



**MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD**

Event: John Werth, Air Traffic Controller, Area 4, Lorain Sector

Type of event: Interview

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Special Access Issues: None

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Team Number: 8

Location: Cleveland Air Traffic Control Center

Participants - Non-Commission: John Werth, former Air Traffic Controller, Cleveland Center and Michael McKinley, FAA attorney

Participants - Commission: John Farmer, Dana Hyde, and Lisa Sullivan

John Werth was the controller for the high altitude Lorain Sector in Area 4 of Cleveland Center airspace. He received the United Flight 93 handoff from Revina Sector before it was even suspected of being hijacked. On 9-11-01, the management reported they were glad Werth was the controller that handled UA 93 because of the excellent job he did to handle to situation.

**Background**

He started at the FAA in air traffic control at Cleveland Center in 1970, having graduated from the University of Cincinnati where he studied civil engineering. He has basically worked the same air space for thirty years, and was the most experienced controller at The Center on 9-11-01. He retired at the end of January 2003 with 32 years of service. Over his career, he worked 1-2 hijacks before, and they were both in the 1970s.

The representatives at the Center said that area 4 is probably the busiest air space in the world, and Lorain sector is probably the busiest sector within that area.

In the morning of 9-11-01, traffic was just started to back up in Lorain sector when Werth heard about the second hit to the World Trade Center. He was in the process of calling planes in his sector to locate American 77 at that time.

He had no idea that the other hijacked flights had gone out a couple of 100 miles and circled back. Three min before eh identified UA 93 as a hijack he heard about the second plane. Werth said his first indication that there was something wrong with UA 93 was when it went "NORDO," Which means no radio. Then the transponder disappeared. Within 3-4 seconds, he tried three times to turn the primary radar on UA 93 before he finally got the track. To verify his position, he asked other pilots in the sector to keep visual on him without getting too close. His next step was to keep all other planes out of

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the airspace. He never had to reroute traffic like he had to that day. People gathered around him to observe the events. A lot of this wasn't conveyed on the recording of the frequency the Commission staff heard.

**Hijack Training – ATC response**

In the case of a flight UA 93's hijacking, Werth said there was no protocol for controllers to follow. Normal protocol in the event of a hijack is to handling find out intentions of the hijacker. The controller is supposed to comply with the demands (if they need a vector or something along those lines). The controller's objective is to "hold on to the data-block (the flight information on the radar screen) in case the hijacker tries to talk to the controller."

When asked about NORAD, he said he was aware of it. He knew it was at Cheyenne Mountain and said that he thought it was the "the central command to safeguard all military planes." His experience before 9-11 led him to believe that the military, in the event of a hijack, would "put a tail on the hijack to intercept them." He also thought that the watch commander at the Center would have had direct access to NORAD.

When asked, "Did anyone notify the mil?" He said that he was told by Mark Barnik not to worry, that "it is taken care of." According to Werth, he found out later that they had trouble getting through to the military during the crisis.

Werth had never heard of anyone talk about the situation of a suicide hijack mission. It was not something they were prepared for in terms of training exercises. General refresher courses occurred once or twice a year but the hijack scenario employed never asked the controller to determine whether or not it was a hijack in progress by other means. "You get the hijack code... the blips... ask the guy what he needs. Vector or whatever," Werth replied.

He said loss of radio communication and transponder is a rare occurrence. Usually, it would mean a technical failure of some sort. Prior to 9-11-01, he would have then tried to contact the airplane on an emergency frequency. As he put it, "you can't do anything with the aircraft unless he talks to you."

What did you know about SCATANA?

SCATANA is a test run once a month less and less each year to figure out how long it would take controllers to get all aircraft in out of the airspace. He thought that it would be invoked in a case of national emergency. In his opinion, it was not a valid test of anything, and was something he thought would never be invoked. Werth recalled that in the 1970s, controllers trained for SCATANA pretty infrequently, and almost never as time passed.

Werth said that controllers frequently see planes deviated from normal flight path because of weather. Pilots at times pick courses contrary to what the controller may advise for the same reason. All controllers are sued to that.

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**On September 11, 2001:**

Werth started his shift at 8:45 a.m. There was normal traffic. He said it usually gets busy at about 9:00 a.m., especially in Lorain sector. At that time, someone came in from the cafeteria and said "they lost one in New York on the radar and it went in to World Trade Center." Werth said that was all the information he received at that time. Pilots queried him for more information because they were hearing bits and pieces of the story on their radios as it was breaking. He said he did not know how to respond appropriately to the pilots because he did not want to panic them. Werth said that it seemed to him that the air carriers had started forcing planes to land on their own. His Supervisor wanted to know if he had a frequency on American 77 or United 175 on frequency. There was some discussion that one had crashed around Louisville, Kentucky. Flight 175 disappeared over New York, and the controllers were asking all the pilots in the air if anyone had seen him.

He knew at least two planes were missing. Five minutes later he brought up Delta 1989 in Lorain sector. He was also told to keep an eye on him; that he was a suspected hijacking because he had taken off from Boston at approximately the same time as the other flight. United 93 looked normal when he checked on.

He had just aligned all of his eastbound planes for New York airspace when he got word they were not taking traffic. In his words, "I had to crisscross them again."

He heard the screaming in the cockpit come over the frequency, but he was not sure which of the 7-8 planes it was coming from. He looked at his "D side" (the controller that assists him on his right to confirm he heard what he thought he heard. He yelled, "I think we've got one," to the supervisor, Mark Barnik. They put the frequency on the speaker so that everyone heard it the second time. Eh described the sound as a "muffled struggle. They distinguished the words, "get out of here."

He called out to all the planes and UA 93 was the only plane that did not answer. Other pilots on the frequency confirmed they heard the screaming. UA 93 went into a quick descent and then came right back up. At that point, Werth said he knew it was UA 93 and not Delta 1989, and he told the Supervisor to "tell Washington." The UA 93 turned 10 degrees to the right (the SATORI presentation smoothed such minor variations out. For systems errors).

His first thought was of a potential target, which he thought could have been a nuclear plant 40 miles away. According to Werth, UA 93 "got east of here a couple of miles. Turned back east."

(He was pretty sure it was a suicide mission, and he treated it that way from the beginning because he had the advantage of knowing what had happened to the planes that hit the World Trade Centers.)

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UA 93 turned south and started climbing. Now Werth was concerned about a midair collision. He had no idea why the plane was over Cleveland at this point. Flights 757, 767, and the executive jet in the area were as fast (or faster) than UA 93 was. He went south for 8 or 10 miles, and then he turned east. At 41,000 feet, he dropped to 32,000. Werth had to turn flights around that he had asked to tail UA 93 from behind.

Werth said there were two statements made about a bomb. Mention of a bomb on board meant it was increasingly important to keep other planes away from him. For instance, he had no idea what the shock or range of nuclear explosion at that altitude would do. Word of a bomb on board did not change the way they handled the situation. His supervisor and the managers were all well aware of the situation by that point.

9:27a.m. - normal transmission from UA 93  
9:28 a.m. - hear the first scream

At this point, Werth was waiting for a plane to turn its transponder off. He knew that was the only way the plane was going to get to its target.

9:29 – 9:30 a.m. – Werth identified UA 93 as the source of the screaming (he had descended, and then back up again).

From 9:20-9:30 a.m., he received many calls from pilots. Werth didn't know what standard procedure was; as a controller, he is trying not to panic people. He told them to call their company. He never said "hijack" on frequency. That's why he didn't want to say "trip" because that is a well-known code.

He also did not know if it was appropriate to ask another pilot to follow him. The executive jet would have to deviate from the course, heat seek, and get down low. He thought the best thing to do was not loose the track and let the military take over. "That was there job." He thought UA93 was far from a crash point and there was time for fighters for from Langley (or something) to intercept him.

Contingency plans were not provided. The multiple hijacking scenario was never considered, either. There was no training to prepare controllers for this event.

The 90 degree turn was made very quickly. Werth thought it probably threw people around in the back of the plane. At first he was going east, then southeast, and finally northeast. That's when Werth realized he may be heading back New York. Right after that thought, he turned south-southeast, making Werth think of Washington as a potential target, because he had already heard about the attack on the Pentagon. EH remembers asking Barnik, "Where is the President? Where's Air Force One?" Werth thought that if the hijackers knew enough to turn the transponder off, he knew enough to get down to a lower altitude where stationary objects would make it harder to track on primary radar. He thought the descent done to purposefully evade radar detection. With the mountains in western Pennsylvania, he couldn't get too low.

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The primary track showed up well. There were no breaks in the track. Werth said the bigger and higher the plane, the easier it is to track. He thought UA93 was at 33,000 feet when the transponder went off.

Delta wanted to ground flight 1989 at Cleveland airport. Kim Wernica reported that Washington Command Center was calling it a confirmed hijack and bomb threat. 1989 traveled through Bluffton and Sandusky sectors, north of Cleveland, before coming down. Werth said 1989 was not acting suspicious.

In terms of the military response that day, all he knew was that the military was notified of the situation. He did not know if planes were scrambled out of Selfridge or Toledo.

Werth handed UA 93 off to Imperial sector, who owned down to 24,000 feet. It was important that every sector below Imperial knew he was leaving Lorain/ Cleveland and losing altitude.

Werth thought that UA93 was traveling at 545 miles per hour when he hit the ground. He is not really sure how long it would have taken him to get to DC at that rate. Linda Justice, the controller in Imperial, changed the flight ticket to reflect destination of DCA because she knew it would be easier to track the primary when the computer has a flight plan to work with.

Flight American 77 never showed a primary track, possibly because it was traveling in the opposite direction over a mountainous region where the "mosaic" of radar returns can be inaccurate.

It was his instinct to have the supervisors/managers contact the military, but he did not know at the time whether or not the Center had a direct line to NORAD. No one knew how bad communications with the military were at the time. The assumption was that the military was coming to intercept. It seemed as though an hour had passed since the first plane had gone in to the World Trade Center. Werth thought that should have been enough time for the military to effectively respond.

By the time he heard the order to ground all flights in the national air space, he had already effectively cleared Lorain Sector. He was working the executive jet at the time.

#### **Follow-up**

The FBI debriefed him 17 weeks later, and "grabbed some tapes and left." This was after Werth repeatedly called to Ashcroft's office. Immediately after the attacks, the FBI agents came in on the night shift and "talked to the wrong people." He was pretty amazed by that. Executive jet pilot told him after the fact that the FBI agents were waiting for him at Columbus airport when he landed.

Werth's own opinion is that the principal hijacker on flight UA93 had to have been sitting in the jump seat. He has heard reports that the hijackers were in possession of

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pilot identification cards that may have helped them gain access to the cockpit. If a hijacker was in the jump seat, it is the "easiest place in the world to cut a throat." What bothered Werth the most about the events of the hijacking was that there was no warning; no more indication of struggle on the flight, or on the other flights.

FAA protocols have not changed in response to 9-11. Werth said that one can't possibly imagine the things that go through your mind when faced with an unconceivable situation like that. As he put it, "you don't know what's moral, legal, or ethical to do in the situation."

Werth thought that someone by the name of Knowles, who was supposedly in charge of Washington Command Center that day, "didn't know one flight from the other. He said they lost 93 that day. He was confusing it with 77."