

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Event: Meeting with Langley Tower personnel, Langley AFB

Type of event: Orientation/Briefing

Date: 10/06/03

Special Access Issues: None

Prepared by: Miles Kara

Team Number: 8

Location: Langley AFB, VA

Participants - Commission: John Farmer, Kevin Shaeffer, Miles Kara

Participants - Non-Commission:

Andrew Huddleston: Dep Chief, Plans, Integration & Transformation Division, AF/XOHP

Colonel Pamela Stevenson: ACC/ JAA, Judge Advocate General

Capt. Jay Scherer, Officer-in-Charge, Norfolk Tower, IOSS/OSA

MSgt Kevin Griffith, Senior Controller and Tower Watch Supervisor, Norfolk Tower, IOSS/OSAT

Senior Airman Raymond Halford, Controller, Norfolk Tower, IOSS/OSAT

MSgt David Somdahl, 119th Fighter Wing, Public Affairs [escort]

MSgt Robert Atchinson, First Fighter Wing [escort]

Background Summary

Both Griffith and Halford were on duty when the 119th Fighter Wing Air Superiority Aircraft were scrambled on 9/11. Their job that day was to get the aircraft launched. They had no situational awareness other than the contents of the scramble order which Halford recalled from memory, almost verbatim. By SOP they had no TV in the control tower but were aware through rumor reports that something had impacted the WTC. Griffith's first impression on hearing that news that the first tower had been hit was that a controller had made a major mistake. After the second tower hit he told everyone to be ready because there would be "itchy trigger fingers" to activate an air defense mission. Four or five minutes later the alert line went off and two a/c were placed on battle stations by HUNTRESS. [That call was made at 0909-0910 EDT] A second call, the scramble, was received some minutes later.

Discussion Points

Air defense alert calls are received from HUNTRESS at four locations: the Langley Command Post, the Tower, the 119th Wing, and Norfolk TRACON. The scramble klaxon is activated by Langley Command Post as part of its overall command and control responsibility on base. The klaxon can be heard outside, as well. The mechanics for activating the klaxon are contained in the MFR covering Staff visit with Base Operations.

The 119th Fighter Wing alert barn is conveniently situated at the west end of the single Langley runway which provides for takeoffs to the east or the west (260 or 080). Scrambled aircraft routinely take off to the east because they can get a rolling start out of the alert barn directly to

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the east. To do otherwise would require the aircraft to taxi to the east end, turn around, and then launch, a process that could consume up to 5 minutes, according to the Commander of the fighter detachment in a separate interview. Prior to 9/11 the air defense mission dictated an eastern launch and that was the procedure that was followed on 9/11 as the fastest way of getting the fighters airborne.

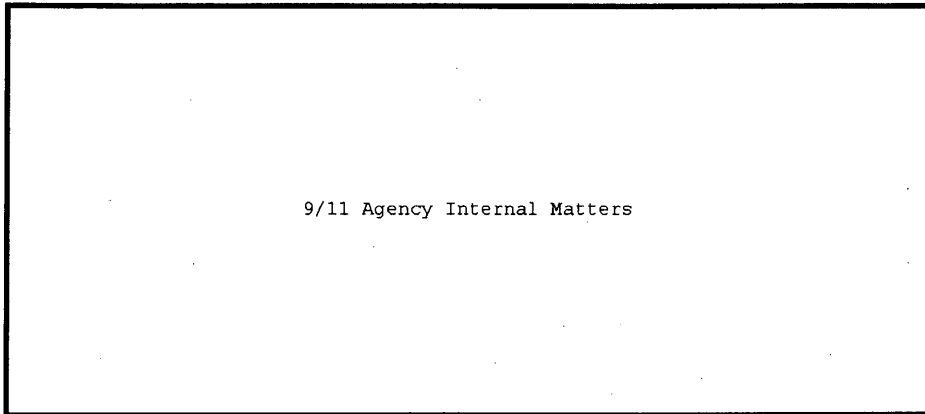
After launch there is no restriction of how soon fighters can turn, that is accomplished under Norfolk Tower control and direction. The duty of Langley Tower operators is to get a flight plan established in the system so that the system will accept the aircraft departure. Tower personnel followed established procedures that day and accomplished their part of the mission efficiently and effectively. Halford brought the Quit 25 flight strip with him and it contained the following details. Quit 25, a flight of two F-16s was given a randomly generated computer number "013." The number "2" was crossed out by pencil and replaced with a "3." A squawk code of 4650 was depicted along with a proposed clearance time of "P1325" at flight level 290. [The scramble order was received at 1324Z.] The strip shows that Tower personnel received local flight clearance at 1326, that fighter lift off occurred at 1330Z and that the information was forwarded to base operations at 1331Z, passed to an individual with the initials "TL." The strip showed that the fighters were cleared 090 for 60 miles. That is an arbitrary entry that allows the aircraft to get airborne. Langley Tower control extends only five miles off the runway so for practical purposes scrambled aircraft are turned over to Norfolk Tower on lift off. The designation "090" is a likely reference to the Langley TACAN, a known point of local reference. Tower personnel recalled that all previous practice scrambles followed that same route. There had been no active air scrambles in the memory of personnel contacted; for Griffith that period covered the three years prior to 9/11. Tower personnel reinforced that runway 08, an easterly takeoff, was the fastest way to get fighter aircraft airborne.

Halford characterized himself as "young and impressionable" and he recalled that they "high-fived" because they were able to get the aircraft off the ground in less than five minutes from time local clearance was granted. [actually four minutes, 0926-0930.] Local clearances expire after five minutes. He also was personally concerned that it took "an excessive time for the aircraft to come out of the hanger." He recalled that delay was on the order of 15 minutes. Staff reminded him that the first call for Battle Stations was at 1309Z and he recognized that his concern was related to that factor. Halford also, on that day, thought that the Langley fighters were scrambling for DC to "protect our national assets."

There is no restriction on use of afterburners and the scrambled aircraft took off in that mode. Supersonic flight is limited by ROE [peacetime] to [redacted] 9/11 Classified Information [redacted] Therefore, scrambled aircraft usually proceed at [redacted] 9/11 Classified Information [redacted] in Capt Scherer's words.

According to the Langley Tower personnel, HUNTRESS establishes a point in space, a place holder simply to get the planes airborne. Norfolk Tower takes actual control on take off.

A powerpoint replication of the flight strip for the Langley scramble is depicted below. This section and the accompanying text were added to this MFR after the Langley visit was completed. Hence the duplication in order not to change the original MFR completed on the day of the discussion with Langley Tower personnel.



Halford shows us the original flight strip. He personally made the data entries into the automated flight system immediately on receipt of the scramble order. He believed the actions he took that day to be the most efficient and effective way to get the planes in the sky. He learned after entering the data that the scramble would consist of three planes, hence the pencil change on the flight strip. A take off to the east on the Langley radial for 60 miles was the standard takeoff from Langley in order to clear local traffic and get the fighters to altitude as quickly as possible. Halford and other Langley Tower personnel explained that the initial vector was not a command; it simply established a reference point from which others could deviate. Although the Langley tower controls the airspace out to five miles, for fighter aircraft, practically, that control stops on lift off and the planes are then controlled by civilian controllers at Norfolk tower. The planes were not bound to the 60 mile distance and could have turned to the North at any time they were directed to or had orders to do so.

The next day the Commander of the scrambled aircraft, in a different session, explained the difficulty in "stepping through" CONUS airspace to get to altitude and pointed out with graphics the density of airports in the Langley area. In the Commander's words, the Langley area is the most dense such area in the United States. As the Commander of aircraft scrambled for an emergency he had no problems with the vectoring of his aircraft.

No one Staff talked to at any location in the Norfolk area had any knowledge or situational awareness of either AA77 or UA93 at the time the Langley fighters were scrambled.

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