

9/11 Tapes Reveal Ground Personnel Muffled Attacks

By **Gail Sheehy** | 06/21/04 12:00am



COMMENT 

Despite having boarded her train at 5 a.m. that morning in Washington, D.C., Rosemary Dillard's linen jacket was still creaseless, her carriage professional and crisp, as she walked down the train platform at Princeton Junction on the morning of June 4.

Ms. Dillard dared to hope that the F.B.I. would clarify the timeline in the mystifying story of Sept. 11, 2001.

The briefing in New Jersey two weeks ago, attended by about 130 family members of victims, had been arranged by the F.B.I. Previously unavailable calls from passengers and crew were to be played for families of victims of the four infamous flights that were turned into missiles by terrorists.

Who knew what, and when? And what did the airlines and federal officials do about it? These were the burning questions on the minds of many family members who have begged the commission to help connect the dots. This week, when the 9/11 commission wraps up its public hearings, families had been promised that the final report would be titled "9-11: The Timeline." But at the last minute the commission switched the subject to "9-11: The Plot," focusing on the hijackers' success in foiling every layer of the nation's defenses, up to and including the airlines'.

For Ms. Dillard, the tapes scheduled to be played in Princeton this June morning were especially important: She herself had acted as

the American Airlines base manager at Reagan National Airport on the morning of Sept. 11. She had been responsible for three D.C.-area airports, including Dulles. For the last two and a half years, she has been haunted by the fact that American Airlines Flight 77 took off from Dulles Airport that morning, with her blessing.

Her husband was a passenger on that flight.

The cab on the way to the hearing at the Radisson Hotel was quiet. Asked if she was part of a lawsuit being filed by the roughly 115 families against American and United Airlines and an alphabet soup of government agencies, she demurred.

"That's a very sore subject," she said. She hoped, in hearing tapes of conversations between flight crews and authorities on the ground, to find out why, when flight controllers in Boston suspected a hijacking of American Airlines Flight 11 as early as 8:13 a.m., neither her company nor the Federal Aviation Administration notified her to warn the crew of American Airlines Flight 77 of the terrorist threat in the skies when the plane took off at 8:20 a.m. By 8:24 a.m., flight controllers were certain that Flight 11 had been overrun.

But neither the tapes and cell-phone recordings Ms. Dillard heard that afternoon, nor the PowerPoint presentation that took the families systematically through all four flights with neat timelines and bland conclusions, helped her to connect the dots. She fled the hearing early, deeply upset.

Those present were told that the material they were hearing is evidence in the government's case against Zacarias Moussaoui, the once-alleged 20th hijacker, and in order not to compromise the case, it mustn't be disclosed. They signed nondisclosure agreements and were not permitted to take notes. Civil attorneys and the media were barred. F.B.I. agents filled the halls of the hotel and took any camera or recording equipment before people

were admitted to the ballroom. Those who left the three-and-a-half-hour session to relieve themselves were accompanied into rest rooms by agents.

The families heard a tape that has just now surfaced. Recorded by American Airlines at its headquarters in Fort Worth, Tex., even as the first hijacked airliner, Flight 11, was being taken over, the tape shows the airline's top management was made aware beginning at about 8:21 a.m.-25 minutes before the impact of the first plane into the World Trade Center's north tower-that a group of men described as Middle Eastern had stabbed two flight attendants, clouded the forward cabin with pepper spray or Mace, menaced crew and passengers with what looked like a bomb, and stormed the cockpit in a violent takeover of the gigantic bird.

Despite all the high secrecy surrounding the briefing, a half-dozen different family members were so horrified by voice evidence of the airlines' disregard for the fate of their pilots, crew and passengers that they found ways to reveal some of what they heard on those tapes, and also what they felt. To them, the tapes appeared to show that the first instinct of American and United Airlines, as management learned of the gathering horror aboard their passenger planes on Sept. 11, was to cover up.

The response of American's management on duty, as revealed on the tape produced at the meeting, was recalled by persons in attendance:

"Don't spread this around. Keep it close."

"Keep it quiet."

"Let's keep this among ourselves. What else can we find out from our own sources about what's going on?"

"It was disgusting," said the parent of one of

the victims, herself a veteran flight attendant for United Airlines. "The very first response was cover-up, when they should have been broadcasting this information all over the place."

That instinct to hold back information, some of the families believe, may have helped to allow the third hijacked plane to crash into the Pentagon and contributed to the doom of a fourth flight, United Flight 93. The United dispatcher was told by his superiors: Don't tell pilots why we want them to land. The F.B.I. and the F.A.A. have also held back or, in one case, destroyed evidence in the government's possession that would tell a very different story of how the nation's guardians failed to prepare or protect Americans from the most devastating of terrorist attacks on the homeland.

"Flight 77 should never have taken off," Ms. Dillard said through clenched teeth.

Voices of the dead on cell

phones aroused gut-wrenching feelings. Passengers who called from both American Flight 11 and United Flight 175 talked about believing the hijackers were piloting the aircraft, and reported wildly erratic flying patterns.

Voices of crew members, calmly disseminating specifics to airline managers on the ground, pointed out how much was known minutes and even an hour and a half before the last of the jumbo jets had met its diabolic finish.

American Airlines officials had to know there was nothing traditional about this hijacking, because two of their flight attendants, Madeline (Amy) Sweeney and Betty Ong, were calmly and bravely transmitting the most illuminating details anyone has yet heard. Ms. Ong's tape was played in a public commission hearing in January, prompting family members to demand that the F.B.I. honor their rights

under the Victims Assistance Act to hear any and all calls made from the stricken planes that day. Ms. Sweeney's name was cited only in passing at that earlier hearing. And when the president and chief executive of American Airlines, Gerard Arpey, testified, he never mentioned Ms. Sweeney or the cache of information she had provided American Airlines officials so early in the unfolding disaster.

Since then, Mike Sweeney, her widowed husband, has been troubled by the disconnect between the airline's ignoring of his wife's efforts, and the fact that the F.B.I. awarded her its highest civilian honor. He was first informed about the new tape two weeks previously by the U.S. attorney's office in Virginia. David Novak, an assistant U.S. attorney involved in prosecuting the Moussaoui case, told Mr. Sweeney that the existence of the tape was news to him and offered him a private hearing.

"I was shocked that I'm finding out, almost three years later, there was a tape with information given by my wife that was very crucial to the happenings of 9/11," Mr. Sweeney told me. "Suddenly it miraculously appears and falls into the hands of F.B.I.? Why and how and for what reason was it suppressed? Why did it surface now? Is there information on that tape that is of concern to other law-enforcement agencies?"

The gut-churning question that has kept the widowed father of two young children on edge for so long is this: "When and how was this information about the hijackers used? Were Amy's last moments put to the best use to protect and save others?"

Now he believes the answer is no.

From the beginning, the commission has been plagued with questions of where evidence exists about what happened with the flights on Sept. 11. This tape is a case in point.

“We, the prosecution team and the F.B.I. agents that have been assigned to assist us, were not aware of that tape,” Mr. Novak told me. He says he only learned of it two weeks ago while he was briefing 9/11 commissioners on what he knows about the two hijacked American flights. He believes the commission got the tape from the airline.

“Now, does Mike have a reason to have heartburn about this?” he asks rhetorically. “Absolutely-as any other victim would, if they learned of something after two and a half years. We’re trying to figure out why we didn’t know about this before. Is it American Airlines’ fault? I don’t know. Is it the way they produced it? I don’t know. Is it an F.B.I. fault? I don’t know.”

Mr. Novak suggested a possible explanation for the airline’s personnel to hold the horrific information tightly: “I think they were trying not to get other people unduly alarmed so they could deal with the situation at hand.” But he says he is not going to defend or attack airline personnel. “That’s not my job. Our job is to try to convict Moussaoui. We view this as a giant murder case.”

He confirmed that the Justice Department only revealed to the families what in its judgment were the “relevant” tapes. The F.B.I. is holding back other recordings from some of the flights as evidence in prosecuting its criminal trial. It is the way the F.B.I. has always done business: zealously guarding information to make its case retrospectively, rather than sharing information with other law-enforcement agencies to improve the country’s defensive posture proactively. For example, tapes considered “relevant” to the families didn’t include the cockpit voice recorder or the flight-data recorder from Flight 93, the final casualty.

On the American Airlines tape played at the meeting, a voice is heard relaying to the airline’s headquarters the blow-by-blow

account by Ms. Sweeney of mayhem aboard Flight 11. The flight attendant had gone face to face with the hijackers, and reported they had shown her what appeared to be a bomb, with red and yellow wires. The young blond mother of two had secreted herself in the next-to-last passenger row and used an AirFone card, given to her by another flight attendant, Sara Low, to call the airline's flight-services office at Boston's Logan airport.

"This is Amy Sweeney," she reported. "I'm on Flight 11-this plane has been hijacked." She was disconnected. She called back: "Listen to me, and listen to me very carefully." Within seconds, her befuddled respondent was replaced by a voice she knew.

"Amy, this is Michael Woodward."

The American Airlines flight-service manager had been friends with Ms. Sweeney for a decade and didn't have to waste time verifying that this wasn't a hoax. Ms. Sweeney repeated, "Michael, this plane has been hijacked."

Since there was no tape machine in his office, Woodward began repeating the flight attendant's alarming account to a colleague, Nancy Wyatt, the supervisor of pursers at Logan. On another phone, Ms. Wyatt was simultaneously transmitting Ms. Sweeney's words to the airline's Fort Worth headquarters. It was that relayed account that was played for the families.

"In Fort Worth, two managers in S.O.C. [Systems Operations Control] were sitting beside each other and hearing it," says one former American Airlines employee who heard the tape. "They were both saying, 'Do not pass this along. Let's keep it right here. Keep it among the five of us.'"

The two managers' names were given in testimony to the 9/11 commission by Mr. Arpey, then executive vice president of operations, who described himself as "directly

involved in American's emergency-response efforts and other operational decisions made as the terrible events of Sept. 11 unfolded." Joe Burdepelly, one of the S.O.C. managers, told Mr. Arpey at 8:30 a.m. Eastern time that they had a possible hijacking on Flight 11. Mr. Burdepelly also said that the S.O.C. manager on duty, Craig Marquis, was in contact with Ms. Ong. Mr. Arpey related that from Ms. Ong, he and the S.O.C. managers had learned by 8:30 a.m. "that two or three passengers were in the cockpit, and that our pilots were not responding to intercom calls from the flight attendants. After talking with S.O.C.," Mr. Arpey testified, "I then called Don Carty, the president and C.E.O. of American Airlines, at that time," who was not available. Mr. Arpey then drove to the S.O.C. facility, arriving, he says, between 8:35 and 8:40 a.m. Eastern time.

Mr. Arpey testified that by 8:40 a.m. they knew one of the passengers had been stabbed, possibly fatally, although this news was transmitted by Ms. Sweeney at least 15 minutes earlier. "We were also receiving information from the F.A.A. that, instead of heading west on its intended flight path, Flight 11 was headed south. We believed that Flight 11 might be headed for the New York area. Our pilots were not responding to air traffic control or company radio calls, and the aircraft transponder had been turned off."

Mr. Arpey's account revealed that the American Airlines executives had attempted to monitor the progress of Flight 11 via communications with the F.A.A. and their traffic-control officials. "As far as we knew, the rest of our airline was operating normally at this point," he said.

But Flight 11 had missed its first mark at 8:13 a.m., when, shortly after controllers asked the pilot to climb to 35,000 feet, the transponder stopped transmitting the electronic signal that identifies exact location and altitude. Air traffic manager Glenn Michael later said, "We considered it at that time to be a possible hijacking."

At 8:14 a.m., F.A.A. flight controllers in Boston began hearing an extraordinary radio transmission from the cockpit of Flight 11 that should have set off alarm bells. Before their F.A.A. superiors forbade them to talk to anyone, two of the controllers told the Christian Science Monitor on Sept. 11 that the captain of Flight 11, John Ogonowski, was surreptitiously triggering a "push-to-talk" button on the aircraft's yoke most of the way to New York. When controllers picked up the voices of men speaking in Arabic and heavily accented English, they knew something was terribly wrong. More than one F.A.A. controller heard an ominous statement by a terrorist in the background saying, "We have more planes. We have other planes."

Apparently, none of this crucial information was transmitted to other American pilots already airborne-notably Flight 77 out of Dulles, which took off at 8:20 a.m. only to be redirected to its target, the Pentagon-or to other airlines with planes in harm's way: United's Flight 173, which took off at 8:14 a.m. from Boston, or United's Flight 93, whose "wheels-up" was recorded at 8:42 a.m.

"You would have thought American's S.O.C. would have grounded everything," says Ms. Dillard. "They were in the lead spot, they're in Texas-they had control over the whole system. They could have stopped it. Everybody should have been grounded."

Ms. Dillard had to learn about the two planes crashing into the World Trade Center from the screams of waiting passengers in the next-door Admirals Club who were watching TV. "We all rushed back to our offices to wait for 'go-do's' from headquarters," she recalls. But headquarters personnel never contacted Ms. Dillard, the Washington base manager, to inform her that Flight 77 was in trouble. They had lost radio contact with the plane out of Dulles at 8:50 a.m. More than 45 minutes later, her assistant gave Ms. Dillard an even more devastating piece of news.

"There's a plane that hit the Pentagon. Our crew was on it."

"Was that 77?" Ms. Dillard asked.

"I think so," her assistant said.

"Are you sure it was 77?" Ms. Dillard pressed. "Cause I just took Eddie over to Dulles," Ms. Dillard said numbly, referring to her husband. "Eddie's on that plane."

She looked at the crew list. Her heart sank. "I knew one of the ladies very well," she later remembered, "and she had kids, and the other two who were married, and another one was pregnant. It was horrible."

One of American's top corporate executives directly in the line of authority that day was Jane Allen, then vice president of in-flight services, in charge of the company's 24,000 flight attendants and management and operations at 22 bases. She was Ms. Dillard's top boss. But Ms. Dillard never heard from her until after Flight 77 had plowed into the Pentagon. Reached at United Airlines corporate headquarters in Chicago, where Ms. Allen now works, she was asked to confirm the names of participants in the Sept. 11 phone call and why the decision was made to hold back that information.

"I really don't know what I could possibly add to all the hurt," she said.

But was it too much information, or too little, that was hurtful?

"I really am not interested in helping or participating," Ms. Allen said, putting down the phone.

"This has been the attitude all the way along," Ms. Dillard observed. "Everybody was keeping it hush-hush."

The failure to trumpet vital news

from calls placed from the first hijacked flight throughout the system and into the highest circles of government leaves families wondering whether military jets could have intercepted American Airlines Flight 77 in time to keep it from diving into the Pentagon and killing 184 more people. That suicide mission ended in triumph for the terrorists more than 50 minutes after the first American jetliner hit the World Trade Center. Suppose American Airlines had warned all its pilots and crew of what their families were able to see and hear from the media?

The information hold-back may have arisen from lack of experience, or from the inability to register the enormity of the terrorists' destructive plans, or it may have been a visceral desire to protect the airlines from liability. The airlines make much of the fact that the "common strategy" for civil aircraft crews before 9/11 was to react passively to hijackings—"to refrain from trying to overpower or negotiate with hijackers, to land the aircraft as soon as possible, to communicate with authorities, and to try delaying tactics."

This strategy was based on the assumption that the hijackers would want to be flown safely to an airport of their choice to make their demands.

But that defense of the airlines' actions is belied by the fact that the F.A.A., which was in contact with American Airlines and other traffic-control centers, heard the tip-off from terrorists in Flight 11's cockpit—"We have planes, more planes"—and thus knew before the first crash of a possible multiple hijacking and the use of planes as weapons.

To this writer's knowledge, there has been no public mention of the Flight 11 pilot's narrative since the news report on Sept. 12, 2001. When Peg Ogonowski, the pilot's wife, asked American Airlines to let her listen to that tape,

she never heard back.

Mike Low had been quite upbeat

going into the meeting. He had just learned that his 28-year-old daughter Sara, another crew member on Flight 11, had not been incapacitated by the Mace the terrorists sprayed in the front cabin. The F.B.I. had notified him that Sara had given Ms. Sweeney her father's calling card, which allowed the 32-year-old mother of two to pretend to be a passenger and use an AirFone to call Logan Airport and relay the vital information.

"I'm a very old-fashioned and simple small-town person," Mr. Low had told me beforehand. He owns and operates a concrete and asphalt business in Batesville, Ark. "I want to believe our government, even after all the mishaps, is doing everything they possibly can."

Coming out of the hearing, he was a different man.

"I find it alarming that the airline and the F.A.A. would want to hold something as horrific as a hijacking among a few people," he said, "when bells and whistles should have been going off in all categories of responsibility."

Agents had allowed families to talk informally with them after the meeting, and Mr. Low had some very frank questions for an F.A.A. representative.

"The warning from F.A.A. in the summer of 2001 was supposedly given to all the airlines on CD-ROM's," he said. "Where did those warnings go? To flight crews? I have never had any indication that any pilot or flight attendant heard those warnings."

He added that the F.A.A. man had nothing to tell him.

"I'd been with American for 29 years," Ms.

Dillard said with embittered pride. "My job was supervision over all the flight attendants who flew out of National, Baltimore or Dulles. In the summer of 2001, we had absolutely no warnings about any threats of hijackings or terrorism, from the airline or from the F.A.A."

Alice Hoglan's face was ashen when she emerged from the meeting. The mother of one of the brave, doomed passengers on United Airlines Flight 93, Mark Bingham, a gay rugby player, Ms. Hoglan now knew even more vividly what her son had kept from her when he had called. Along with Todd Beamer and other brave passengers, he had helped lead a passenger revolt aboard Flight 93, which was heading toward Washington and either Congress or the White House.

"It was excruciating," she said, her lips biting off the few upbeat words she could muster. "I'm just very grateful that the people on Flight 93, the heroes who were able to act, died on their feet and doing the very best they could to preserve lives on the ground."

Ms. Hoglan, who worked 29 years as a flight attendant for United, the airline on which her son was killed, was still flying for United in the summer of 2001. She had come to the hearing neatly dressed in a gray suit, her eyes bright in anticipation of deeper understanding. Afterwards, her wispy silver hair looked like it had been raked through in frustration. Her eyes blazed with reignited anguish and sank back into a mother's face that could only be described as ravaged. She is among the 115 families who rejected the financial buyout by the federal Victims' Compensation Fund in order to preserve her right to sue the airlines and government agencies who failed to warn or protect Americans from the third terrorist bombing on our homeland.

"I've been learning a lot," said Ms. Hoglan. "During the summer of 2001, there were 12 directives sent by the F.A.A.-which are now supposedly classified-notifying the airlines of

specific threats that terrorists were planning to hijack their aircrafts. The airlines apparently buried that information and didn't tell us."

A Freedom of Information Act request has confirmed that the F.A.A. sent a dozen warnings to the airlines between May and September of 2001. Those 35 pages of alerts are being exempted from public disclosure by a federal statute that covers "information that would be detrimental to the security of transportation if disclosed." Most rational people would say that the non-disclosure of the alerts was what was detrimental to the security of transportation on Sept. 11.

"The F.B.I. gathered the evidence, gave it to the F.A.A., the F.A.A. gave it to the airlines, and the airlines didn't tell us," Ms. Hoglan said. "I was a working flight attendant with United that summer, in 2001, and I never heard a thing. I'm suing United Airlines, and I'm very keen on the role of the flight attendants in Sept. 11."

The same lament was sounded by Ms. Ogonowski, who was also a senior working flight attendant in the summer of 2001, for American Airlines. She had crewed many times on the 767 that her husband piloted on the morning of Sept. 11. "I'm an insider. There was no warning to be more vigilant. We were sitting ducks. My husband was such a big, commanding man, six feet tall. He didn't have a shot in hell. These people come in behind him, he's sitting low, forward, strapped in-the same with his co-pilot. No warning. If they'd been alerted to possibilities ... but people were complacent."

Ms. Ogonowski was legally required to exempt American Airlines from her lawsuit in order to accept workmen's compensation from the company for her husband's death on the job. "But I never felt American was at fault," she said. "Our own C.I.A. and F.B.I. failed us. They should have been able to be more prepared, and warned us."

Some of the families of victims aboard Flight 93 were painfully reminded of the cockpit tape the F.B.I. allowed them to hear one year ago. That was the "Let's roll" flight, for which Beamer and the other passengers have been celebrated for their quick thinking and courageous confrontation with the terrorists.

"There was a lot of yelling by passengers, like you'd hear in a huddle," one family member told me, requesting anonymity for fear of being thrown out of the suit against the airlines. "It sounded like, 'In the cockpit, in the cockpit-if we don't get in there, we'll die!' Then we heard crashing dishes. Then screaming among the terrorists, frightened screams, as if to say, 'You got me! You're killing me!'"

Some of the relatives are keen to find out why, at the peak of this struggle, the tape suddenly stops recording voices and all that is heard in the last 60 seconds or so is engine noise. Had the tape been tampered with? When I put their question to Mr. Novak, the lead prosecutor on Flight 93, he said curtly, "I'm not going to comment on that, and neither should have they. They violated that nondisclosure agreement by telling you the contents of that cockpit voice recorder."

Why didn't United at least warn the pilots of Flight 93 to bar the cockpit door, some of the families wanted to know?

Ed Ballinger, the flight dispatcher for United Airlines that morning, was the last human being to talk to the cockpit of Flight 93. He had 16 flights taking off early that morning from the East Coast to the West Coast. When United's Flight 175 began acting erratically and failed to respond to his warnings, he began banging out the same enigmatic message to all his planes: "Beware of cockpit intrusion."

Flight 93, the last of the hijacked planes, called him back and said "Hi, Ed. Confirmed."

Mr. Ballinger said he didn't wait for his

superiors or for Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta's decision to ground all flights. He sent out a Stop-Fly alert to all crews. But United dispatchers were instructed by their superiors not to tell the pilots why they were being instructed to land, he claims.

"One of the things that upset me was that they knew, 45 minutes before [Flight 93 crashed], that American Airlines had a problem. I put the story together myself [from news accounts]," Mr. Ballinger said. "Perhaps if I had the information sooner, I might have gotten the message to [Flight] 93 to bar the door."

This week, when the 9/11 com-

mission holds its 12th and final hearings on Wednesday and Thursday, it will drill down on the excuses offered by the nation's air defense network, NORAD, to explain why it failed utterly to order a protective cap of fighter jets over the nation's capitol as soon as the world knew that the nation was under attack. Families will be listening carefully when the commission questions the head of NORAD's Northeast Air Defense Sector, General Ralph E. Eberhart. NORAD had as long as 50 minutes to order fighter jets to intercept Flight 93 in its path toward Washington, D.C. But NORAD's official timeline claims that F.A.A. notification to NORAD on Flight 93 is "not available." The public will hear further questioning of military officials all the way up to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard Myers, who wasn't notified until after the attack on the Pentagon.

So many unconnected dots, contradictions and implausible coincidences. Like the fact that NORAD was running an imaginary terrorist-attack drill called "Vigilant Guardian" on the same morning as the real-world attacks. At 8:40 a.m., when a sergeant at NORAD's center in Rome, N.Y., notified his northeastern commander, Col. Robert Marr, of a possible hijacked airliner-American Flight 11-the colonel wondered aloud if it was part of the exercise. This same confusion was played out at the

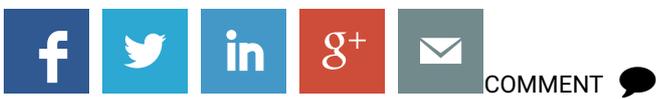
lower levels of the NORAD network.

What's more, the decades-old procedure for a quick response by the nation's air defense had been changed in June of 2001. Now, instead of NORAD's military commanders being able to issue the command to launch fighter jets, approval had to be sought from the civilian Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld. This change is extremely significant, because Mr. Rumsfeld claims to have been "out of the loop" nearly the entire morning of 9/11. He isn't on the record as having given any orders that morning. In fact, he didn't even go to the White House situation room; he had to walk to the window of his office in the Pentagon to see that the country's military headquarters was in flames.

Mr. Rumsfeld claimed at a previous commission hearing that protection against attack inside the homeland was not his responsibility. It was, he said, "a law-enforcement issue."

Why, in that case, did he take onto himself the responsibility of approving NORAD's deployment of fighter planes?

The families of the vanished bodies and unsettled souls of 9/11 are still waiting to have the dots connected. Until that happens, many continue to feel perforations in their hearts that even time will not heal.



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