"HE DID WHAT GUARDSMEN ALWAYS DO"

THE AIR NATIONAL GUARD RESPONDS ON 9/11

Less than two hours elapsed from the hijacking of the first aircraft on September 11, 2001, at 8:14 am EDT, to the crash of the fourth plane in a Pennsylvania field at 10:03. Those 109 minutes were a jumble of incomplete and contradicting information. But ten years later, thanks to the efforts of the 9/11 Commission and other researchers, we can accurately construct a time line of events during and after the attacks. This time line documents the key role played by the Air National Guard in the nation's immediate response. At the same time that New York City firemen raced toward danger on the ground, Air National Guard aviators flew into an unknown situation in the skies.

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Crew Chiefs Wing by Brendan Duffy
Spirit of Cape Ed
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NEW YORK

On the morning of September 11, 2001, air traffic controllers near Boston first grew concerned about American Airlines Flight 11 when it stopped responding to routine communications around 8:14 am. Their concerns intensified when the plane made a sharp turn, its transponder stopped broadcasting and a series of strange messages came from the cockpit. One said: "Nobody move. Everything will be okay. If you try to make any moves, you'll endanger yourself and the airplane. Just stay quiet."

These ominous messages, said in an accented voice that investigators later believed to be the hijacker-pilot Mohammed Atta, caused several controllers to conclude the plane had been hijacked. FAA controllers contacted officers at the Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS), which was under the command of the Continental U.S. NORAD and which could call upon two of the seven alert sites that provided air defense for the continental U.S. The FAA controllers also placed a direct call to the tower at Otis ANG Base in Cape Cod, Mass., at 8:34 a.m. This was the first notification that the ANG's services would be needed that day.

Two pilots with the Massachusetts ANG 102d Fighter Wing were on alert duty that day. Lt. Col. Tim Duffy, a traditional Guardsman and commercial airline pilot, was disappointed to be on alert instead of on the flying schedule for that day's crisp and cloudless weather. He was near the operations desk break room when the call came through of a suspected hijacking—"not one of those words you throw around" in that environment. Full-time Guardsman Maj. Dan Nash was also on alert, covering a shift for another pilot flying a training mission. Though Nash was scheduled to fly lead, he deferred to Duffy due to his previous experience intercepting a hijacked Lufthansa flight in 1993. The pilots ran to a pickup truck and rushed to the alert barn while air traffic officials worked with NEADS to secure scramble authority. As the pilots raced toward the barn at 80 miles an hour, the alert klaxon sounded, its piercing noise ordering all pilots to battle stations. They had already saved several minutes by suiting up before the order, and they were already strapping themselves into their jets and awaiting orders.

At 8:46 a.m., the scramble order was given and Duffy launched his F-15 Eagle into the sky several minutes later. Nash was right behind, both pilots heading to New York. Though no one could yet confirm that the plane had been hijacked at all, Duffy's prior experience led him to believe that this situation was not an ordinary hijacking. This intuition led him to push his F-15 faster, in order to get on the scene as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, Duffy and Nash could not know that Flight 11 had just struck the World Trade Center's North Tower, killing all aboard the aircraft and many hundreds of others in the building.

When word of this first crash came through aviation channels, the pilots went into a holding pattern in a military training airspace off Long Island, which would put them in close range to fly a combat air patrol (CAP) over New York if needed. Then the second hijacked craft, United Flight 175, hit the South Tower. Nash and Duffy proceeded to Manhattan and established a CAP. They would soon have their hands full identifying and escorting dozens of aircraft as the FAA began the unprecedented action of grounding all commercial air traffic in the United States.

WASHINGTON, DC

In the airspace surrounding Washington, DC, around 9:30 a.m., Minnesota ANG Lt. Col. Steve O'Brien had just taken off from Andrews Air Force Base. He and the rest of his C-130 crew were returning home after a long deployment on a supply mission in the Caribbean. As the cargo plane passed over the Potomac River, O'Brien received an unusual request from Washington air traffic controllers, who hoped he could get a visual on what controllers now feared was a third hijacking—American Airlines Flight 77.

"I told him that was an understatement," O'Brien later told the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, "By then, he [AA 77] had pretty much filled our windscreen. Then he made a pretty aggressive turn so he was moving right in front of us, a mile and a half, two miles away. I said we had him in sight, then the controller asked me what kind of plane it was. That caught us up, because normally they have all that information. The controller didn't seem to know anything."

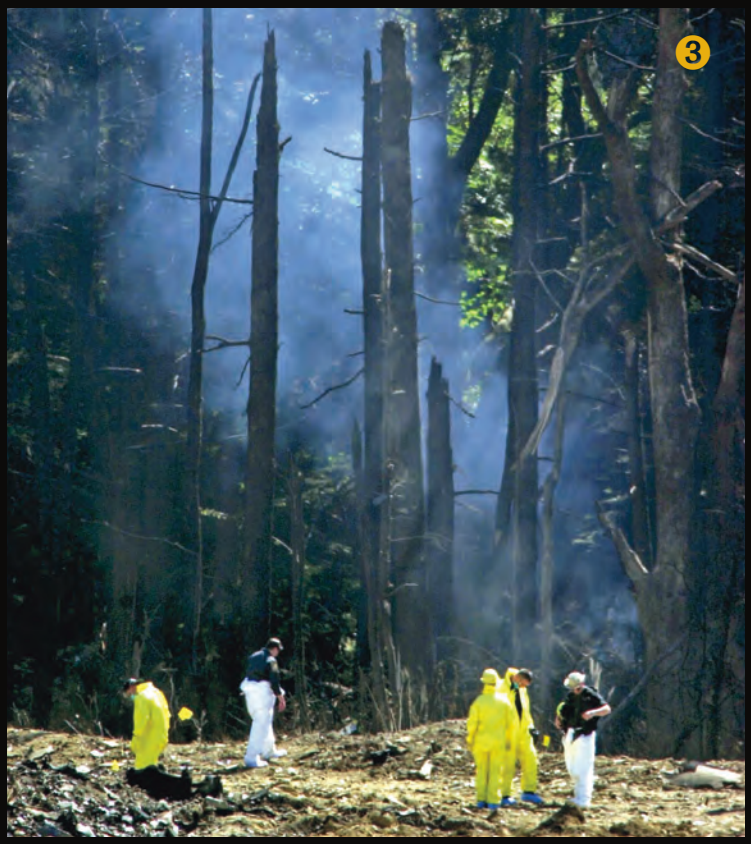
KEY EVENTS

7:59 AM EDT	8:14	8:20	8:34	8:42	8:46	9:03
American Airlines Flight 11 takes off from Boston's Logan International Airport bound for L.A.	AA 11 stops responding to routine air traffic communication. United Airlines Flight 175 takes off from Logan, also headed to L.A.	AA Flight 77 takes off from Dulles International Airport just outside DC, also bound for L.A.	Massachusetts ANG 102d Fighter Wing is alerted by FAA.	UA Flight 93 departs Newark Liberty International Airport bound for San Francisco.	102d FW scrambles F-15 fighters from Otis AFB. AA 11 crashes into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.	UA 175 crashes into the South Tower.

1. **NEW YORK—SEPTEMBER 11:** Hijacked United Airlines Flight 175 from Boston crashes into the south tower of the World Trade Center and explodes at 9:03 a.m. on September 11, 2001, in New York City. The crash of two airliners hijacked by terrorists loyal to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and subsequent collapse of the twin towers killed some 2,753 people. (Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

2. **WASHINGTON, DC—SEPTEMBER 11:** Rescue helicopter surveys damage to the Pentagon Building as fire fighters battle flames after the terrorist-piloted airplane crashed into the U.S. military headquarters outside of Washington, September 11, 2001. Three hijacked planes crashed into U.S. landmarks in an unprecedented assault on key symbols of U.S. military and financial power. © Larry Downing / Reuters

3. **PENNSYLVANIA—SEPTEMBER 12:** Smoke rises behind investigators as they comb the debris field from United Airlines Flight 93 near Shanksville, Penn., September 12, 2001. Flight 93 is one of four planes that were hijacked as part of a deadly and destructive terrorist plot mounted on September 11. © Tim Shaffer / Reuters



9:13
102d FW maintains holding pattern over Atlantic, then establishes a CAP over New York.

9:24
F-16s from North Dakota's 119th Fighter Wing scramble out of Langley AFB, Virginia.

9:32
Unarmed Minnesota ANG C-130 is directed by controllers at Reagan National Airport to identify and follow radar contact moving toward DC. (AA 77's transponder was no longer transmitting.)

9:37
AA 77 crashes into the Pentagon, witnessed by MN ANG's C-130.

9:57
Passengers aboard UA 93 begin efforts to retake control of the plane from the hijackers.

10:02
Hijackers of UA 93 realize passenger assault on them will soon be successful and crash the jet into a field in Shanksville, Penn.

10:25
DC ANG 113th Wing secures airspace over the nation's capital.

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Then O'Brien received an even more unusual order to reverse course and follow the airliner—something he had never been asked to do in 20 years of flying. At 9:37, as O'Brien began tracking Flight 77, it suddenly banked hard and hit the ground in a massive fireball. "It looks like that aircraft crashed into the Pentagon, sir," he reported. He then received a final surprise: an order to vacate airspace immediately, to clear the way for incoming fighters. He flew north, where he was then in position shortly after 10 a.m. to verify the last known position of the fourth hijacked aircraft, United Flight 93, which the terrorists crashed into a Pennsylvania field after passengers tried to retake the aircraft.

Back in DC, the three F-16s of the North Dakota Air National Guard's 119th Fighter Wing had been scrambled several minutes earlier based on the belief that Flight 11 was still airborne and headed to DC. Now with the World Trade Center already hit, NEADS ordered them to head directly over the capital at maximum subsonic speed. "That's as fast as you can go without breaking the sound barrier," Capt. Craig Borgstrom later recalled, "I've never heard it before in my short career, but I don't think anyone's heard that order before."

Forty miles away, they saw smoke billowing from the Pentagon, and they headed toward it to identify several small unidentified aircraft approaching. These turned out to be military and law enforcement helicopters, so two of the pilots—Capt. Borgstrom and Maj. Brad Derrig—established a CAP while the third, Maj. Dean Eckmann, swept low over the city. As he passed over the Pentagon, evacuees there cheered the reassuring sight of U.S. air power, then renewed their efforts to help those still trapped inside.

Meanwhile, pilots from the District of Columbia ANG's 113th Wing at Andrews AFB were taking to the skies. Though called the "Capital Guardians," they were not in NORAD's chain of command and had no way to communicate with other elements of national air defense at that time. They therefore spoke directly with the White House operations center, which ordered them to establish a CAP, intercept any aircraft within 20 miles of Washington's airports, and use "whatever force is necessary… to keep them from hitting a building downtown." By 11 a.m., a total of seven guardsmen had taken to the skies, established direct communication with each other, and by noon had secured the national capital region's airspace.

LEARN MORE

Readers interested in air defense during the September 11 attacks can find a more comprehensive account in a forthcoming pamphlet published by the Air Force Office of Historical Studies, tentatively titled *9/11 and the U.S. Air Force: The First 109 Minutes.*

ON THE GROUND

When United Flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania, the attacks of September 11 came to an end. Of course, nobody knew that at the time. Throughout the morning, National Guard personnel reported to duty without formal orders. In many ways, the typical experience of the National Guard on September 11 was not that of the pilots who were already on duty when the attacks occurred, but of members who learned of the attacks while at their civilian jobs.

Maj. Chris Hamilton, a lawyer and security forces officer with the 102d Fighter Wing at Otis, was preparing to start a trial at the U.S. District Court in Boston, when U.S. Marshals closed the building and ordered everyone outside.

"I realized there was something wrong," Hamilton later told Air Force historians, "when there was this absolutely eerie silence in Boston because the U.S. District Courthouse is right across the water from Logan Airport. Normally it is very loud, and there was just this eerie silence—no planes in the air, no nothing. I knew something was up when I actually saw fighter jets from the 102d over Boston. I told the partner that I was with that I needed to go; I needed to report to my unit." Hamilton's wife packed his gear as he raced home. "With no questions asked, she packed my bags."

"I think the vast majority of the squadron reported without having been prompted to," he said. "As I understood it, they also understood it: that this was serious and it's time to do your duty."

These and similar stories encapsulate the immediate response of thousands of National Guardsmen on September 11. Without notice and with other commitments, as many as 60,000 of the Air Guard's 110,000 members reported for duty, and then worked tirelessly even as formal orders took days to secure. On September 11 alone, the ANG flew 179 missions, and the tasks to come would be even greater.

Brig. Gen. Paul S. Kimmel, former assistant for operational readiness to the director of the ANG, said that on September 11 and afterward, the men and women of the National Guard did "what Guardsmen always do, and that's respond and respond well when there's a need. The initiative people took on their own without direction was amazing and showed the real value of the Air National Guard." ≡

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Andrew Wackerfuss lived in downtown Washington, DC, during the attacks of September 11, 2001. He received his Ph.D. in history from Georgetown University in 2009, and continues to teach at Georgetown while working with the Office of Air Force Historical Studies at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, Washington, DC. He is assigned to the team writing the definitive history of USAF operations in Operation Noble Eagle.*