

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

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Event: Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) New York Air Route Center

Type of event: Interview with Charles Alfaro

Date: Tuesday, September 30, 2003

Special Access Issues: None

Prepared by: Geoffrey Brown and Miles Kara

Team Number: 8

Location: FAA New York Air Route Center, Rokonkomo, New York

Participants - Non-Commission: Charles Alfaro and Alfred R. Johnson, Jr., FAA Deputy
Regional Counsel, Eastern Region

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

Background:

Alfaro started in January of 1977 as an Assistant Controller. He worked in that position until 1981 when he was dismissed for three years. At the end of that period he was retrained on the sectors he had been qualified for, and became an Operational Supervisor for the area in October of 2000. He worked in Area C of ZNY for his entire career, until a year and a half ago when he switched to Area F, Oceanic. [Staff Note: Alfaro is one of only a few of the Controllers fired by President Reagan who was reinstated and continued a career in the FAA.]

His responsibilities as an Operations Supervisor are to run the shifts and manage the area Air Traffic Controllers (ATC). He does not man a radar scope, but is required to sit one 8-hr shift at a scope per month to maintain currency. In a typical day his duties include oceanic planning, sector splits, shift start, and the monitoring of air space restriction enforcement in his area. He reports to the Operations Manager in Charge (OMIC).

Events of 9-11:

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Alfaro's shift started at 0630. The Operations Supervisor in Charge (OSIC) position was initially assigned to Andy Epstein. At roughly 0730 Epstein had paperwork to do, and Alfaro was assigned as OSIC. Bruce Barrett was the OMIC on 9-11.

AA 11:

Around 0830 a call came in from the Boston Center supervisor of Rockdale sector that passed information on a primary target. The information Alfaro was given for the primary target Boston Center was tracking was a best known position of 20 miles southwest of Albany, and a reported last altitude of Flight Level (FL) 290 with

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instructions to climb to FL 350. ZNY was told the aircraft was not communicating with the controller. Alfaro noted to Commission staff that the first phone call from Boston was not recorded and he was not informed of any "threatening" communications from the cockpit.

Alfaro informed Barrett, the OMIC, about the call from Boston Center and the information on the primary target. He did not know if Barrett had already been informed from another source. Alfaro commented that usually in a circumstance involving an aircraft that is not communicating with the controllers a call is made from the ATC Center to AirInc. AirInc is a service provided to major airline carriers that has its own dedicated communications link with an aircraft, and serves the primary purpose of providing a backup method of communicating with an aircraft. After Alfaro informed the OMIC, Tim Stephany, the Sector R34 controller, told Alfaro of a deviation on the primary target that ZBW had identified as AA 11. Alfaro called Boston Rockdale from the R49 radar desk, which is an adjacent position to R34.

Alfaro noted to Commission staff that the area was looking for AA 11 at altitudes below 29K feet. Sector 42 controls aircraft at 24K ft. and above, Sector 35 controls those at 23K ft. and below. To compensate for the uncertainty of AA 11's altitude, the controllers for these areas were told to keep all their air traffic five miles away from the primary target identified as AA 11. As long as a controller can see a primary target a controller can "block" (protect airspace) from the ground up. Alfaro commented that this was a standard procedure in the case of primary only aircraft in question.

Alfaro related to Commission staff that a second phone call from Boston Center confirmed that the primary target being tracked was in fact AA 11, and told ZNY that Boston Center was "treating him like a hijack". Alfaro then went to see Bruce Barrett for the second time. He recalled it could have been five or so minutes between the two phone calls. He told Barrett AA 11 was headed southbound. Barrett said he was aware and was already talking to the American Airlines dispatch office.

Pre 9-11 concerning anomalies:

Alfaro explained to Commission staff that aircraft routinely are NORDO (no communications with controllers), and that there are various methods to get in touch with the aircraft. Further, Alfaro explained that it was not unusual for an aircraft to be out of communications for five or six minutes before a controller regained contact. However, controllers would inform supervisors immediately about the situation. Alfaro's estimates and comments were based on 23 years experience.

Alfaro commented that a lost transponder incident averaged in frequency at about once a month. He considered it routine to lose a transponder and noted that it was not something to be alarmed about. The protocol was for a controller to ask the pilot to recycle the transponder. According to Alfaro, when the pilot recycled the transponder, in most circumstance the transponder signal would be restored.

The combination of a NORDO condition and a lost transponder was infrequent; according to Alfaro this occurred more than once a year but was still extremely infrequent. The combination of NORDO, a lost transponder and a serious course deviation was very rare.

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Further on AA 11:

When Alfaro was told Boston Center was considering AA 11 a hijack he had already assumed AA 11 was an ongoing hijack and told the OMIC right away. He still believed it was a possibility that AA 11 was experiencing a serious mechanical malfunction, and had still heard nothing of the threatening communications heard from the cockpit. If it was a cockpit emergency his thought was the plane would head for either Kennedy or Newark since both airports had extended runways.

According to Alfaro, the OMIC at ZNY did not give any direct order to the controllers to treat AA 11 as a hijack. Tom Kelly from Sector 35 went back to Barrett for information. Barrett did not inform Alfaro of the possibility of threatening communications. However, once Barrett did inform him Alfaro was sure of the gravity of the situation. He went back to the area and told Sector 35 that it was not an emergency landing; that it was a hijack.

He does not know of any efforts made in Area C to verify altitude since they did not need that information to keep other aircraft away. He assumed that the identification of the primary was positive, and his area did not doubt Boston.

He watched AA 11 head towards Kennedy Airport until it disappeared from the scope. He thought that it was malfunctioning radar when the target did not come back on screen. There was no information from any other source that AA 11 struck the WTC, and Alfaro thought AA 11 might have landed at Kennedy.

Alfaro changed that opinion when ZNY received a phone call asking if they had lost an airplane. Carl Schmalz, a controller who was at home at the time, called the center and informed them of the crash at the World Trade Center. Schmalz said he thought it was a small aircraft. Alfaro was hoping that it was not AA 11, but gradually changed that position to acknowledge it was probably AA 11.

Alfaro then went to the TMU desk and spoke with LeCates, Thumser and McCormick. He referred to AA 11 as probably hitting the WTC and was told "we already know". He went back to his area thinking that AA11 had impacted the WTC.

He was not involved with the UAL 175 incident and noted to Commission staff that he could only comment on AA 11. He saw the second impact on CNN and knew it was a commercial airplane when the impact was replayed, but did not know what plane struck the tower.

Training:

Alfaro commented that his hijack procedure prior to the events of 9/11 was to verify the hijack with the pilot via the hijack code, "7500", and to notify his supervisor that a hijack was in progress. The standard procedure was not to make inquiries with the pilot in the cockpit to avoid escalating events. Any request for military assistance would be handled at the OMIC level.

The training he received was computer refresher training and dynamic simulation exercises. He does not recall any multiple hijacking exercises. Further, Alfaro noted that all his training dealt with single-event scenarios.

Other Information:

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Alfaro recalled media reports of an aircraft striking the WTC but did not hear any reports that 1) it was AA 11; or 2) air traffic controllers continued to look for AA 11. Alfaro expressed his feeling regarding the identity of the airplane involved in the WTC crash did point towards AA11, but on 9/11 he was never sure.

The second time Alfaro went to Sector 35 he advised the controller to call NY Tracon. Alfaro noted to Commission staff that no controller indicated that AA 11 was slowing down or descending. The controllers were only tracking a primary target and ZNY could not tell the airspeed of the plane. Alfaro commented that they assumed the airspeed was "fast".

Alfaro assumed that any contact with the ATCSCC at Herndon would have been by the OMIC, Bruce Barrett. Alfaro did not know what role the Washington Operations Center in the events of the day.

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