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FBI seeks to rebuild its image

Sept. 11 attacks brought new subjects and training methods.

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QUANTICO, Va. - Wanted in a letter-bomb attack, the suspected terrorist parks his black Mercedes in front of a seedy barroom here. He steps out and places a black attache case containing a bomb on the trunk. Another scruffy fellow emerges from an alleyway, and the two huddle in animated conversation.

That's the cue for a dozen FBI agents in nearby parked cars to gun their engines and converge on the scene, training their Glock .40-caliber handguns and 12-gauge semiautomatic shotguns on the suspects.

"Gentlemen, get your hands in the air," an agent booms politely over a loudspeaker.

This is Hogan's Alley at the FBI's training academy, a mock town of phony storefronts, apartments and car lots named for a 1930s Chicago comic strip about gangsters, where the FBI stages mock crimes to prepare agents for what they can expect on the streets.

As the FBI scrambles to remake itself after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Hogan's Alley is humming with activity.

Hour after hour, teams of agents arrive to practice arrest techniques as FBI instructors hover over the process, critiquing the students.

These classroom crime clinics have taken on a distinctly contemporary twist. Nowadays agents are as likely to be working on cases involving bomb-wielding terrorists as on bank robberies or kidnappings.

In the classroom, they are as likely to be poring over the text of the USA Patriot Act, the antiterrorism law signed by President Bush last fall that gives the FBI broad new surveillance capabilities, as they are to be studying federal mail- and wire-fraud laws.

By October, the FBI says it plans to hire as many as 966 new agents - one of the biggest classes in years - whose skills will range from fluency in Arabic, Urdu, and Farsi to aviation and computer expertise.

"You name the occupation, from ordained minister to airline pilot and I can probably find them [at the academy]," said Roger L. Trott, chief of the agent training unit.

The pressure to change is coming not just from within the bureau, but increasingly from Capitol Hill.

Congress had been hammering away at the bureau even before the attacks. The FBI's failure to turn over thousands of documents regarding convicted Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh triggered intense criticism, as did the disclosure that former FBI agent Robert Hanssen had worked for years as a spy for the Russians.

And members of Congress have begun to question whether the bureau missed signals that a terror attack was imminent.

At the Senate Judiciary Committee on May 8, Democrats pressed FBI Director Robert Mueller 3d to explain why the FBI did not act on suspicions voiced by a counterterrorism expert in its Phoenix office last July that groups linked to Osama bin Laden might be sending terrorists to U.S. flight-training schools.

That memo, along with the disclosure that the FBI failed to follow leads involving Zacarias Moussaoui, the alleged 20th hijacker arrested before the attacks, heightened concerns that the FBI was ill-equipped to analyze or understand information that its agents were collecting in the field.

"When senior FBI officials concede in testimony before this committee that the FBI does not know all that it knows, we are left to wonder whether the FBI effectively used the information it knew before the watershed events on Sept. 11," said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D., Vt.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Bureau officials concede that the FBI has done a poor job of staying on top of information from its field offices.

In response, the bureau has initiated a graduate-training program in intelligence analysis for agents who have been in the field for several years. Mueller also plans an FBI "super squad" to fight terrorism that would be based in Washington.

Congress last fall passed an emergency appropriation of \$745 million for the bureau to hire additional agents, upgrade its computer system, and expand training. Of the 400 agents hired so far, most are expected to focus on terrorism.

Each agent must pass a 16-week course at the academy that covers everything from firearms instruction to classroom work on antiterrorism laws to field exercises. The washout rate is low, about 7 percent, reflecting in part the intensive winnowing of candidates during hiring. The bureau expects to hire only about 5 percent of the 20,000-plus people who have submitted applications since the beginning of the year.

Applicants are tested on analytical math and communications skills. Trott says that nearly half the applicants who survive the written tests and the interviews typically don't pass the polygraph on past drug use, potential security risks, and other issues.

Agents, once they enter the academy, even the erstwhile dentists and accountants, are expected to have minimum competency in the use of firearms and hand-to-hand combat.

Says Trott: "I am only training a basic agent here. I don't have time in 81 days to make someone, for example, a terrorism expert, a counterintelligence expert, or an expert on violent crime."

But Trott said agents do pick up skills that will help them survive on the streets. They also make a start on developing advanced techniques for the pursuit of more esoteric criminals, such as international terrorists.

Most important, Trott says, new agents "need to take their judgment with them. Their critical-reasoning skills. You have situations where an arrested suspect does something completely unexpected. Situations where in the first three minutes an arrest plan goes right out the window. That's when you need to use your critical-reasoning skills, your judgment."

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