

Aboard the Hi-jacked Planes

by Mark Easton

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The investigation isn't just about discovering WHO was responsible, but crucially what exactly happened during the course of the hijacking.

It's now looking as if the US authorities DID know that a plane had been hijacked BEFORE the first crash into the World Trade Centre.

How they responded is now the focus of intense debate.

Mark Easton has been piecing together the sequence of events:

Only now are we beginning to piece together what happened in the skies over America on Tuesday morning. Two and a half hours of horror which changed the world.

The four doomed airliners took off within 15 minutes of each other. Just before 8 flight AA 11 left Boston. heading for Los Angeles Two minutes later UA 93 left New York for San Francisco. At 8.10 flight double A 77 left Washington for San Francisco. Four minutes after that a second Boston flight headed for LA.

The first visible sign of anything untoward came at 8.28 when flight AA11 out of Boston inexplicably took a 50 degree turn South as it flew over New York state. But in the moments before, the Captain John Ogonowski - a former US pilot who served in Vietnam - activated the talk-back button as hijackers entered the cockpit. According to reports today air traffic controllers in New Hampshire heard a voice say "We have more planes. We have other planes". The Captain was told: "Don't do anything foolish. You're not going to get killed."

Alerted to the crisis on board, air traffic personnel informed the military and at Otis Air Force base on Cape Cod two fighter aircraft - thought to be F16s - are reported to have been scrambled.

But before they could get airborne the second Boston plane veered off course, banking South as if heading for New York. A stewardess on board used a mobile phone to contact her office at United Airlines and told them: "colleagues have been stabbed" and - crucially for the FBI investigation now underway - gave the seat number of one of the hijackers.

At 8.39 two F16s or possibly F15s took off from Otis Airforce Base to try and intercept one of the hijacked aircraft. Further mobile calls were being received from AA11 - at about 8.43 one passenger said "we're going down". At 8.45, with 92 people on board, American Airways flight eleven crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre.

Now the authorities had a terrifying dilemma. The F16's were in the air with the capability to shoot the second hijacked plane out of the sky. At 9.00 UA175 changed direction again - heading straight for Manhattan from the South over a very built up area. I understand it would have required sanction from the President to shoot down a civilian airliner and he was touring a school in Florida. We don't know whether he was even informed about the second plane - until - at five minutes past nine,

United airlines Flight 175 with 65 people on board was deliberately crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Centre.

Fifteen minutes later and two more planes suddenly change course. United Airlines flight A93 reaches Cleveland and turned back on itself heading towards Washington or possibly the Presidential retreat Camp David. A few minutes later flight AA77 altered course over Kentucky also heading towards Washington. Air Traffic Controllers at Reagan National Airport immediately alerted the Pentagon that an airliner was headed for the restricted airspace over Washington.

Aboard, passenger Barbara Olson - a political commentator - called her husband Ted Olson who worked in the US Justice Dept and told him about the hijack. "Passengers and pilots have been herded to the back of the plane at knifepoint" she said.

Mr Olson rang the Justice Department control centre but they already knew of the hijack. At 9.30 White House alarm horns sounded. Staff were told to run for their lives. In the skies over the city flight AA77 was heading straight for the White House when at 9.38 it suddenly veered 270 degrees to right away from White House and headed towards the Pentagon, It crashed into the west side two minutes later.

Just before the crash a civilian plane was filmed over the city apparently banking hard and there were reports of a military plane circling the US capital. Moments later, the Department of Defense was hit.

Aboard the fourth plane a number of mobile phone calls were being made - four from one passenger, most of which were relayed directly to the FBI. He was told about the World Trade Centre crashes and said he and other passengers would attempt to tackle the hijackers.

At 9.58 a passenger called the emergency 911 number from the lavatory of the plane and told them he had "Heard an explosion" and had "seen white smoke".

Twelve minutes later the plane crashed into a field, 80 miles south east of Pittsburgh.

So what happened in those fatal moments. What was the explosion? The smoke?

This afternoon it was reported that a second debris site has been found six miles from where the plane actually crashed suggesting part of the aircraft may have broken of before it hit the ground. Was flight UA 93 shot out of the sky before it became the fourth guided missile of that terrible morning?

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