

The 9/11 Commission Report clears up some misperceptions about that awful day.

SEPT. 11, MINUTE BY MINUTE

By Adam J. Hebert, Senior Editor

THE National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, popularly known as “The 9/11 Commission,” was created to conduct an independent, non-partisan investigation into the deadliest-ever foreign attack on US soil. Panel members had wide access to key participants, documents, and classified information. Their final report was released in July.

Confusion surrounding the events of Sept. 11, 2001, resulted in major misperceptions and inaccuracies in the public record. What follows is the commission’s accounting of how Osama bin Laden’s killers did their work and how US air defenses responded.

On Sept. 11, 2001, US government personnel first learned that something

At 8:46 a.m., two air defense fighters were ordered to get airborne. Only seconds later, at 8:47 a.m., American Flight 11 crashed into the World Trade Center North Tower. Here, a Vermont ANG F-16 soars above Ground Zero in New York City.



USAF photo by Lt. Col. Terry Moultrup

was wrong at about 8:25 a.m. A terrorist aboard hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 (soon to slam into the North Tower of the World Trade Center) inadvertently broadcast news of the aircraft seizure over an air traffic control frequency, heard by personnel in the Northeast.

Within the hour, the US would learn that 19 hijackers flying on four airliners that morning had, in the words of the commission's report, "defeated all of the security layers that America's civil aviation security system then had in place to prevent a hijacking."

The attackers then exploited gaps in the emergency response procedures of the Federal Aviation Administration and North American Aerospace Defense Command.

The FAA and NORAD did not have effective means of communicating with each other, did not expect that hijackers would turn off the aircraft transponders in an "attempt to disappear" in the skies, and did not anticipate the possibility that airliners would be turned into piloted missiles aimed at US targets. The report observed that, on 9/11, existing defense protocols were "unsuited in every respect for what was about to happen."

Withered Defense

Created to help shield North America's airspace from fast-approaching Soviet bombers, NORAD defined its job as "defending against external threats." Following the demise of the Soviet Union, the Pentagon dramatically scaled back the number of NORAD alert sites with fighters ready for takeoff. In fact, said the report, "Some within the Pentagon argued in the 1990s that the alert sites should be eliminated entirely."

On Sept. 11, just seven alert sites were operational—none in the immediate New York or Washington, D.C., areas.

The withering away of the US air defense network led some to worry—long before the attacks—that NORAD could not protect the United States, Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the commission. Myers served as NORAD commander from August 1998 to February 2000.

NORAD officers themselves first learned of a problem at 8:38 a.m., when the FAA's Boston Center called



At 9:13 a.m., two Massachusetts ANG F-15s (such as this Eagle) left a holding pattern off Long Island and flew 115 miles to Manhattan at 575 mph. They arrived in 12 minutes and established a combat air patrol.

NORAD's Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS), located in Rome, N.Y.

According to the final report, "This was the first notification received by the military—at any level—that American 11 had been hijacked." The FAA center also tried to contact a former alert site in Atlantic City, N.J., "unaware it had been phased out."

Officials at NEADS sprang into action, ordering two Air National Guard F-15 fighters at Otis AFB, Mass., to battle stations. "The air defense of America began with this call," said the report.

Col. Robert Marr, the NEADS battle commander, called Maj. Gen. Larry K. Arnold, head of NORAD's continental air defense region, seeking instruction. Arnold told Marr to scramble the F-15s and "get authorities later." At 8:46 a.m., the F-15 pilots were ordered to get airborne.

Only seconds later, at 8:47 a.m., American Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower. Unfortunately, "that nine-minute notice" between first warning and impact "was the most the military would receive of any of the four hijackings," the commission said.

At 8:52 a.m., a flight attendant aboard United Airlines Flight 175 called United's offices. He reported that the flight had been hijacked, "both pilots had been killed, a flight attendant had been stabbed, and the hijackers were probably flying the plane."

At 8:53 a.m., the F-15s from Otis

got airborne. However, no one knew where to send them, and they were put into a holding pattern off Long Island.

By 9:00 a.m., the FAA and the airlines faced "the staggering realization" that the nation was in the grip of multiple aircraft hijackings. At the time, the military had no such realization, according to the report.

United Flight 175 struck the WTC South Tower at 9:03 a.m. At almost exactly the same moment, NORAD officials were notified that the flight had been hijacked.

The terrorists struck a third time, against American Airlines Flight 77. The FAA learned of this event at 9:05. However, "NORAD had no indication that any other plane had been hijacked," the panel reported.

Langley's Fighters

Concerned about the developing situation and unsure how much gas the Otis F-15s had left, NEADS called the alert site at Langley AFB, Va., for backup. "Langley fighters were placed on battle stations at 9:09," said the report, but they were not immediately ordered to launch.

At 9:13 a.m., the Otis fighters left their holding pattern and flew 115 miles to Manhattan at 575 mph. They arrived in 12 minutes and established a combat air patrol (CAP) over the city.

At 9:21 a.m., NEADS got another call from FAA's Boston Center and received new information "about a

plane that no longer existed: American 11.” It had already crashed into the North Tower.

“NEADS: OK, American 11 is still in the air?”

“FAA: Yes. ...

“NEADS: He—American 11 is a hijack?”

“FAA: Yes.

“NEADS: And he’s heading into Washington?”

“FAA: Yes. This could be a third aircraft.”

Based on this erroneous report, the NEADS mission crew commander decided to launch the fighters at Langley.

Meanwhile, a United dispatcher began transmitting warnings to flights that he was monitoring. At 9:24 a.m., he sent this message: “Beware any cockpit intrusion—two [aircraft] hit World Trade Center.” His transmission was received on United Flight 93. Three minutes later—9:27 a.m.—Flight 93’s pilot “responded with a note of puzzlement.” At 9:28, the hijackers seized his airplane.

The Langley F-16 fighters, meanwhile, got airborne at 9:30. They were ordered to Baltimore in a misguided effort to intercept the already-destroyed American Flight 11.

At FAA, “concerns over the safety of other aircraft began to mount,” the report states. American Flight 77 was by that time a known hijacking, but the airplane had “vanished” and “traveled undetected for 36 minutes on a course heading due east for



USAF photo by SSgt. Greg L. Davis

At 9:30 a.m., two F-16s from Langley AFB, Va., got airborne but were sent to Baltimore in a misguided intercept effort. The F-16s, part of a detachment of the North Dakota ANG’s 119th FW, never got actual authority to shoot.

Washington, D.C.” At 9:32 a.m., air traffic controllers finally located it—approaching Washington.

Air traffic controllers in Washington “vectored an unarmed National Guard C-130H cargo aircraft, which had just taken off en route to Minnesota, to identify and follow the suspicious aircraft. The C-130H pilot spotted it ... [and] attempted to follow its path,” the report stated.

At 9:33 a.m., a supervisor at Reagan National Airport called the Secret Service to say “an aircraft [is] coming at you and not talking with us.”

First Word

Still unaware of this threat to Washington, NEADS contacted another FAA center to get more information about American Flight 11. At 9:34, FAA told NORAD that American Flight 77 was also missing. This was the first official notice to the military that American 77 was missing, and “it had come by chance,” the report noted.

“This startling news prompted the mission crew commander at NEADS to take immediate control of the airspace to clear a flight path for the Langley fighters,” the report stated. “He then discovered, to his surprise, that the Langley fighters were not headed north toward the Baltimore area as instructed, but east over the ocean.” The Langley F-16s had not been given a specific destination and followed a “generic” flight path designed to take them away from populated areas as quickly as possible.

“I don’t care how many windows you break,” the NEADS commander said, ordering the fighters to race north.

At 9:37, American Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon. The C-130 was on the scene only seconds later. The fighters from Langley were still 150 miles away.

By this time, said the report, “another aircraft was heading toward Washington, an aircraft about which NORAD had heard nothing.” It was United Flight 93.



At 9:32 a.m., air traffic controllers rediscovered American Flight 77 (which had vanished) flying in Washington, D.C., airspace. At 9:37, the hijacked airliner crashed into the Pentagon. Langley F-16s were 150 miles away.

US Navy Photo by PH1 Dewitt D. Roseborough III

Even if it had been available, military intervention was not needed to stop Flight 93, because a passenger revolt began at 9:57 a.m. Several passengers “terminated phone calls with loved ones in order to join the revolt,” the report noted. One ended her call, “Everyone’s running up to first class. I’ve got to go. Bye.”

The attack against the hijackers went on for six minutes. At the end, “the hijackers remained at the controls but must have judged that the passengers were only seconds from overcoming them.”

At 10:02 a.m., officials in the White House shelter, which now housed Vice President Dick Cheney, received word that Flight 93 was inbound toward Washington.

At 10:03, Flight 93 plunged into a field near Shanksville, Pa., south-east of Pittsburgh. “The nation owes a debt to the passengers of United 93,” the commissioners wrote. “Their actions saved the lives of countless others and may have saved either the Capitol or the White House from destruction.”

The same C-130 that saw Flight 77 crash into the Pentagon was also first to the United 93 crash site. The airlifter had “resumed its flight to Minnesota and saw the smoke from the crash ... less than two minutes after the plane went down.”

No one from FAA had requested military assistance for dealing with Flight 93. “The flight had already crashed by the time [NORAD] learned it was hijacked,” the report noted.

Cheney’s Order

In the chaos of the morning, there was a misperception that Flight 93 was continuing toward Washington long after it actually had crashed. Around 10:12 a.m., Cheney gave an order for orbiting fighters to “take out” the incoming airliner.

Cheney would repeat this order three times by 10:30, but word never reached the F-16s flying CAP from Langley.

By 10:38 a.m., however, D.C. Air National Guard F-16 fighters were airborne with “entirely different rules of engagement,” the report stated.

Maj. Gen. David F. Wherley, then commander of the 113th Wing at Andrews AFB, Md., sent up F-16s after contacting the Secret Service, having heard secondhand reports that



At 9:28 a.m., hijackers seized United Flight 93 and headed toward Washington, D.C. A passenger revolt began at 9:57 a.m. and, at 10:03, Flight 93 plunged into a field in Pennsylvania. The F-16s still had not gotten the “shoot” order.

fighters were needed over the nation’s capital.

“While the fighter pilots under NORAD direction ... out of Langley never received any type of engagement order, the Andrews pilots were operating weapons free,” the report reads.

There is no evidence that Bush, Cheney, NORAD, or the top leaders at the Pentagon knew the Andrews fighters were airborne that morning.

NORAD had essentially no chance of stopping the hijacked aircraft that morning. Air defenders had nine minutes’ notice of the first hijacked airplane before it crashed and “no advance notice” for any of the other three.

Inaccurate statements in the wake of the attacks created impressions that the military could have stopped some of the aircraft, the report stated. NORAD officials have said they scrambled the Langley fighters to intercept Flight 77, Flight 93, or both. “These statements were incorrect,” the commission asserted.

All evidence shows “the fighters were scrambled because of the report that American 11 was heading south. ... This response to a phantom aircraft was not recounted in a single public timeline or statement” issued by DOD, the report reads.

“NEADS never received notice that American 77 was hijacked,” and did not have 14 minutes to respond, as previous statements held.

“Nor did the military have 47 min-

utes to respond to United 93, as would be implied by the account that it received notice ... at 9:16,” the report stated. NORAD learned of Flight 93’s hijacking four minutes after the airliner crashed in Pennsylvania.

It is impossible to know what would have happened if Flight 93 had not been brought down by its passengers. Timelines show the only fighters over Washington at Flight 93’s expected arrival time were the Langley F-16s.

“At that point in time, the Langley pilots did not know the threat they were facing ... and did not have shoot-down authorization,” the report reads.

“I reverted to the Russian threat. ... I’m thinking cruise missile threat from the sea,” explained the lead pilot from Langley that morning. He looked down to “see the Pentagon burning” and “thought the bastards snuck one by us,” he said. “No one told us anything.”

The events of Sept. 11 do not cast dishonor on “the operational personnel at NEADS or FAA,” the report stated. “NEADS commanders and officers actively sought out information, and they made the best judgments they could on the basis of what they knew.”

Military personnel “struggled, under difficult circumstances, to improvise a homeland defense against an unprecedented challenge they had never before encountered and had never trained to meet,” the commission concluded. ■