

Agent told CIA of flight students

By Jerry Seper
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A Phoenix FBI agent whose July 2001 memo seeking a search of flight schools for possible al Qaeda terrorists went unheeded by FBI headquarters also took his concerns to officials at the CIA, but it is not clear what they did - if anything - with the information.

According to government sources, Agent Kenneth Williams told a closed-door session of the Senate Judiciary Committee that after alerting FBI headquarters that followers of Osama bin Laden were training at an Arizona flight school, he gave the names to CIA officials for background and intelligence checks.

Mr. Williams, accompanied to the session by FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III, said CIA officials ran checks on eight of the flight-school students, but they proved negative, the sources said.

The agent, a 10-year FBI veteran and counterterrorism expert, said after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that killed about 3,000 people, new checks were conducted and one of the Arizona men was identified as an al Qaeda associate.

A CIA spokesman yesterday said it was "routine" for the agency to run names for law enforcement officials, but the CIA never received any specific request concerning the so-called Phoenix memo prior to the September 11 attacks, and never received a copy of it.

"It is not unusual to run names, we talk everyday and will continue to talk," said the spokesman. "But nothing was done in context with a Phoenix memo."

According to the sources, the committee wants to know who at the CIA ran the checks on the eight men and what they did with the information. They said the

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committee also will try to determine why it was necessary to conduct a second round of checks to turn up the al Qaeda connection.

The committee, the sources said, also was told that after the September 11 attacks, it was learned that one of the Arizona men called a "very close associate" of bin Laden, identified as Abu Zubaydah, the highest-ranking al Qaeda member now in U.S. custody. Zubaydah has been described as al Qaeda's operational commander.

The sources also said the committee heard that: Mr. Williams' July 10 memo went to the Radical Fundamentalist Unit, or RFU, at the counterterrorism unit at FBI headquarters, and was addressed to the Osama bin Laden desk. The memo also was sent to the FBI's New York field office.

The memo concluded there was an inordinate number of individuals of "an investigative interest" attending flight schools in Arizona. It said several of the men also were taking courses on airplane construction and one had inquired about airport security.

Several of the Arizona men had ties to al-Muhajiroun, a radical Islamic organization based in London that is closely aligned with bin Laden and has called for the destruction of the United States.

Mr. Williams documented several "fatwas," or religious edicts, against the United States, including one that described America's civil aviation and its airports as legitimate targets.

FBI officials told The Washington Post on Tuesday that midlevel executives at FBI headquarters who received the Phoenix memo lacked sufficient manpower to carry out follow-up investigations before the September 11 attacks.

But government sources insisted yesterday that no such claim was made during the committee's closed-door session.

The Phoenix memo has caused an uproar on Capitol Hill, where Democrats are calling for an independent commission to investigate how the administration responded to warnings about possible terrorist attacks before September 11.

Democrats and several Republicans want to know whether the administration failed to heed the warnings.

The Phoenix memo focused on eight students enrolled at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Ariz., where they took classes in pilot training, aircraft mechanics and security.

None has since been named as having any direct link to the September 11 attacks, although two were described as having ties to al Qaeda and are under active investigation, the sources said.

Mr. Mueller has ordered a reorganization of the bureau in the wake of September 11 that relies heavily on upgraded information technology and an infusion of computer specialists better able to detect and deter would-be terrorist attacks. The FBI plans to hire 900 new agents by the end of summer.

His planned reorganization will concentrate authority for terrorism investigation at the FBI's Washington headquarters.

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