

Norad on Heightened Alert: Role of air defence agency rapidly transformed in wake of Sept. 11 terrorist attacks

by Linda Slobodian
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Seventeen days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Herald reporter Linda Slobodian was offered a rare glimpse of Cheyenne Mountain, Colo. -- the headquarters for Norad, the high-tech military operations centre where thousands of aircraft flying through North American skies are monitored. In the Herald today and Sunday, Slobodian examines how military forces are responding to the increased security threat against Canada and the U.S.

Critics dismiss it as a Cold War relic, a dinosaur that outlived the threat of Soviet missiles soaring over the North Pole to destroy North American targets.

Others insist Norad, operating since 1958 under a Canada-U.S. agreement to guard our airspace, offers vital protection and adapts to changing, volatile world situations.

Sept. 11 proved the latter.

That awful day, the U.S. intelligence system broke down. Terrorists used commercial jets to crash into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

As the horror unfolded, Northern Aerospace Defence Command was challenged with preventing more carnage. Where was Norad, the multimillion-dollar, 24-hour eyes and ears of North American skies, when the hijacked planes embarked on their sinister missions?

Ironically, Norad was doing its job: peering 300 kilometres out into the Air Defence Identification Zone encircling North America. Its task: to help assess, within two minutes, if each of the 7,000 incoming aircraft every day is friend or foe.

It was scanning space for something as tiny as a fleck of paint which at nearly 58,000 km/h can damage a shuttle.

It was on alert for intercontinental ballistic missiles which, if fired from rogue nations such as North Korea, will strike North America in 23 minutes.

Norad's 1,100 army, navy, marine and air force personnel -- 12 per cent of them Canadian -- were neither expecting, nor trained, to deal with manned missiles launched out of Boston.

When the second plane hit the other World Trade Center tower, Norad swiftly shifted its attention to help prevent possible further attacks.

Norad was instrumental in getting fighter jets -- normally on 15-minute alert -- airborne within eight minutes.

About 2,400 commercial flights in U.S. skies at the time -- and thousands more incoming flights and private planes -- were quickly diverted and grounded.

"I am convinced we saved lives after with the actions that were taken -- including the grounding of the

other traffic and other events that have occurred since the 11th," says Canadian air force Maj. Pierre Berube.

He was commander on duty Sept. 11 in the Air Warning Centre -- since renamed the Battle Management Centre -- at Norad headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colo.

U.S. navy Lieut. Derek Paul, an air battle management officer who assesses and passes data up the chain of command, admits satisfaction in knowing Norad likely "saved lives."

"But patting yourself on the back with thousands of people dead in New York, it's kind of difficult," says Paul.

Norad learned in a harsh way the job it was doing was incomplete. Sept. 11 resulted in several changes adding a new dimension to Norad's job -- the ability to track enemy threats which military and intelligence officials warn still lurk from within.

It is rare that a visitor, only the second since Sept. 11, is allowed past the secured door leading into section 2212 of Norad headquarters in Cheyenne Mountain.

To get to this point, one must go through several checkpoints manned by U.S. soldiers armed with M-16 rifles, two 25-ton steel blast doors, and a maze of eerie corridors with granite walls in the subterranean complex.

Beyond 2212 is the Command Centre, the heartbeat of Norad -- a room jammed with computers, phones and huge multihued screens on the walls.

Canadian and American military experts, dressed in crisp uniforms, are glued to phones and screens.

Data streams into the Command Centre from the Air Warning Centre, which detects invading aircraft; the Missile Warning Centre, which provides warning of missiles attacks; the combined Intelligence Watch which monitors world events and evaluates the potential of attacks with biological or chemical weapons, and finally the Space Control Centre, which tracks manmade objects orbiting earth.

North America is divided into three Norad regions -- Alaska, Canada and continental U.S., with posts from each feeding data into headquarters.

The Command Centre sits 426 metres below the apex of Cheyenne Mountain, carved out in 1961 to house this granite bunker, a product of the Cold War when the U.S. and Russia were bitter foes.

Designed to withstand a 31-megaton Soviet nuclear strike, this 4.5-acre complex of chambers and tunnels surrounded by 600 metres of granite has 15 buildings, 12 of them three storeys high.

Norad -- on which Canada spends about \$300 million a year -- is best known for its space control role.

Maj. Bill Laramore, a command director, barks out a briefing on Norad's functions and layout as only a 26-year U.S. army vet can. Without missing a beat, the stern-faced Laramore points ahead and says: "There is a door that comes out of Gen. Hunter's office that goes into the room where we do all of the alien autopsies."

That generates a round of laughter -- even from Canadian Brig.-Gen. Jim Hunter, vice-commander of the command centre. Laughter is rare at Norad since Sept. 11.

Since that date, however, Norad's mission has expanded.

"If it (an aircraft) took off from within the U.S. or Canada, Norad always assumed the law enforcement,

the Federal Aviation Authority, or the air force security people had done their jobs and it wasn't going to be a threat. That's why we looked out," says Hunter. "We are prepared now more than we were previously for internal threats from the sky."

Norad now tracks 40,000 flights a day.

"We have to assume something else is coming because if we didn't, as military officials, we would be irresponsible. We plan for the worst and right now we're planning for that," says Hunter.

Another change is new computers, their screens saturated with turquoise dots -- each representing thousands of commercial and private flights the FAA tracks. A quick computer check provides data on each aircraft.

Now an FAA officials sits in the Command Centre round the clock to liaise with Norad.

The FAA still maintains responsibility over domestic airspace. But Norad can now rapidly respond to FAA requests for assistance with any threatening or hostile aircraft, as well as detect, track, warn, and then offer recommendations.

Information is passed on to Norad Commander-in-chief Gen. Ralph E. Eberhart, who oversees U.S. Space Command and Air Force Space Command. In a crisis, he passes it on to national command authorities of the U.S. and Canada such as the president, prime minister and defence officials.

One screen indicates their whereabouts. "We track where the president and vice-president and chairman and secretary of defence are at all times . . . Same thing for the leadership of Canada," says Laramore.

Prior to Sept. 11, only the president or prime minister had authority to order a hijacked commercial aircraft on a suicide mission to be shot down.

The rules of engagement, something Norad officials refuse to discuss, have changed. That authority has been passed down to Norad generals -- but only as a last resort.

Norad has no defence capability. Intercepts are up to the National Guard or the U.S. or Canadian airforce. Never in Norad history has an aircraft been shot down during an intercept.

Pre-Sept. 11, readiness posture meant 20 fighter jets, six of them in Canada, were always on alert. Now more than 100 fighter jets at several North American bases are poised to take off on 10 minutes' notice.

F-16s and F-15s randomly fly over U.S. cities. In Canada, to a lesser extent, CF-18s are doing the same. In an historic move, NATO jets will begin patrolling North American skies within days.

Today, any aircraft with radio problems is suspect, no problem routine. Fighter jets are scrambled to babysit suspect aircraft or "unknowns" three or four times a day. Before Sept. 11, that happened twice a week.

Last year, there were 425 unknowns -- pilots who didn't file or diverted from flight plans or used the wrong frequency. Jets were scrambled 129 times.

A five-member crew once manned the Battle Centre. Now it pulsates with between 40 and 50 Canadian and U.S. defence experts.

This is hardly the first time Norad headquarters (which cost \$142.4 million to complete by 1966; the equivalent of \$20 billion in today's dollars) has had to adapt.

The early threat was Soviet bombers. In 1957 Sputnik satellite was launched, and the war game changed.

The U.S. air force felt if the Soviets could launch a satellite, they could employ missiles from space. The capability of launching nuclear warheads from continent to continent was born.

In the 1960s a new ICBM threat emerged. The Ballistic Missile defence Centre was installed in the mountain.

Then in the 1980s, the Air Warning Centre took on a new task -- working with U.S. and Canadian customs and drug enforcement agencies to track aircraft hauling drug shipments.

In the 1990s, Desert Storm presented a need to provide Theatre (short range) Ballistic Missile Warning (TBMW) for deployed forces.

Sept. 11, 2001 manifested a new threat. Norad entered the age of the terrorist, to provide a new layer in air defence.

"The FBI and the CIA are the agencies that are mostly concerned with trying to figure out where the next threat may be coming from," says Hunter.

"Canadians and Americans both should feel better that we're here."

Since Sept. 1

Changes to Norad defence strategy as a result of Sept. 11:

- For the first time in history, NATO radar planes from the 19-member alliance -- countries such as England, Germany and France -- are patrolling U.S. skies to assist Norad's AWACs.
- Air Force generals have been authorized to shoot down hijacked commercial jets threatening U.S. cities without consulting the president first.
- Norad now monitors 40,000 daily flights, adding domestic flights to the 7,000 international flights it formerly tracked.
- New computers in Norad headquarters Command Centre identify every internal North American flight.
- Federal Aviation Administration officials moved into the Command Centre in Cheyenne Mountain, Colo., to liaise round the clock with Norad.
- Now 100 fighter jets stand on constant alert as opposed to 14 in North America prior to Sept. 11.
- No inflight problem is considered routine. Fighter jets now scramble to "babysit" suspect aircraft several times daily as opposed to one or so a week before the attacks.
- About a dozen Norad mobile radars have been moved across the U.S. to expand the ability to monitor home skies.

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