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From the Times state desk



When ringleader Mohamed Atta was denied a license at one office, he simply went to another office.

Requests for Florida license raised no flags

Many of the men who commandeered planes Sept. 11 had little or no trouble getting Florida drivers' licenses.

By ALISA ULFERTS, Times Staff Writer
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TALLAHASSEE -- Mohamed Atta couldn't get a driver's license at the state office in Venice. But no one there answered the phone when the Lauderdale Lakes office, where Atta tried again, called to find out why.

So the ringleader of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks walked out of the Lauderdale Lakes office May 2 with his new driver's license in hand.

Ahmed Al Haznawi helped hijack the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania on Sept. 11. Just four days before, he visited the Lauderdale Lakes branch of the motor vehicle department to apply for a duplicate license.

And as they plotted the attacks that brought down the World Trade Center towers and damaged the Pentagon, 11 of the 13 terrorists known to have Florida licenses or identification cards made more than a dozen trips total to driver's license offices in the state, records released Thursday show.

That's how often the terrorists willingly called themselves to the attention of the state, either to acquire

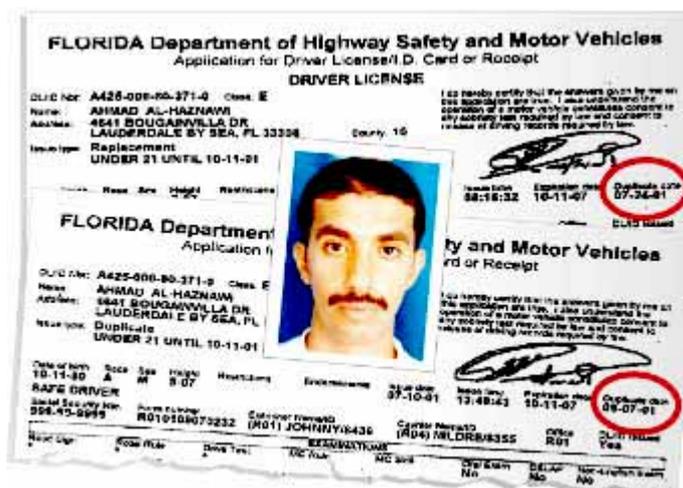
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a license or to update their address, both of which might have helped them rent cars or board planes without arousing suspicion.

Should the trips have raised a flag with the examiners behind the counter? Department spokesman Robert Sanchez said no.

"If it were unusual for people to come in and ask for a new license" that might have triggered an alarm, Sanchez said. But people do it all the time, Sanchez said, adding his own wallet had been stolen recently and he had to replace his identification.

"You'd be surprised how many people lose their licenses and ask for duplicates," Sanchez said.



Ahmed Al Haznawi obtained duplicate licenses in July and September, the records show.

Even law enforcement let one of the terrorists slip. Atta was ticketed twice, once for driving without a license and once for speeding, and the license he later got was suspended for failing to appear in court less than a month before the attacks.

The state had refused to release Atta's and the other terrorists' license information in the days after the attacks to give the federal government time to seek a court order keeping the records under wraps. That order has since expired, Sanchez said.

But state officials still refused Thursday to release additional information on why Atta was unable to get a driver's license in Venice but was able to get one later in Lauderdale Lakes, except to say his documents were in order when he received the license.

"That information is not public right now," Sanchez

said. State officials are checking to see whether the expired court order allows them to release the Atta records, Sanchez replied. He added those records were in a "separate category" from the others.

To get his Florida driver's license, Atta offered a passport, a driver's license and the controversial I-94 immigration form as proof of his identity and his legal status. Foreign visitors to the United States fill that report out themselves before their plane lands and it's then checked by immigration officials. Driver's license examiners noted the serial number of Atta's Egyptian ID, but failed to do that for Ahmed A.A. Al Nami's passport or even note which country issued it. Al Nami was on the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, the state records list a slightly different spelling for Al Haznawi -- Ahmad Al-Haznawi -- than the most recent spelling released from the federal government. And state workers didn't copy the terrorists' identification, they just noted it on the application form.

That persuaded the state's top cop, Florida Department of Law Enforcement Commissioner James T. "Tim" Moore, to ask the Legislature for \$500,000 for scanning equipment that will copy all supporting documents foreigners use when applying for a license. Moore got the money, said FDLE spokeswoman Jennifer McCord.

Several other terrorists presented their passports and I-94 forms as proof, and two of the younger ones had "Under 21" stamped on their applications. Some used driver's licenses from other countries to back up their application for a Florida license, and most seemed careful to keep their home addresses current on their licenses.

State officials have said all of them met the requirements for obtaining a Florida license, assuming the supporting identification they used was legitimate. The same day the state released the applications and driver histories of the terrorists, it announced a new policy for all non-citizens who want a license. Foreign nationals now must wait 30 days after they apply for a license so Florida can check their status with immigration and law enforcement officials, and they can apply only at certain offices.

Florida then will mail the driver's license to the address given on the application, and it expires the same time as the applicant's visa, Sanchez said.



Past 14 Days

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