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ALASKA

High Alert

For 30 tense minutes on morning of East Coast attacks, officials feared KAL jet was hijacked, bound for Anchorage

By Zaz Hollander
 Anchorage Daily News
(Published: September 8, 2002)

For about 30 minutes, Alaska's top military commander believed Korean Air Flight 85 might actually be hijacked and closing in on a target in Anchorage.



En route to a refueling stop in the state's largest city, the Seoul-New York flight with more than 200 people on board had already sent out one hijack message.

Then about a half-hour later, the pilot punched in a second.

7500. 7500. 7500.

The four-digit international hijack code flashed on radar scopes before the eyes of baffled and worried military and civilian air-traffic controllers.

Two planes had already destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center. The Pentagon burned around the wreckage of a third hijacked jet. The debris of a fourth smoldered in a western Pennsylvania field.

Along with the rest of the world, Lt. Gen. Norton Schwartz woke up that morning to a terrorist plot to use commercial airliners as weapons. Anything could happen. And suddenly, a fifth possible hijacking cruised into his territory.

"Given what had happened on the East Coast, it was entirely plausible to me this was an analog on the West Coast," said Schwartz, head of the Alaskan Command. "So naturally, we took this seriously."

At the time of this Sept. 11 incident, little was publicly disclosed about the wayward signals from the Korean pilot. The airline and flight crew have kept mum about what happened that day, when brief evacuations cleared hundreds from downtown Anchorage and Valdez, and F-15s streaked southwest to intercept the jet.

But recent interviews with Schwartz and Tim Crowley, an air-traffic controller, shed new light on the scramble that occurred from Washington,

Alaska and see list of 2002 permit recipients.

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SCRAMBLE

The first inkling of a possible problem came about 8 a.m.

A technician with ARINC, an airline contractor in Maryland, who was scanning air-to-ground teletypes from jets for anything suspicious, spotted three chilling letters in a message from Flight 85, a Boeing 747 in the air near the Aleutian Islands.

Embedded in the text was the code for a hijacking: "HJK."

The company urgently dialed up the Federal Aviation Administration in Washington, D.C.

Within minutes, a rare mix of military and civilian controllers huddled in a windowless command center at Elmendorf Air Force Base, the strategic heart of Alaska's North American Aerospace Defense Command.

Normally, the FAA controls the airspace over Alaska. But on the morning of Sept. 11, the Department of Defense owned the skies.

Schwartz ordered Elmendorf Air Force Base to launch two F-15s armed with missiles.

Tail the aircraft, he told the fighter pilots. Follow Flight 85 at a position out of sight of passengers. Follow so the four-man flight crew -- and anyone in the cockpit with them -- couldn't see them either.

BIZARRE QUIET

Flight 85 cruised toward Anchorage. Passengers on the long flight might have been looking forward to stretching their legs during the refueling stopover in Anchorage.

As soon as the Korean airliner flew into radio contact over land just west of Dillingham, a controller asked the pilot to confirm that first hijack signal.

The pilot punched in the "7500" hijack code.

Civilian air-traffic controllers saw the numbers start to flash on their scopes at the FAA's Air Route Traffic Control Center, a glossy box of a building a stone's throw from Elmendorf's Boniface Parkway entrance.

Controller Tim Crowley, a shop steward for the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, had arrived at work around 8 a.m. The Korean incident was under way.

The center was heavy with that bizarre quiet that only comes when there's trouble.

He surveyed the room.

About a dozen controllers peered into four rows of radar scopes, busy clearing the skies, finding places to land dozens of inbound jets flying toward Anchorage after the military ordered all civilian aircraft grounded.

Crowley, serving in his union capacity rather than as a controller this day,

families. But nobody cursed, and nobody prayed.

A dozen managers and supervisors fielded frenzied phone calls at the center's watch desk, a Star Trek-type corner console stacked with computers that overlooks the controllers. Normally, three or four people supervise center activities from the desk.

The desk's eight phones rang with calls from FAA headquarters in D.C., from military brass, from airline companies tracking their jets.

FAA brass in Washington, D.C., first told controllers to let the plane land at Anchorage as planned. They were following an agency policy not to turn hijacked aircraft to keep hijackers from killing the crew and crashing the plane.

But after Flight 85 beamed that second hijack signal, another message came from the military.

Turn the plane.

A controller told Flight 85 to bear north of Anchorage by about 100 miles, fly east, then turn southeast for Yakutat, a fairly remote airport with a runway long enough to land the Boeing 747.

A controller gave the pilot his new heading. The pilot repeated the heading, confirming his plans to make the sweeping turn south.

COMPLICATIONS

Schwartz started to relax only when the plane turned. The pilot showed he was in control of the jet. Thirty minutes and about 300 air miles after the second hijack signal, the immediate threat had passed. The fighter jets would continue their escort.

But the ordeal wasn't over. No one had checked weather conditions in Yakutat. The weather there was deteriorating. It wasn't clear whether the airport's navigational aids or on-board maps were good enough to guide the Korean pilot over risky mountainous terrain.

Another complication arose. Civilian controllers discovered Flight 85 had less than an hour of gas. The pilot couldn't head back to Anchorage or make it to Fairbanks. The group at NORAD brainstormed other options. They settled on Whitehorse.

Schwartz contacted skeptical Canadian authorities about 9:45 a.m. He reminded them of the circumstances, and the jet's low fuel. They talked about how the plane, now over Alaska for an hour, wasn't acting like a hijacked aircraft.

Everybody agreed on Whitehorse.

Canadian police suggested downtown businesses and residents evacuate. Most did not. Locals who heard about the plane from police scanners eyed the skies as Flight 85 roared overhead with an escort of U.S. and Canadian fighters and landed without incident.

The evacuations were called off around 10 a.m.

Korean Air administrator Michael Lim said last September that the pilot typed in the 7500 signal following instructions from air-traffic controllers. The first HJK signal? Possibly a question rather than a warning. ARINC staff say pilots can't type in question marks on the teletypes.

The confusion of the day made everything hard, Crowley said. Language problems with foreign pilots made things even harder.

The Korean Air incident wasn't the only one Elmendorf fighter pilots scrambled for that day. They also followed an Asiana cargo jet bound for Anchorage when the pilot refused to turn the plane as directed because he didn't understand controllers' instructions, he said.

All involved said the Korean Air pilot cooperated with controllers every step of the way.

"If it had been an American pilot, he probably would have said, 'Center, why are you doing this? Everything's fine here,' " Crowley said.

But he didn't -- or couldn't.

And the military treated the situation as the real thing.

"Were we prepared to act? Yes," Schwartz said. "Was such action imminent? I would say as the morning wore on, no."

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