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Hijacked passenger called 911 on cell phone

September 11, 2001 Posted: 11:35 PM EDT (0335 GMT)

SHANKSVILLE, Pennsylvania (AP) -- A passenger on United Airlines Flight 93 called on his cell phone from a locked bathroom and delivered a chilling message.

"We are being hijacked, we are being hijacked!" Minutes later the jetliner crashed in western Pennsylvania with 45 people aboard, the last of four closely timed terror attacks across the country.

Radar showed the San Francisco-bound Boeing 757 from Newark, New Jersey, had nearly reached Cleveland when it made a sharp left turn and headed back toward Pennsylvania, crashing in a grassy field edged by woods about 80 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. There was no sign of any survivors.

"There's a crater gouged in the earth, the plane is pretty much disintegrated. There's nothing left but scorched trees," said Mark Stahl, of Somerset, who went to the scene.

The Boeing 757 crash was one of four reported Tuesday by United and American Airlines. Two jetliners crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City and one hit the Pentagon in Washington.

United said Flight 93 left Newark at 8:01 a.m. with 38 passengers, two pilots and five flight attendants. Minutes before the 10 a.m. crash, an emergency dispatcher in Pennsylvania received a cell phone call from a man who said he was a passenger locked in a bathroom aboard United Flight 93. The man repeatedly said the call was not a hoax, said dispatch supervisor Glenn Cramer in neighboring Westmoreland County.

"We are being hijacked, we are being hijacked!" Cramer quoted the man from a transcript of the call.

The man told dispatchers the plane "was going down. He heard some sort of explosion and saw white smoke coming from the plane and we lost contact with him," Cramer said.

FBI agent Wells Morrison wouldn't confirm that the plane was hijacked, but said the FBI was reviewing the tape of the 911 call.

"At this point, we're not prepared to say it was an act of terrorism, though it appears to be that," Morrison said.

Reporters were taken to the top of a hill overlooking the scene. The crash left a V-shaped gouge in a grassy field surrounded by thick woods, just below a hilltop strip mine. The gouge is 8- to 10-foot deep and 15- to 20-foot long, said Capt. Frank Monaco of the Pennsylvania State Police. Investigators believe the plane crashed there and disintegrated, sending debris into thick

Michael R. Merringer was out on a mountain bike ride with his wife, Amy, about two miles away from the crash site.

"I heard the engine gun two different times and then I heard a loud bang and the windows of the houses all around rattled," Merringer said. "I looked up and I saw the smoke coming up."

The couple rushed home and drove near the scene.

"Everything was on fire and there was trees knocked down and there was a big hole in the ground," he said.

In Chicago, United CEO James Goodwin said the airline was sending a team to Pennsylvania to assist in the investigation and to provide assistance to family members.

"Today's events are a tragedy and our prayers are with everyone at this time," Goodwin said.

Without citing a death toll, United said Tuesday afternoon that it had identified all passengers and crew members on board the two planes and was notifying family members. No names were released immediately.

In Pennsylvania's Richland Township, police Chief Jim Mock said air traffic control coordinators reported Tuesday morning that a large aircraft was heading toward John Murtha Johnstown Cambria County Municipal Airport in the township, about 60 miles east of Pittsburgh.

The air traffic controllers said the aircraft would not identify itself, according to Mock, who is also the airport's emergency coordinator. Shortly after talking to the controllers, Mock said, a plane crashed north of the Somerset County airport about 20 miles away.

"It shook the whole station," said Bruce Grine, owner of Grine's Service Center in Shanksville, about 21/2 miles from the crash. "Everybody ran outside, and by that time the fire whistle was blowing."

Stahl was listening to reports about the World Trade Center attacks on the radio when he heard Flight 93 crash. He took pictures showing a billowing cloud and a large, black hole burrowed into the ground surrounded by small piece of airplane still on fire.

"I didn't know what to think, it was shocking," Stahl said.

At San Francisco International Airport, where the plane was headed, an evacuation was ordered. Bomb-sniffing dogs patrolled the hallways and a counseling center was set up for relatives of the people aboard Flight 93.

"This is a time for compassion. It's not a time for long sermons," said the Rev. John Delariva, a Catholic priest who is part of the airport's counseling team.

Flight 93 also operated as a code-share flight with Air Canada as Flight

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