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Amid Crisis Simulation, 'We Were Suddenly No-Kidding Under Attack'

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Lt. Cols. Ian Sanderson (l) and Dawne Deskins work in the Battle Cab at the Northeast Air Defense Sector in Rome, N.Y. It was here the officers helped raise and direct fighter jets responding to the Sept. 11 plane hijackings. (Photo by Peter Chen)

On Sept. 11, as Americans watched horror rain upon New York and Washington, command teams at a little-known military outpost in Rome, N.Y., worked feverishly to restore safe skies and rouse a slumbering homeland defense.

At the Northeast Air Defense Sector, radar operators who constantly scan the continent's boundaries suddenly faced a threat from within and a race they could not win.

Four months after the terrorist attacks, there are still untold stories. This is one.

6 A.M.: WAR GAMES

Lt. Col. Dawne Deskins figured it would be a long day.

Sept. 11 was Day II of "Vigilant Guardian," an exercise that would pose an imaginary crisis to North American Air Defense outposts nationwide. The simulation would run all week, and Deskins, starting her 12-hour shift in the Operations Center as the NORAD unit's airborne control and warning officer, might find herself on the spot.

Day I of the simulation had moved slowly. She hoped the exercise gathered steam. It made a long day go faster.

8:40 A.M.: REAL WORLD

In the Ops Center, three rows of radar scopes face a high wall of wide-screen monitors. Supervisors pace behind technicians who peer at the instruments. Here it is always quiet, always dark, except for the green radar glow.

At 8:40, Deskins noticed senior technician Jeremy Powell waving his hand. Boston Center was on the line, he said. It had a hijacked

airplane.

"It must be part of the exercise," Deskins thought.

At first, everybody did. Then Deskins saw the glowing direct phone line to the Federal Aviation Administration.

On the phone she heard the voice of a military liaison for the FAA's Boston Center.

"I have a hijacked aircraft," he told her.

American Airlines Flight 11, headed to Los Angeles, had veered off course, apparently toward New York. The liaison said to get "some F-16s or something" airborne.

Forty-one minutes earlier, Flight 11 had left Logan Airport with 81 passengers. For the last 27 minutes, it had not responded to ground control.

Deskins requested Flight 11's latest position, which an operator put up on the screen.

Flight 11 wasn't there.

Someone had turned off its transponder, the device that identifies the plane to ground control.

Boston Center could still track it on primary radar, but the operators in Rome would be hard-pressed to find it amid the jumble of blips on their screens.

We'll direct the intercept, the liaison told Deskins. Just get something up there.

Deskins ran up a short flight of stairs to the Battle Cab and reported the hijacked plane -- real world, not a simulation.

"He says it's going to New York," she said. A thought flashed: Why is he going to New York?

8:43 A.M.: SEARCH

Master Sgt. Maureen Dooley started doing the math.

If Flight 11 cruised at a normal speed, maybe 350 knots, in a certain direction, it would be right -- she directed a technician to zero in on a sector northeast of New York -- there!

They saw blips, dozens of them -- the swarm of a Tuesday morning aerial rush hour. Somewhere in there was Flight 11.

"You have the urgency to do what you're trained to do," Dooley said. "But you also have that personal urgency, which is saying, 'Oh, my God!'"

By now, Powell was on the scramble line to Otis Air Base in Falmouth, Mass., one of two Air National Guard units controlled by

the Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS), telling it to upgrade its "readiness posture." Direct phones and e-mails flashed to NORAD in Colorado and CONR, its Continental U.S. Region headquarters in Florida.

At 8:43 a.m., Dooley's technicians, their headsets linked to Boston Center, heard of a second plane, United Flight 175, that also was not responding. It, too, was moving to New York.

The FAA was still trying to contact Flight 11. If this followed past scenarios, the hijackers would start making demands, the first of which might be to land at JFK International Airport.

Dooley's technicians centered in on a radar blip that might be Flight 11. They watched it close on New York City.

8:46 A.M.: SCRAMBLE

The Battle Cab, a long, glassed-in office, overlooks the Ops Room like a low-slung balcony in a darkened theater. In a corner booth, an officer waits for the unthinkable: the coded message indicating America is at war.

Six minutes after Boston Center's call, NEADS scrambled two armed F-15s at Otis Air Base on Cape Cod.

"We had no idea where the aircraft was," recalled Maj. James Fox, who gave the order. "We just knew it was over land, so we scrambled them towards land."

Weapons directors guided the jets, as radar technicians talked to the FAA -- a headset to one ear, a phone to the other.

Deskins ran to a nearby office and phoned 1st Air Force Chief Public Affairs Officer Major Don Arias in Florida. She said NEADS had a hijacked plane -- no, not the simulation -- likely heading for JFK.

"The entire floor sensed something wrong," Chief of Operations Control Lt. Col. Ian Sanderson said. "The way this unfolded, everybody had a gut sense this wasn't right."

8:46 A.M.: TOWER ONE

As the first plane hit the World Trade Center, the F-15s were rumbling off the runways at Otis.

"I remember somebody running into the Ops Room," Deskins said. "They said they'd just seen on CNN that an aircraft hit the World Trade Center."

A quiet tremor rolled through the room, replaced by the buzz of urgent questions into phones. What kind of aircraft hit the building? A small plane? A large plane? Could it be Flight 11?

Boston Center was still tracking a blip believed to be Flight 11.

Dooley grasped for a way the fighter pilots could identify it. "I was

fighting to get the (plane's) tail number," she said. "We were trying to grab at anything we could."

Several minutes passed before Boston Center said Flight 11 had hit the Trade Center.

"I had a feeling of helplessness," Dooley said. "I think everybody did. We were doing everything in our power."

Again, Deskins phoned Maj. Arias in Florida. "We think the aircraft that just hit the World Trade Center was American Airlines Flight 11," she reported.

To this day, Arias says he cannot recall his reply, such was his state of mind.

Deskins can't forget it.

"Oh, God," he told her. "My brother works in the World Trade Center."

9:03 A.M.: TOWER TWO

A second plane hit the Trade Center. The F-15s were still 71 miles away.

"We were ... floored," Sanderson said.

By now, every qualified staffer had been called to the Ops Room and Battle Cab. Others, hearing the news at home, headed to work.

"We were suddenly no-kidding under attack," Deskins said. "The FAA didn't know how many aircraft there were. Any airliner they weren't talking to could potentially be one."

Sanderson said the second crash brought a brief pause, and then a renewal: "This was our situation to seize back. There was almost a turning point."

The staff looked to Col. Robert Marr, who rallied the operation: Get to the phones. Call every Air National Guard unit in the land. Prepare to put jets in the air. The nation is under attack.

They would rouse the homeland defense unit by unit, if necessary.

9:24 A.M.: FLIGHT 77

A third plane, American Airlines Flight 77 from Washington to Los Angeles, changed course and stopped responding.

Instantly, Rome scrambled fighter jets from the nearest air base, Langley in Virginia. Again, Fox dispatched the jets without targets. That would come later.

Now, NEADS was phoning Air Guard commanders across the Northeast, posing questions that hours earlier would have seemed ludicrous. Did the unit have available pilots? Mechanics? Crew chiefs? What could it get airborne in two hours? In 24 hours? In 48?

Fox directed a Combat Air Patrol, or CAP, over New York City: Jets were in place to take out a hijacked plane if necessary.

In the Battle Cab, where officers stood shoulder to shoulder, Col. Marr began thinking aloud.

"What am I missing?" Marr could be heard asking himself. "What I am NOT thinking of?"

Increasingly, attention turned to Flight 77. The FAA's Washington Center could not find it on radar, the transponder was turned off.

In the Ops Room, radar technicians focused on a blip and watched it closing on Washington.

At 9:37 a.m., the blip disappeared from their screens.

Last position: six miles from the Pentagon.

9:38 A.M.: WASHINGTON

When Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon, the jets from Langley were about 100 miles away.

"Now, I just felt it was personal," Deskins recalled.

Said Fox, "At that point, I'm just reacting."

At least four other planes were behaving strangely, according to the FAA. Each might be another hijacking. Most notably, United Airlines Flight 93 had turned off its transponder in Ohio.

"We're thinking: Where's he going? To Chicago?" Deskins said. "WHERE IS HE GOING?"

Fighters fixed a CAP over Washington. If a plane ignored warnings, they would fire on it, on orders from the president.

Fox's weapons teams passed the word: Be prepared to receive that order and carry it out.

At 10:03 a.m., Flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania. The passengers, told of the other attacks via cell phones, had turned on the hijackers.

In the Ops Room, scopes now searched for United Flight 83, which had turned toward Cleveland. Was it a hijacking? NEADS and Cleveland Center watched until it landed. The pilot simply wanted to get down.

"I was actually expecting to hear about more (hijackings) from other parts of the country," Sanderson said. "Los Angeles, Dallas -- that's what I was expecting."

12:30 P.M.: REALIZATION

By order of the FAA, commercial air traffic had stopped. Radar scopes showed nearly empty skies.

With the threat diminished, an Ops Room screen was tuned to CNN. Almost immediately, a replay showed the World Trade Center crash. A young radar technician turned around and said she wanted to cry.

"We don't have time," Dooley responded.

She later apologized. But with fighter patrols over Eastern cities, much work remained to be done.

8 P.M.: REAL LIFE

"I just didn't want to let go," said Deskins, who worked 14 hours. "There was a fear that you weren't going to pass on everything, and that when you left, you wouldn't be helping anymore."

Sanderson cannot recall what time he got home. He talked with his wife until 3 a.m., unable to sleep.

In Florida, Maj. Don Arias waited for word from his younger brother, Adam.

After Deskins' call, Arias phoned his brother in Tower II to say that the crash next door was a hijacking, and he should get out. Adam P. Arias roused people throughout the 84th floor, exhorting them to leave. Several credit him with saving their lives.

His body was one of the first found in the wreckage.

AFTERMATH

"The mole people are always watching," Chaplain Maj. Timothy C. Bejian wrote in a message to the Northeast Air Defense Sector after Sept. 11. "They gather together in groups, in windowless places, usually arriving while it's dark and staying long hours, only to leave while it's dark. Many times they can't tuck their own children into bed and read them fairy tales because they are watching. This bothers the mole people, but they know that it needs to be done.

"The mole people are real," Bejian wrote. "They aren't part of a fairy tale, because fairy tales always have happy endings. Real people who live real lives don't always have happy endings, but that doesn't mean that they can't be happy. ...

"Happiness comes from deep within, where your heart of hearts lives."

Today, armed guards at NEADS scan cars at the gate for bombs. Jets patrol the skies over major cities. Twelve-hour shifts have become the norm.

It's dark when some come to work, dark when they leave. In the Ops Room, where the only windows are radar screens, the watchers keep watch.

"That's why we're here," Sanderson said. "I think (Sept. 11) gave people here a new sense of purpose. ... Suddenly, it was very real.

This unit will never be the same."