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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Event: John White, former Assistant Program Manager for Administration at the ATCSCC, "Command Center", Herndon VA

Type: Interview

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Special Access Issues: None

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Team: 8

Participants (non-Commission): None

Participants (Commission): Miles Kara and John Azzarello

Location: GSA Conference Room

Background

From 1965-1969, he was in the US Air Force; in 1970 he joined FAA at Los Angeles Center; he spent 14 years as a controller; from 1989-1992 he was in Hawaii as an AT manager; November 1992, he started at the Command Center at FAA HDQTS in Washington, and then helped build the Command Center out in Herndon, Virginia. They moved in March 1994. He retired on January 3, 2004.

Command Center leadership

On 9/11, Jack Kies was the Manger Air Traffic Tactical Operations (ATT-1); Linda Schuessler was the Facility Manager at the Command Center (ATT-100); John White was the Manager of System Efficiency (ATT-200) at the Command Center.

Jack Kies was not at the Command Center on 9/11. He was on travel.

Command Center

The concern of the Command Center is supply and demand – capacity issues and traffic flow management. The job was to ensure that the system didn't overload one airport at any one given time.

The Command Center has expanded since then; it is now a communications facility – it commands a lot of data – a lot of which is not directly related to air traffic management. Prior to 9/11 it was going that way.

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We have a lot of automation activity that supports ATC function but it also gives information all over the world. For instance, CNN and the Weather Channel use Command Center information. They read Command Center advisories.

“Command Center,” as a term, is misleading.

What was the Command Center’s role in a hijacking?

There were no “legitimate” hijackings in the United States for a considerable period of time. On 9/10/01, a hijacking was a method of extortion. “No one thought a hijack would ever result in an airplane being turned into a missile.”

The Command Center did not have a large role in response to a hijacking, other than being aware of the situation. The primary concern of the Command Center was to prevent the hijacked plane from disrupting the paths of other planes in the system.

The authority of the ATC System was given to Command Center by Jane Garvey in 1999. The change is reflected in the handbook. 7210.3, the controllers’ hijack protocol, was not changed to reflect authority of the Command Center over the national air space.

Lufthansa Hijacking

He wasn’t involved in that. He remembers the incident.

Hijack Coordinator

ACS 1 and 2 were Mike Canavan and Lynn Osmus. Under FAA Security division, operations and intelligence divisions existed. White would assume when information on a hijacking came in, the WOC would brief the ACS, the Administrator, and the Deputy Administrator.

Would you, at the Command Center, know who the hijack coordinator was on any given day?

No, he does not know who the hijack coordinator was on 9/11.

Regional Operations Center and the Command Center

The plan to eliminate the Regional Operations Centers has been floated within the FAA. The ATC Division Manager of all the different regions has their own little “kingdoms”. They are all resistant to change. The FAA and ATC have not changed that much since 1970. They talk about modernization, but it is still very much the same. A profession as young as ATC should not stagnate as it is. Change has to be driven by structure.

Misinformation on 9/11

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“On 9/11, it was obvious to me when I was on the phone that 60-percent of the information was wrong.”

For instance, the US Secret Service reported that UAL 93 had crashed into Camp David. “They confirmed that, I heard it; it was in my ear.” “We thought it was still in Pennsylvania.” In addition, Indianapolis Center passed information to Command Center that a plane had crashed on the border of Ohio and Kentucky. “We passed that information raw up the line.”

He attributes that misinformation in part to a lot of stove-pipes in the government. The Command Center floor is an attempt to bring people together to eliminate stove-piping.

“If, in the event of a crisis, the best thing to do is have the USAF, NORAD, the FAA, and the FBI in the same room so they are all on the same page, than that’s what we should have and we don’t have it.”

For instance, the DHS has a Washington Area Ops Center across the street from the Command Center in Herndon. They were at one time located in the Command Center facility. Since they built their own facility, “we don’t talk to them”; “there’s no way we’d have rapid communication with them in the event of another crisis.”

When the first plane hit the WTC; my mind did not allow me to think, “Somebody flew that airplane into the WTC.” When the second plane hit the WTC, then he knew it was a terrorist attack. The question, “what do we do?” loomed large. White said, “There was no direction. If you can find a shred of direction anywhere, in any of this, let me know.”

On that day, the Command Center was in shock; it was surreal; the response was anger. “How do we defend the United States?”

White and the other controllers went back to their US Air Force training- the Cold War training. They stopped transatlantic flights first; then they landed everybody. You would have been amazed in watching all the work in that room in trying to figure out how to respond without prior knowledge or training.

Awareness of Hijackings

On 9/11, he started out the day in a staff meeting reviewing the events of the day before. Ben Sliney came in off the floor and interrupted the meeting to say there was a report of a hijacking and a flight attendant had been stabbed.

Within a matter of minutes, Tom Paccione came in and said he heard report of a transmission, “we have other planes.” At that point, the meeting broke up.

“Then things started moving way, way, way too fast.”

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We all got around the NOM desk – me, Ellen King, Linda Schuessler, Ben Sliney.

He thinks that the first plane had crashed at this point. CNN was not on the big screen for the first crash, but soon after, they had it up.

There was some difference of opinion that it was a commercial jet or a small aircraft. The New York facilities reported that an aircraft had hit the World Trade Center.

John Azzarello talks about the ATC centers linking up to share information about the first hijacking: New York, Boston, and Cleveland (among others). New York and Boston lost radar on the plane almost simultaneously. This was all recorded at position 15 at the Command Center – Tony Smith’s line.

Do you personally equate the reported hijack with the crash at the WTC?

White is not sure that your brain allows you to equate those two things. It was a “quantum leap.” We had a suspicion, but we weren’t ready to think about that at the time.

He learned of the second one because they had CNN on and they saw it. He thinks that he saw one of the playbacks on CNN moments after the impact. White thinks he knew there were other problems in the system; he knew there was another plane with a problem...

He thinks they received a call from Newark Tower that said, “Watch this,” in reference to flight UAL 175.

White asked the Commission if Langley fighters were ever scrambled in response to the hijackings. He asked that question on 9/11, and it was never confirmed to him.

Commission staff and White spent some time listening to tapes... 9:02 a.m. is the time of the second impact. After the second crash, White ends up on the phone with Jeff Griffiths. The call began at the NOM position – line 34. He crossed the room to get some information. Griffith called back and “threatened” White to stay on the line. He was at the NTMO East position for the remainder of the call. There was a fifteen minute interval of time between the calls.

9/11 Personal Privacy

The call was resumed on an admin phone. After the second crash, a white board went up with a whole slew of flight numbers.

White confirmed the Commission’s suspicion there was some hostility between the controllers at the New York position 14 (located in close proximity to the East NTMO position).

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Commission staff showed White a sketch of the Aviation Crisis Center on the 10th floor or the FAA Headquarters. When the call first started, he thinks Griffith was in the AT Suite. He thinks Griffith moved the call to the ACC at some point. He did not know what person he was talking to at Headquarters most of the time.

Even though I technically “out-ranked” Ben Sliney, it was his room that day. He was in charge of the room.

What were other supervisors doing?

Linda Schuessler was handling internal security issues, such as getting armed guards and sending non-essential people home. She was also talking to people at Headquarters. She was working with Ellen King at times.

Situational Awareness

Griffith wanted information that we weren’t able to garner right away. There was all of this “noise” in the system. Continental, Delta, United... Probably 60-percent of the information he got was false. While they wanted information and they wanted it fast, he wanted to give Headquarters good information. But he does not think they were ever really successful in that there was no way to filter the reports they received.

Azzarello pointed out that the Command Center was on top of UAL 93 in terms of pinpointing where it was and passing on that information quickly.

White agreed; he said that was the only plane they were on top of that morning. “The American flight that hit the Pentagon – No.” There was no advance information on that to relay to Headquarters.

Azzarello points out that at 9:25 a.m., White tell Jeff Griffith about AAL 77 Dulles to LAX with flight level 3-5-0; the target was lost. He said Command Center had received that information 10 minutes prior. He also reported that the Delta flight had landed safely in Cleveland.

“There was always confusion for a good period of time what aircrafts went into what buildings.” They thought at one point the plane that went into the Pentagon was much smaller; “an American Eagle or something.”

Commission staff and White discuss Eastern Region’s misinformation recorded on the East NTMO line; as well as the misinformation documented in their logs from 9/11. “There were clearly folks that were confused that day” about which planes hit where.

White remembers that it was very difficult to “wade through” all the information that day.

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Ricky Bell from ATCSCC corrects and verifies the information about the four flights and where they hit.

At 9:34, Command Center reported to Headquarters the report of “a bomb on board” UAL 93.

On the East NTMO line, John White reports to Jeff Griffith at Headquarters that UAL 93 is 29 minutes out of the Washington area, it turned around over Akron, Ohio, and is tracking toward Washington. Doug Davis takes the line. White asks him if they want to scramble aircrafts. Davis says he does not know. White says that is a decision that needs to be made in the next ten minutes. Davis responds that everyone just left the room. Davis tries to relay that information to someone else, most likely Pete Falcone. White then tells Davis of another reported hijack – Delta 1989. Discussion on this flight ensues and the conversation moves away from UAL 93.

Military Scrambles and UAL 93

At 9:54 a.m., White relays on the tape to Doug Davis that he received a report that fighters were scrambled for the Washington and New York area. He tells the Commission staff that he has no recollection where he received that information.

Miles Kara interjects known times of fighter scrambles on 9/11:

Otis fighters – 8:52 a.m.

Langley fighters – 9:24 a.m. (The fighters were scrambled because of a report that AAL 11 had not crashed into the WTC and was heading south toward Washington. So they headed north to intercept it and actually headed out over the ocean until they were told differently to turn and head to Washington. They capped DC at 9:52 a.m.)

On UAL 93, what prompted Langley to scramble was Boston Center telling NEADS that AAL 11 was still airborne and heading south. The Langley fighters were turned because of a report of a fast moving “VFR” heading toward the White House.

Headquarters and the people in the Crisis Center were told about UAL 93 by John White and given ample time (29 minutes) to inform the military. However, NEADS did not hear about it until the plane was already in the ground. The fighter pilots have told us they were not aware of UAL 93. That message was lost somewhere at Headquarters.

John White was not aware that Headquarters did nothing with the information he reported on UAL 93. He said “that is a shame.”

John Azzarello Recap:

On AAL 11, Boston Center gave the military 8 minutes notice before it crashed. The call was placed at 8:38 a.m.. This is after the loss of radio, loss of transponder, and the strange transmissions heard on the frequency.

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On UAL 175, the military got a call on that a minute or two before impact. The transponder code was changed at the time of impact of AAL 11. The controller was handling both planes at the time, and he did not notice the change in code for 5 or 6 minutes. There was only 17 minutes between the first two crashes.

On AAL 77, no one gained awareness on where the plane was located. At 9:08 a.m. Indianapolis Center reported it missing. Dulles TRACON finally picked it up again just moments before it hit the Pentagon. No one knew at the time the plane was AAL 77. It was referred to as the fast moving VFR. The state police at one point did report a crash in the area of the Kentucky/Ohio border. That misinformation stems from the Indy Center personnel asking the police to check for a crash.

On UAL 93, Command Center, as White says, was on top of it, yet the report of the fourth hijacking never got to military assets.

Azzarello showed White the factual inaccuracies in the press release from FAA issued a year after 9/11; and also referred him to erroneous timeline information presented by DOD witnesses at the Commission's May 2003 hearing (they testified that the DOD was notified about UAL 93 at 9:16 a.m. Commission staff has learned that the cockpit was not breached by the terrorists until 9:28 a.m., as heard on the air traffic control frequency).

He then told White that the first NEADS learned of a problem with UAL 93 was when it reached out to Cleveland Center to follow up on Delta 1989 at 10:07 a.m. Cleveland Center told NEADS about the "bomb on board" transmission heard from UAL 93's cockpit. The plane had crashed four minutes prior to the call.

The remainder of this interview was conducted off the record at the request of John White.