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Tribune photo by Pete Souza

FBI agents, testifying behind a screen to hide their identities, address a House-Senate intelligence committee on Tuesday. One agent said a congressional leak of his identity had put his life at risk.

Agent's pre-9/11 advisory contradicts FBI statements

By Cam Simpson
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — A memo from a Phoenix FBI agent, written two months before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, named an Islamic extremist directly connected to the suicide pilot who crashed an airliner into the Pentagon, congressional investigators said Tuesday.

The so-called Phoenix memo, largely ignored by top FBI officials after it was sent to headquarters July 10, 2001, named 10 Muslim men who were the subjects of FBI investigations and had been linked to American flight schools and aviation training. The memo suggested that Osama bin Laden was sending men to enroll in U.S. aviation programs in a coordinated plot.

The memo and its path through FBI headquarters were the focus of a joint House and Senate intelligence committee hearing Tuesday into intelligence lapses leading up to the Sept. 11 attacks.

Eleanor Hill, the lead investigator for the committee, testified Tuesday that one of the 10 men listed in the Phoenix memo had a relationship in Arizona with Hani Hanjour, the suspected pilot aboard American Flight 77, as early as 1997.

In public statements and previous congressional testimony, FBI officials had said that none of the 19 hijackers was associated with anyone in the U.S. who had come under investigation prior to Sept. 11.

The FBI did not learn until after Sept. 11 that the radical named in the Phoenix memo attended the same Arizona flight school as Hanjour and flew there as an "observer" in Hanjour's plane on at least one occasion in 1999. The FBI also learned after Sept. 11 that Hanjour and the radical even may have carpooled together and attended the same Arizona religious center, Hill said.

"No one can say whether the FBI would have developed an investigative interest in Hanjour had they opened an investigation on the individual mentioned in the Phoenix EC [memo] prior to Sept. 11," Hill said in a written report.

But she also said the committee's investigation suggests that some of the 19 hijackers might not have isolated themselves nearly as much as FBI officials have portrayed, leading to "more significant questions" about whether they should have come to the FBI's attention prior to the attacks.

FBI agent Kenneth Williams, author of the Phoenix memo, testified Tuesday that the unidentified subject connected to Hanjour actually might be the recruiter for Al Qaeda who chose the young pilot for the Sept. 11 mission.

Williams, who began his testimony by blasting Congress for, in his view, failing to protect his identity from the media when his memo was disclosed in May, said the investigation into the man is still under way. Williams testified from behind a screen to shield him from cameras. He said he believed his life was in danger because his identity had been disclosed.

Hill said Williams' memo was largely ignored by top FBI officials even though others within the agency had expressed concern about terrorists, inside and outside of Al Qaeda, possibly enrolling in U.S. flight schools. She said top FBI officials believed that bin Laden wanted trained pilots to ferry men and supplies, not to conduct terrorist operations.

When the memo was received at headquarters, there also was discussion that its request to begin examining the visas of flight-school students could lead to charges of racial profiling, Hill said.

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jerrwilliamsauthor
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