

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

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Event: Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Boston Center Interview with Terry Biggio, Deputy of Facility, Boston Center.

Type of event: Recorded Interview

Date: Monday, September 22, 2003

Special Access Issues: None

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Team Number: 8

Location: FAA Boston Center, Nashua, New Hampshire

Participants - Non-Commission: Chris Perito, FAA General Consul

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

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NOTE: Please refer to the recorded interview for a complete account.  
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**Background**

On 9/11 Biggio was Operations Manager Areas A and D for one and half years with duties as OMIC (Operations Manager in Charge) in conjunction with the Traffic Management Unit (TMU). Biggio reported to Glen Michaels, assistant deputy for Boston Center who was away on 9/11, and has since retired, and Heather Ackerman, an administrative manager who was away at a joint managers meeting on 9/11. Biggio was the manager overall responsible for Boston Center on 9/11. Prior to being OMIC, Biggio worked with Boston Center as a Quality Assurance officer, an Air Traffic Control (ATC) teacher, an ATC supervisor, an Operations manager, a support manager, and as acting deputy.

**Events of 9-11**

On 9/11, Daniel Bueno paged Biggio, who came to the TMU and was briefed by Jon Schippani and Bueno. They showed Biggio AA11 on the 46R radar display, which was being worked by Peter Zalewski at the time. Bob Jones, Quality Assurance, was asked to review the tape recording for AA11 for possible unusual communications. Jones told Biggio immediately of the threatening communication, and that the speaker clearly had a middle eastern accent, and had said something like "we have some planes" and "don't do anything stupid". Biggio immediately relayed that information to the Regional Operations Command (ROC).

According to Biggio, prior to 9/11, an airplane that had gone NORDO (no radio communication) was a frequent occurrence. An airplane that lost transponder was relatively infrequent, but not unheard of. An airplane that had seriously deviated from its course was indicative of a serious mechanical problem. Biggio and never experienced

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such a serious deviation before as was the case with American Air 11. The combination of the three factors—NORDO, no transponder, course deviation--when applied to AA11, were enough for Biggio to deem it necessary to contact ROC. But, without the threatening communication from the cockpit, he doubts AA11 would have been recognized or labeled a hijack.

Specifically, Air Traffic Controllers are taught that a hijack would include a covert sign from the cockpit, either use of the transponder code 7500, which flashes "HIJACK" on the data block for the flight on the TMU (traffic monitoring unit), or the pilot would have used covert language (the word "trip" to describe the airplane's course) to signal the ATC. In simulated hijack exercises the pilot would be in contact with the ATC, and they would be able to verbally confirm "7500" for a hijack, "7600" for a malfunctioning transponder, and "7700" for an emergency.

Biggio noted that though he did not call the Washington Operations Center (WOC) directly to inform FAA of the hijacking, he was placed in a conference call through the ROC that was being actively monitored, as far as he knows, by the WOC.

Biggio noted that though there was no drilled simulated scenario, or previous real-life scenario that mirrored the events of 9/11, Boston Center was able to respond effectively through the benefit of numerous air traffic threats during the summer storm season and the combined extensive experience of the ATC staff. [Staff Note: We found no young controllers involved on that day. The Radar Associate positions were manned by experience personnel sitting in to maintain their qualifications.]

Biggio noted that part of Boston Center's success can be attributed to their authority over air traffic. Biggio was able to stop air traffic through the Sparta/Carmel corridor and was able to ground stop Logan Airport directly.

Biggio noted three main points about the collective knowledge brought to bear on 9/11 by Boston Center 1) Coordination and communication were key since 9/11's situation itself had not been planned for, but the instinct and capability to deal with crisis scenarios had been firmly developed; 2) quality personnel enabled solid communication in Boston Center, but Biggio had serious concerns after the impact at the Pentagon that his Center's urgency and information was not being translated to FAA operations nationally; and 3) the responsiveness of Boston Center allowed for the Sparta/Carmel corridor and all west bound traffic to be shut down, which saved valuable airspace for the coordination of the complete clearing of the skies to commercial air traffic.

#### **Regarding Boston Center, FAA and the Military**

Pre-9/11 protocol for communicating a hijack threat to the military had been practiced but as far as Biggio knew they had never practiced intercept procedures. In such exercises all communication was handled through the ROC.

Once the first WTC collision was reported, Biggio clearly believed it to be AA11, and communicated that belief on the open line with ROC. It is for this reason that Biggio was surprised to hear that controllers for the New York region were still looking for AA11 after impact. [Staff Note: Biggio's surprise was in response to a question as to what he knew about the post-impact search for American Air 11.]

Biggio noted that there is tension with the military at times over the use of airspace,

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specifically regarding use of the Whiskey 105 and 106 military controlled airspace off the coast, but that this tension is normally negligible.

**Regarding crisis management preparation and response post-9/11**

ATC procedure has shifted from a service focus to a homeland security focus, and that some of this change in concentration is due to the critical incident stress debriefing for the Air Traffic Controllers, post-9/11. Biggio believes both sides, FAA and military, need education on each-others procedures and capabilities. The Dynamic Simulation exercises required for ATCs pre-9/11 did not stress combined FAA/military scenarios, and Biggio is concerned his ATCs would not have been successful in coordinating an intercept with United Airlines 175.

He is extremely concerned with the air vulnerability of the nation's nuclear power plants. Since 9/11 he has experienced a scenario in which a fighter scramble had not reached a nuclear plant cap in time to escort an aircraft out. This incident had no adverse result, but served as an example to Biggio of the need for quicker communication and response time, despite changes like the 24 hour DEN (Defense Event Network), increased attention to NORAC communication, and 360 degree "confidence turns" (an ATC supervisor can request a pilot perform a complete 360 degree circle if there is cause for suspicion of the aircraft). Permanent airspace caps over these high risk sites may be necessary.

**Final Thoughts (in response to questions about recommendations)**

Communication and information is key. Given a urgent situation, it is vitally necessary to be confident that Boston Center knows it is speaking with the right person to have the correct information, or request for information, immediately addressed. Biggio believes that ATC supervisors now will recognize the unusual signs in their airspace that will indicate a possible terrorist event using aircraft, and that those supervisors will communicate immediately with TMU and Boston Center management. Biggio is extremely concerned though that this process, as well as it may work within Boston Center, will not translate into the rapid and effective national response needed to deal with a crisis akin to the 9/11 attacks.