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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

(R)

Event: Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) New York TRACON (N90)

Type of event: Interview with Robert Birch

Date: Tuesday, December 16, 2003

Special Access Issues: ID Check

Prepared by: Geoffrey Brown

Team Number: 8

Location: N90, 1515 Stewart Ave., Westbury, NY 11590

Participants - Non-Commission: Mary M. McCarthy (Office of Regional Counsel,
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Participants - Commission: Team 8: John Azzarello, Geoffrey Brown

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

Prior to recording:

Birch noted his disappointment that Commission staff was the first group to question him about the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11), and that this interview occurred over two years from the day of the attacks.

Birch noted also that most hijacks in the past were thought to be taken to a place of safety for the hijackers, not as a weapon against infrastructure.

Background:

Birch started with the FAA on June 12, 1977. He was assigned to Newark Tower and was certified there as an FPL (full performance level) controller. He transferred to N90 in 1980. [REDACTED] returning to N90 in 1984. He was certified for Newark area, and in the mid eighties transferred to traffic management unit (TMU). He transferred to LaGuardia area, became a first line supervisor, and then at the TMU became a supervisor. He has been an Operations Manager for roughly three years.

9/11:

Birch was the Operations Manager in Charge (OMIC) on 9/11. Mike Lofaso was one of the TMU supervisors, as well as Karl Jiricek. Jeffrey Clarke, the acting Air Traffic Manager currently, was Birch's supervisor on 9/11.

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American Airlines Flight 11 (AA 11):

Birch had a portable phone on him, and his deputy chief, Jeffrey Clarke called him and relayed the information that N90 had received a call from Boston Center informing him that AA 11 was hijacked. The information given was that it was primary only and traveling down the Hudson River north of the metropolitan area.

Birch noted that they were observing the target, and they watched the primary target identified with AA 11 disappear along the Hudson River. N90 staff was watching television in the break room, and Birch noted that these staff members informed the Watch Desk that the World Trade Center (WTC) had been hit by a light aircraft. Birch noted that they did not associate the WTC impact with the loss of the primary on AA 11. This was since lighter aircraft pilots are less experienced than an airliner pilot, and he personally was not thinking this was a purposeful action.

United Airlines Flight 175 (UAL 175):

Birch noted that the Watch Desk received information on UAL 175 from New York Center (ZNY). Birch does not have any knowledge about the changing beacon code of UAL 175. They were monitoring an assigned data block for the flight. Newark Tower called and informed them that there was a second aircraft into the WTC.

Birch immediately told Newark Tower to stop all air traffic. Ron Regan went around the operations floor and told all the supervisors and controllers to stop all air traffic in their sectors.

Birch noted that he believes there was a call from ZNY, possibly by Mike McCormack, informing him that there might have been more ongoing events. Birch noted that he does not believe this call came until after they had started halting their air traffic.

Aftermath:

Birch orchestrated a complete stop to the air traffic that was controlled by N90 immediately after the first two attacks on 9/11. Birch participated in numerous telephone conferences while doing so. He spoke with his counterpart at Herndon Command, but does not know who that would have been. Birch noted that he most likely spoke with someone at the FAA Eastern Regional Office as well.

Birch noted that there was one call that was with the Local Eastern Region and another conference call that was at the national level. Both these were established at some point after UAL 175 struck the WTC. Birch recalls that one of these conference calls had military participation. Birch believed that the national level telecom and the regional level telecom were held on recorded lines. Birch also noted that these telecoms were open listening lines. N90 monitored the national telecom line for several days at least, according to Birch.

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Birch had no knowledge of AA 11 being airborne after 8:46 AM, or of there being two aircraft that hit the north tower, or of there being a Sikorski helicopter involved in the events of the day.

Commission staff reviewed a transcript provided by the FAA to the Commission labeled Position 14, Parts 1-4, page 73 with Birch.

Birch noted to Commission staff that Tommy White, at that time a Traffic Management Unit supervisor, went "downstairs" right away to review an instant radar replay. This replay is normally used to investigate possible operational error.

AA 77 and UAL 93:

Birch did not recall if he heard of flights AA 77 or UAL 93 from the break room or from one of the conference calls. He noted that they heard of other crashes that did not actually happen. That is why at N90 they feared that there were massive attacks occurring concurrently across the country.

Military assistance:

Birch did not recall on 9/11 making a request from N90 for military assistance, but believed that request was made by Boston Center. Birch noted that his step to request military assistance would be to notify the En Route Center, the Regional Office, the Command Center, and the National Headquarters. Birch would also notify his superior at N90.

Now N90 has a hotline that connects directly to NEADS. This would be his first notification procedure. There is also a DEN line that is monitored by a number of agencies. N90 does not normally monitor it unless a flight is coming inbound. The DEN line is not monitored by N90 at all times. Birch was not familiar with the National Military Command Center, or the FAA Hijack Coordinator at FAA Headquarters.

Recommendations:

Birch noted that the first line of communication should be to an asset capable of making a difference in the air event.

Birch noted that there should be air defense fighters at Flyod Bennet Field outside of Manhattan. But he also noted that security should begin on the ground, and that hijackers should be prevented from accessing planes before they even board.