atta’s money paid the rent, the apartment lease was in her name, Amanda explained. One night soon after meeting him, she brought the new boyfriend back to her and Atta’s shared apartment. She told Atta: he could deal with it. He could move out. Or he could check with the landlord.

The hot new guy was sleeping over. Atta was on the couch. The hot new guy was in the ‘big bed.’ After discussing what she should do with the apartment house manager, who corroborated her story, Amanda Keller unceremoniously dumped Atta’s three suitcases and Gold’s gym bag onto the parking lot underneath their second floor apartment, and called him a cab.

“He told me he’d get even with me,” she says. “He said: ‘You will be sorry for this!’ ”

One week later she found out what he had meant, upon returning from a long night at the escort service to the apartment that was now hers alone.

Amanda kept a pet dog, and several cats as well, one of whom had just had a litter, she now informed us haltingly. There were six adorable kittens. But when she opened the door to her apartment when she got home, she didn’t hear any kitten noises, which was strange...

And then she hit the overhead light. Voice cracking with emotion, she told us what she saw: there were dead kittens—no, *pieces* of dead kittens, kitten parts—strewn all over her living room.

When we heard the story we asked her to repeat what she was

saying because we couldn't believe what we were hearing.

She walked through it again. "I came home from work, after breakfast with Page, (a co-worker) and then went down to the beach to talk for a while, so it was about 9 a.m. when I walked into my apartment," she stated.

"She (the mother cat) had had a litter of six, and only one survived. The mother cat was dead, gutted on my kitchen table. And there were little baby cat parts all over the place."

"The only ones to survive were my little dog, that hid under the couch, and my Siamese, who sat on top of the fridge behind the cookie jar. There were dead kittens with their heads cut off, little body parts everywhere, I saw little baby legs and everything. It was awful. My friend, Page, had to clean it up. I couldn't do it."

In an apartment directly across the street from the Venice Airport, an American girl who had spurned Mohamed Atta was stepping around kitten parts. She moved out that same day and never returned.

Numerous descriptions of Atta have painted him as menacing, dark, glaring, sometimes just wooden. We heard speculation, from people who had been in his presence in Venice, that he looked as if he might have been brainwashed, not that anyone in town had ever seen anyone who had been brainwashed, but he looked like how they thought somebody in that condition *might* look.

But after listening to Amanda Keller's story, corroborated by eminently-credible witnesses in coming pages, we're confident we got the answer to one of our big questions about the 9/11 attack: why Mohamed Atta had been the one chosen to commit one of history's most unspeakable crimes.

It was because he *could*. He was capable of it. Not merely capable, but seemingly perfect for the job.

Mohamed Atta was a psychopath. A Kitten Killer. Is there any other word to describe someone who would dismember little kittens and leave 'baby kitten parts' strewn around but psychopath?

We're in Jeffrey Dahmer territory here.

While the FBI's phony chronology of Mohamed Atta will be explored later, it's worth noting that the events just described took place in Venice fully four months after the FBI says Atta left town.

The FBI has said nothing at all about his numerous appearances in Venice after finishing flight training at Huffman in December 2000. And nothing at all about Kitten Killer Atta

We don't know why. Perhaps if they admitted he had been in Venice a lot more than they'd told us, they would have to answer questions about what he was doing while he was there that authorities would prefer not to see raised.

Questions that might open up what legendary Southern Senator William Fulbright once called 'an endless can of worms.' Fulbright was speaking about the Bay of Pigs invasion.

But he might just as well have been describing the 9/11 cover-up in Florida.

When we finally tracked her down, Amanda Keller displayed the reluctance to talk about her brush with history we soon discovered was typical among people who had been contacted by the FBI.

Reporters had camped out on her doorstep in the days after the attack in a vain attempt to get her to talk. She told them that authorities had told her not to say anything. And then she disappeared, going into seclusion in a place where she had every right to think she would never be found.

Until she told us her story after we had finally managed to show up on her doorstep, she had spoken just eleven words to reporters. Her choice of words pretty much sum up 'the way things were' in Southwest Florida in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack.

"I can't really discuss anything," Amanda Keller said.

"I'm afraid I'll get in trouble."