

**MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD**

Event: Robert C. McLaughlin, FAA HQ Security Operations on 9/11

Type: Interview

Date: June 3, 2004

Special Access Issues: None

Prepared by: Bill Johnstone

Team: 7

Participants (non-Commission): Robert McLaughlin and Christine Beyer, TSA General Counsel

Participants (Commission): Bill Johnstone; and John Raidt

Location: GSA conference room, Washington, DC.

**Background**

[U] McLaughlin was in Army Intelligence 1984-88, specializing in terrorism analysis and force protection issues.

[U] On September 12, 1988 he joined the FAA Civil Aviation Security Field Unit (CASFU) at Baltimore Washington International (BWI) Airport. McLaughlin also served as a Federal Air Marshal (FAM). In 1992, he became the BWI CASFU supervisor and in 1995 he moved to the Washington, DC Civil Aviation Security Field Office (CASFO), based at Dulles Airport.

[U] In 1997, McLaughlin came to FAA headquarters in Washington, DC as part of the civil aviation security operations division (ACO; he was in ACO-600). Among his responsibilities was to serve as a duty officer in the FAA Operations Watch. His areas of particular responsibility included the canine unit, crisis management and standards and evaluations. McLaughlin was serving in this capacity on 9/11/01.

[U] He moved to TSA when it took over the functions of the FAA civil aviation security office, and currently serves as the Assistant Director of TSA's Assessments Division.

**Day of September 11, 2001**

[U] On 9/11/01, Mike Weichert was the person in McLaughlin's unit who was the Duty Officer. At around 8:30 a.m. Weichert and Bob Clark (who was also in the same unit)

went out for coffee. At around 8:40 a.m. Laura Volaro came urgently looking for Weichert and McLaughlin paged Weichert and offered to help out in his absence.

[U] McLaughlin reached the FAA security SCIF facility on the third floor of headquarters by around 8:45 a.m. He found that everything there had become "elevated." Pat Durgin informed him that FAA was aware that someone had been stabbed on board American Airlines Flight #11, that contact had been lost with the aircraft, and that the pilot may have been keying the mike so that the ground could hear sounds from the cockpit. Furthermore, they were aware that the plane's altitude had been fluctuating.

[U] Durgin told McLaughlin that it was clear there had been a hijacking, but that only someone from the Operations division could activate the Aviation Crisis Center (ACC) on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. Mike Weichert returned at just that moment, and he left to go to the 10<sup>th</sup> floor to activate the ACC. McLaughlin went to get Lee Longmire, head of Operations, but discovered that he had already left to go to the ACC.

[U] McLaughlin indicated that his unit had helped put on two crisis exercises previously that year (both based on traditional, non-suicide hijacking scenarios) so "everyone knew what to do." McLaughlin's and Weichert's immediate supervisor on 9/11 was Carrie Riley, but she was in Ireland that day.

[U] When McLaughlin went to the ACC (around 8:55 a.m. or 9:00 a.m.) the primary communications net (for notification of other federal agencies and for convening decision-makers) was in the process of being activated. He was tasked with getting the FAA managers for the New England and Eastern regions plugged into the primary net. At about that time, he saw, via CNN coverage, a picture of what appeared to him to be a large passenger aircraft striking the World Trade Center (WTC). (This would have actually been the second strike, of UA #175, at 9:02:40, but McLaughlin was not aware of those facts at the time.) After getting her to come over and view a replay, McLaughlin asked Fran Lozito if it was Flight #11, but she indicated they didn't know.

[U] Carrier Riley who was in charge of emergency protocol was in Europe on 9/11.

[U] At this point in time (around 9:05 a.m.) the assumption in and around the ACC was that there had been only one large aircraft crash into the WTC.

[U] McLaughlin served as a "runner" or back up in the ACC for the next hour or so. By 10:00 a.m., another office was opened, on the third floor, and under the charge of Bob Clark, with a mission of sorting out all of the information that was coming in about the unfolding events. McLaughlin observed that an unintended consequence of the activation of this third floor operation (which had not been provided for in emergency plans or exercises) was to remove the individuals charged with obtaining the most accurate information about what was going on from direct contact with the sources of that information, which were still reporting in to the 10<sup>th</sup> floor.

[U] At some time after 10:00 a.m. McLaughlin was dispatched to Boeing to get airplane schematics to be used by a planned "Go Team" that would be heading to New York. When he returned to the FAA around 11 a.m., however, all of the focus had shifted to getting all of the remaining airborne flights safely landed and plans for the Go Team trip were cancelled.

[U] McLaughlin recalled seeing Deputy Administrator Belger come in and out of the ACC a few times while he was present, but he did not recall seeing Administrator Garvey.

### Communications Nets

[U] McLaughlin indicated that there were actually three communications networks that the FAA could activate in an emergency:

- The Primary Net, which was operated out of the Washington Operations Center (WOC) adjacent to the ACC, and which could be activated by FAA Operations< served as a means of bringing other federal agencies (on 9/11, including CIA, FBI, White House, National Military Command Center, regional FAA division managers, and the Secret Service) into the loop, and also as a way of assembling decision-makers to allow for coordinated action.
- The Tactical (or Secondary) Net, which was an internal network for FAA personnel.
- The Tertiary Net, which was apparently not used on 9/11, allowed for "side bar" communications that may not have been appropriate for the Primary Net.

[U] McLaughlin did not recall an Air Traffic Control (ATC) presence in the ACC at the outset, nor did he recall ever seeing Jeff Griffith and Doug Davis during the first hour he was there. He was not aware that day of the ATC net established by Dave Canoles, and McLaughlin believed that the ATC net wasn't established until two or three hours after the activation of the Primary Net. (He reported that ATC had not been involved in the emergency exercises conducted by his office, and allowed that may have contributed to what he perceived to be a lack of connectivity between ATC and FAA security on 9/11.

[U] McLaughlin was surprised when he was informed by Commission staff that FAA logs indicated that the Tactical Net had been activated at 8:55 a.m., but the Primary Net wasn't up and running until 9:20 a.m. As indicated above, his recollection was that the latter had been activated by shortly after 9:00 a.m. In McLaughlin's view, the security division had acted quickly in activating the communications nets as soon as possible on 9/11. He pointed out that the time-consuming activation process required the individual dialing up of 30 agencies.

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[U] He stated that events in the Washington Operations Center (WOC) were being recorded by individuals using "event tracker" fed with hard copies of data from the primary and tactical net. He said that [redacted] and [redacted] served as recorders that day.

#### **Military liaison**

[U] McLaughlin stated that there was supposed to be a military representative at FAA Headquarters but that she was gone that day. Her name is [redacted]

#### **The Airlines**

[U] McLaughlin indicated that communications with the airlines on 9/11 was the responsibility solely of the FAA's Principle Security Inspectors (PSI's) for the individual airlines.

#### **Warning Cockpits**

[U] McLaughlin does not recall any discussion on 9/11 on the notification of cockpits about the emerging situation. In his view, such action would have been the prerogative of the ATC

#### **Reverse Screening**

[U] McLaughlin could recall no discussion of screening de-planing passengers from the grounded aircraft on 9/11. He felt that all concerned did the best they could in coping with an unprecedented emergency response.

#### **After-action Reports**

[U] McLaughlin was surprised that apparently the FAA never undertook an after-action report on the events of 9/11. He reported that such analysis was typically done in the wake of major incidents.

#### **FAA Intelligence and Operations**

[U] McLaughlin indicated that the Operations Division had begun its own 24-hour watch only as a result of 9/11. However, as a duty officer, he felt that he had a responsibility to remain current on intelligence information, though this knowledge was not factored back into the work of the operations division. McLaughlin reported that the Security Directive (SD) working group was the one place where intelligence and operations were combined pre-9/11.

[U] Pre-9/11, McLaughlin recalled having heard the name bin Ladin fairly frequently, but never with specific threat information. Based on what he saw, he perceived that the threat to civil aviation had gone up "a little bit" in the months preceding 9/11.

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[U] Related to the question of information sharing among agencies, McLaughlin recalled previously having seen a State Department cable with information on Pan Am 103 specifying that the information was not to be shared with the FAA.

**Transportation Security Operations Center**

[U] McLaughlin said that the TSOC doesn't have an ATC representative assigned to it which could be a serious problem in the event of an aviation emergency because situational awareness is so critical.