

**MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD**

Event: North Eastern Air Defense Sector (NEADS) field site visit

Type of event: Interview with Lt. Col. Dawne Deskins

Date: Thursday, October 30, 2003

Special Access Issues: Clearance check

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Team Number: 8

Location: Commander's Conference Room, Building 102

Participants - Non-Commission: Lt. Col. Dawne Deskins, and Captain Daniel L. Warnock

Participants - Commission: John Azzarello, Miles Kara, Geoffrey Brown

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Note: Please refer to the recorded interview for further details.

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**Background:**

Lt. Col. Dawn Deskins began her career with the military through ROTC at Cornell in 1984. She held the positions of Weapons Controller, Senior Director, and Executive Officer at Northwest Air Defense Sector (which consolidated and became WADS). She became an instructor at Tindel Air Force Base (Tindel AFB) in 1988, and worked in a special program for setting up the Schoolhouse for Weapons Directors. She then tested the equipment at the Schoolhouse in Tindel. She left the Air Force in 1995, and became part of the Air National Guard in February of 1995. At NEADS she became a Senior Director, Mission Crew Commander (MCC), and Weapons Director, then went to the Exercises Section (CVX) and came back to operations to be a Flight Commander in 1997. She was a flight commander for two years and then became the ADOC (Assistant DOC) for the SOCC. She became an MCC instructor and evaluator. She became the chief of CVX in late September 2001.

According to Deskins, in 1985 at the Northwest Air Defense Sector there were more assets available than there were at NEADS on 9/11. She continued and explained that there was "a good deal more flying going on", but it was solely to account for the Cold War air defense threat.

Deskins noted that the primary mission of NORAD has always been to look out over the oceans and identify targets. NORAD assets may be called to assist with a drug interdiction through law enforcement, but the identification mission is primary. This mission had evolved after the Cold War to account for drug-interdiction and terrorist threats, and that staffing levels at centers like NEADS shrank. In 1985 the staffing was much more robust. After 9/11 NEADS activated drill staff Guardsmen on 2 year Noble

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Eagle orders. They have used some of their request through the Air Expeditionary Force cycle to fill some Battle Staff and security positions.

She left the NWADS sector in 1988 "after the Wall went down"; so she "didn't actively think about" how the end of the Cold War changed staffing.

She was at NEADS when the available fighter assets shrunk to just Langley and Otis. Atlantic City was not-decommissioned, but it lost its air alert role. There are points in which bases may have "flex site" assets – meaning the connectivity to be on alert is there, but assets are not on alert.

Previous to 9/11, the alert bases were based on the Air Defense mission of looking out over the water. Which asset is scrambled depends on the proximity to where the threat is incoming.

**Command structure:**

Deskins gave Commission staff an overview of the NEADS operational layout as follows: one side of the floor is involved with ID, another with controlling fighters, another with surveillance – and these three funnel information to the Battle Cab.

Deskins explained to Commission staff that the order of command from the bottom up would proceed as follows: Weapons Director Technician gives information to the Weapons Director. The Weapons Director talks to the MCC. The MCC speaks with the Fighter Officer. The Fighter Officer speaks with the Director of Operations (DO). She is not directly familiar with whom the DO and the Battle Commander report to at CONR and NORAD.

On September 11, 2001 (9/11) Deskins was the ACAWO (Aircraft Control and Warning Officer). That position would not normally have been filled since Battle Staff then was only formed in the case of an air defense event or exercise. The ACAWO is normally responsible for coordination with the AWACS. AWACS are responsible for the air picture within NEADS. ACAWO also supports the Fighter Officer with tankers. As a flight officer she was responsible for the flight that was on duty at any given shift.

**Exercises prior to 9/11:**

Deskins noted that NEADS had a hijack checklist and a variety of exercises depending on higher authority involvement and direction prior to 9/11. Some of those exercises involved NORAD coordination. She does not recall ever personally designing an exercise in which a decision would be made to shoot down the hijacked aircraft. A typical design would include course deviation in which the hijacker forces the pilot to fly to a designated landing point. They would not do these hijacks exercises real world. They had a cell that would play the FAA in the exercise. Deskins noted that there really were not the assets to do a large scale real world exercise to practice hijack response. The scenarios for the exercises are created by exercise designers in the exercise shop. Sgt.

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Mark Stanford and Sgt. Mike Quigley, both retired, designed the exercises when she was the head of the shop. NEADS' hijack shop would not design exercises for other sectors.

Exercises that are designed on the NORAD level are created at planning conferences. NORAD planning exercises are mostly held at Peterson, or at CONR at Tindle. There is intelligence representation at the conferences, but the sector shops are more concerned with the individual exercise of the sector floor and Battle Cab. She does not personally recall the design of a hijack with multiple hijacks or terrorist take over.

Any formal exercise has an after action report. Those are only retained for a period. But if there is a named exercise then there is an after action report. NEADS would share information if the exercise is at the CONR level. The crews might talk to another sector if it is felt that a specific area exposed in the exercise needed improvement.

She recalled an exercise in which an aircraft was used to release chemicals, but not a hijacked plane. She does not remember participating in an exercise in which a hijacked aircraft crashed into infrastructure. She noted that there are exercised scenarios in which an aircraft is hijacked in France. In this exercise there is a long "lead in" time that involves receiving intelligence and having the crews practice using their hijack checklist. If it is a "straight" hijack scenario then it does not involve identification because the aircraft is already identified as hijacked. She states that she does not have a firm recollection of the details of these exercises.

Deskens states that since the mission prior to 9/11 was air defense NEADS trackers were actively looking to initiate "symbology" on unknown tracks. But prior to 9/11 this was not applied over the US. They did exercise correlating the identification of targets by radar with the identification of aircraft by visual contact by fighters; then the fighters would escort the planes in. Tracks originating in the United States were "Friendly by Origin".

Regarding exercises that specifically practiced for responding to acts of terrorism, Deskens noted that when she came back to the air defense field in 1995 protecting against terrorism had become part of the mission. She remembered the terrorist mission as "a new piece of the puzzle" – it was exercised, but was just a part. From the intelligence perspective because of world events, there were times when terrorism became a greater focus; but Deskens does not remember a point when terrorism became a larger part of the mission than the air defense mission. At this point in the interview Deskens noted to Commission staff that she does believe NEADS exercised scenarios in which a terrorist would take a "small airplane that would run into something", or was full of chemicals, or would be a ground event. These scenarios would be developed through the intelligence cell. They would not do an event in which intelligence did not connect it to another event. Deskens does not remember with the general aircraft scenarios where the aircrafts would originate from.

**9/11 – American Airlines 11 (AA 11) timeframe:**

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On the morning of 9/11, Deskins came to work at the Battle Cab for the ACAWO position in the ongoing Vigilant Guardian exercise. She was going through her checklists and briefings that were involved in planning for the exercise. She is not familiar with what the exercise was supposed to entail. She remembers that "things were very slow that morning on the simulated" side for the exercise.

Lt. Col. Cleveland was the chief of CVX on 9/11, and was present on the Operations Floor. Deskins had held this same position earlier in her career.

Deskins was contacted by then Sgt. Jeremy Powell (now Lt. Jeremy Powell), since she was an available MCC. She went to the Operations Floor, and Powell informed her that a Boston Air Route Control Center (ZBW) controller had reported a hijack. She does not think there was an MCC sitting in position, so that may have been why she was called down.

She questioned Powell if it was a real world event or an exercise. He clearly stated that it was real world. She looked at the communications panel on the scope and it was indicating the other end of the phone conversation was from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The controller identified himself as from ZBW. She recalled the controller informed her that it was a hijacked aircraft headed towards the New York metropolitan area. The ZBW controller on the phone requested a fighter asset to assist the hijacked aircraft. Deskins asked the ZBW controller for a latitude and longitude point for the hijacked aircraft, since she did not see a radar point.

Deskins recalled that the FAA air traffic controller (ATC) indicated that he would control the fighters once scrambled since NEADS had indicated that they did not have radar contact with the target. Deskins could not see anything on her scope because the aircraft had turned its squawk off and there was nothing in the location the FAA gave her. That location is now covered by radar, but on 9/11 there were not as many radar sites feeding into the sector. According to Deskins, the aircraft was both inland and low, and the NEADS radar did not pick it up at the location the FAA controller gave her.

Deskins asked the FAA ATC for a Mode 3 code. It would have been very easy for her to type in a Mode 3 code to instruct the computer to find the target. That is why she was looking for a location. If the information was even five minutes old she would not have been able to spot it. They had radar coverage of that area, but she does not know what the limitations of the radar's line of site was.

Deskins noted that the information she received from her scope operators and from the FAA ATC was passed to NEADS' surveillance section. While she was on the phone the entire crew came onto the Operations Floor, and Major Fox arrived very quickly. She and the FAA ATC decided to leave the line open. She briefed both Nasypany and Fox. She then went to the Battle Cab to brief Colonel Marr.

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Major Fox took over the Weapons section, and Major Nasypany took over the MCC position once they were both briefed on the situation by Deskins. Normally she would have briefed them together, but she does not recall if that is what she did on 9/11. Deskins noted that once the appropriate personnel was briefed, her role was to provide support for the Battle Cab Staff. She worked with Marr to assess which military assets were available to support NEADS' emerging priorities. Deskins did not know of the Trade Center impact at this point.

After she briefed Colonel Marr she went from the NEADS main floor to call Major Don Airies, the public affairs officer at CONR (Continental United States Aerospace Defense Command Region). She recalls telling him that Huntress *thought* it was a hijacked airplane from ZBW. She noted to Commission staff that she thought it was a single event. After speaking with Major Airies, she went back to the Battle Cab. She knows she was in the Battle Cab when the plane hit the Pentagon.

**Phantom AA 11:**

Deskins recalls a FAA "center" calling to say that the aircraft that hit the WTC was not AA 11; but she was never given a report that confirmed AA 11 had hit the WTC. She was still looking on the scope at the ACOWO position for the missing aircraft. She was even still looking for AA 11 after UAL 175 hit the WTC. She extrapolated a possible location based on the previous known heading and speed, and searched those sections of airspace south of New York City. Deskins distinctly recalled that the FAA told the Huntress ID section that AA 11 was still airborne.

**9/11 – United Airlines Flight 175 (UAL 175) timeframe:**

Deskins noted that she does not recall having much situational awareness regarding UAL 175 prior to hearing that a second airplane had hit the World Trade Center (WTC). After she received this information, she began monitoring the MCC position and beyond from a position referred to as "echo".

**9/11 – American Airlines Flight 77 (AA 77) timeframe:**

Deskins noted to Commission staff that she was solely looking for an unidentified aircraft track coming in from the north and did not look for anything coming in west of Washington, DC.

Deskins remembers seeing AA 77 enter the radar loop. It was very brief and not within a time that she feels she would have taken a course of action. Shortly after she spotted it the aircraft hit the Pentagon.

In the Battle Cab, following the Pentagon hit, Deskins can recall the DEFCON "going up".

**Scrambles:**

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Colonel Marr's decision was to support the FAA's request for fighters. She does not recall when Otis was put on Battle Stations, or when the Scramble order was given. She noted that this direction would take place on the operations floor. According to Deskins, the MCC is the lowest level rank that has the authority to give a scramble order, but since Colonel Marr was in the Battle Cab it was his role. Since the decision involved a civilian aircraft, he had to be the one who made the decision. Deskins does not remember if the order came straight from him or was channeled through her.

Later in the interview, Deskins informed Commission staff that she was in the Battle Cab when Colonel Marr asked to scramble the Langley fighters, but she had not heard yet anything about a second hijack; but Deskins also told Commission staff that before the Pentagon was impacted she had limited knowledge of the Otis AFB and the Langley AFB fighter scrambles.

She noted that she assumed the target for the scrambled aircraft would be AA 11, which she presumed was coming towards DC from the North. [It is unclear to Commission staff if Deskins believed this was the target for the Langley AFB F-16 flight or the Otis AFB F-15 flight.]

Further in regard to the fighter scrambles and their role on 9/11, Deskins stated that she does not remember the "Weapons Free Zone" in relation to Washington, D.C. She associates that term with the Army. She was not in the chain of command through which the fighters received their Rules of Engagement, and does not remember that information.

**Post 9/11:**

After the attacks on 9/11 the NEADS crews were on six days a week at twelve hour shifts, then three days off. At the end of this they would switch from the day shift to the night shift for the next rotation. It was during this period that they also were trained on the new equipment. They activated their drill status Guardsman and received additional staff through the AEF (Air Expeditionary Force).

**Airspace caps:**

Deskins noted that she, and others, including Col Sandersen, were asked by Marr to find any available fighter bases that could provide coverage. The first place she called was Springfield, Ohio AFB on a STU line.

**Record of events:**

Deskins explained to Commission staff that she wrote her notes on a plexiglass writing board that was kept at the station. This board was not preserved.

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Deskins knows that NEADS unsuccessfully attempted to transcribe the 9/11 tapes internally. She remembers a McGuire Air Force Base staffer made the transcripts, but does not remember who supervised him. She does not believe she was recorded on the tapes for a significant time period.

Deskins does not recall an attempt to use folders to capture lessons learned post 9/11. Post 9/11 they set up a log to maintain recorders of what is going on at the ACAWO desk.

On 9/11 Deskins participated with Sandersen in keeping a log on which bases they contacted to search for deployable air assets. They did not save this log since their intention was not historical.

**Review of transcript:**

Commission staff showed Deskins radar information and a transcript provided to Commission staff by NEADS and the Department of Defense (DoD). Part of the document indicated that the FAA ATC she noted to Commission staff that she spoke with was Joe Cooper from ZBW. The other section was extrapolated radar information.

Regarding the radar information, Deskins noted that there is some capability from the surveillance section to map where the radar covers, but there is no capacity to narrow the radar focus. Deskins was not aware of any evaluation of the radar capability to find AA 11.

**Media:**

Deskins noted to Commission staff that the first full media event that NEADS participated in was in the Rome local paper that was sent out through Associated Press. She further noted that NORAD sends out public affairs guidance through the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Force public affairs office. Colonel Blaney dictated what could and could not be discussed by NEADS personnel with the media.

**Observations:**

Deskins recalls that there was a lot of traffic on screen that morning; when the controller told her an approximate location, she used the radar screen to "zoom-in" for a target. She did not see the aircraft in the section indicated.

Deskins noted that either the Surveillance section or the Senior Director ("someone") took the latitude and longitude information provided by the FAA and marked that point with a stationary "Z" tag on their radar screen – this was after Deskins looked on the radar for the target.

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Deskins noted that she would have had a high probability of seeing American Airlines 11 (AA 11) at Flight Level 290; the minimum altitude level that the radar can pick up a target at becomes higher and higher the further from the radar the target is.

Deskins does not recall the reported total number of possible hijacked aircraft. Once the Pentagon was hit, she does recall a discussion saying there may have been five hijacked aircraft. Deskins' personal response to the FAA information that there might have been more airplanes in the way was to discern what other potential target might hit.

Deskins noted that the primary FAA representatives at NEADS are Airies, the airspace manager (a civil servant) and Steve Culbertson, an employee of the FAA.

Deskins notes that ZBW did "an excellent job" on 9/11; and that ZBW looked ahead to what might have happened. Deskins notes that in discussion with Sgt. Dooley and Sgt. Rountree ZDC has been explained as a source of some confusion on 9/11. Apparently ZDC was in a shift change.

**Recommendations:**

Deskins was frustrated on 9/11 with the Q93 radar display, and is pleased that they have received new equipment. She thinks NEADS is "getting there". NEADS needs more staffing, and will get the "Battle Control System Fixed" by February 2004. This will put all the command and control systems on a common operating picture by sector.

Deskins is worried over having the manpower to effectively use the equipment and monitor the new radar feeds NEADS has received. She thinks that the line of communication with the FAA is efficient, especially because of the DENS line. She explains to commission staff that the FAA does not have all the radar requirements of the military, but the military "piggy backs" off the FAA radar. The radar is not designed for the necessary military Mode 2 and Mode 4. Deskins noted that the DEN line is one of the most effective changes since 9/11. She notes that NEADS hears of events in air very quickly.

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