

The NORAD Tapes

9/11 Live: The NORAD Tapes

How did the U.S. Air Force respond on 9/11? Could it have shot down United 93, as conspiracy theorists claim? Obtaining 30 hours of never-before-released tapes from the control room of NORAD's Northeast headquarters, the author reconstructs the chaotic military history of that day—and the Pentagon's apparent attempt to cover it up.

VF.com exclusive: See excerpts from the September 11 NORAD tapes.

By MICHAEL BRONNER

Jucked in a piney notch in the gentle folds of the Adirondacks' southern skirts—just up from a derelict Mohawk, Adirondack & Northern rail spur—is a 22-year-old aluminum bunker tricked out with antennae tilted skyward. It could pass for the Jetsons' garage or, in the estimation of one of the higher-ranking U.S. Air Force officers stationed there, a big, sideways, half-buried beer keg.

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"This is not an exercise"

As Major Kevin Nasypany, the facility's mission-crew commander, drove up the hill to work on the morning of 9/11, he was dressed in his flight suit and prepared for battle. Not a real one. The Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS), where Nasypany had been stationed since 1994, is the regional headquarters for the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), the Cold War-era military organization charged with protecting North American airspace. As he poured his first coffee on that sunny September morning, the odds that he would have to defend against Russian "Bear Bombers," one of NORAD's traditional simulated missions, were slim. Rather, Nasypany (pronounced Nah-sip-a-nee), an amiable commander with a thick mini-mustache and a hockey player's build, was headed in early to get ready for the NORAD-wide training exercise he'd helped design. The battle commander, Colonel Bob Marr, had promised to bring in fritters.

NEADS is a desolate place, the sole orphan left behind after the dismantling of what was once one of the country's busiest bomber bases—Griffiss Air Force Base, in Rome, New York, which was otherwise mothballed in the mid-90s. NEADS's mission remained in place and continues today: its officers, air-traffic controllers, and air-surveillance and communications technicians—mostly American, with a handful of Canadian troops—are responsible for protecting a half-million-square-mile chunk of American airspace stretching from the East Coast to Tennessee, up through the Dakotas to the Canadian border, including Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago.

It was into this airspace that violence descended on 9/11, and from the NEADS operations floor that what turned out to be the sum total of America's military response during those critical 100-some minutes of the attack—scrambling four armed fighter jets and one unarmed training plane—emanated.

The story of what happened in that room, and when, has never been fully told, but is arguably more important in terms of understanding America's military capabilities that day than anything happening simultaneously on Air Force One or in the Pentagon, the White House, or NORAD's impregnable headquarters, deep within Cheyenne Mountain, in Colorado. It's a story that was intentionally obscured, some members of the 9/11 commission believe, by military higher-ups and members of the Bush administration who spoke to the press, and later the commission itself, in order to downplay the extent of the confusion and miscommunication flying through the ranks of the government.

The truth, however, is all on tape.

Through the heat of the attack the wheels of what were, perhaps, some of the more modern pieces of equipment in the room—four Dictaphone multi-channel reel-to-reel tape recorders mounted on a rack in a corner of the operations floor—spun impassively, recording every radio channel, with time stamps.

The recordings are fascinating and chilling. A mix of staccato bursts of military code; urgent, overlapping voices; the tense crackle of radio traffic from fighter pilots in the air; commanders' orders piercing through a mounting din; and candid moments of emotion as the breadth of the attacks becomes clearer.

For the NEADS crew, 9/11 was not a story of four hijacked airplanes, but one of a heated chase after more than a dozen potential hijackings—some real, some phantom—that emerged from the turbulence of misinformation that spiked in the first 100 minutes of the attack and continued well into the afternoon and evening. At one point, in the span of a single mad minute, one hears Nasypany struggling to parse reports of four separate hijackings at once. What emerges from the barrage of what Nasypany dubs "bad poop" flying at his troops from all directions is a picture of remarkable composure. Snap decisions more often than not turn out to be the right ones as commanders kick-start the dormant military machine. It is the fog and friction of war live—the authentic military history of 9/11.

"The real story is actually better than the one we told," a NORAD general admitted to 9/11-commission staffers when confronted with evidence from the tapes that contradicted his original testimony. And so it seems.

Subpoenaed by the commission during its investigation, the recordings have never been played publicly beyond a handful of sound bites presented during the commission's hearings. Last September, as part of my research for the film *United 93*, on which I was an associate producer, I requested copies from the Pentagon. I was played snippets, but told my chances of hearing the full recordings were nonexistent. So it was a surprise, to say the least, when a military public-affairs officer e-mailed me, a full seven months later, saying she'd been cleared, finally, to provide them.

"The signing of the Declaration of Independence took less coordination," she wrote.

I would ultimately get three CDs with huge digital "wav file" recordings of the various channels in each section of the operations floor, 30-some hours of material in full, covering six and a half hours of real time. The first disc, which arrived by mail, was decorated with blue sky and fluffy white clouds and was labeled, in the playful Apple Chancery font, "Northeast Air Defense Sector—DAT Audio Files—11 Sep 2001."

"THIS IS NOT AN EXERCISE"

At 8:14 a.m., as an Egyptian and four Saudis commandeered the cockpit on American 11, the plane that would hit the north tower of the World Trade Center, only a handful of troops were on the NEADS "ops" floor. That's the facility's war room: a dimly lit den arrayed with long rows of radarscopes and communications equipment facing a series of 15-foot screens lining the front wall. The rest of the crew, about 30 Americans and five or six Canadians, were checking e-mails or milling around the hall. A briefing on the morning's training exercise was wrapping up in the Battle Cab, the glassed-in command area overlooking the ops floor.

On the Dictaphone decks, an automated voice on each channel ticked off, in Greenwich Mean Time, the last few moments of life in pre-9/11 America: "12 hours, 26 minutes, 20 seconds"—just before 8:30 a.m. eastern daylight time.

The first human voices captured on tape that morning are those of the "ID techs"—Senior Airman Stacia Rountree, 23 at the time, Tech Sergeant Shelley Watson, 40, and their boss, Master Sergeant Maureen "Mo" Dooley, 40. They are stationed in the back right corner of the ops floor at a console with several phones and a radarscope. Their job in a crisis is to facilitate communications between NEADS, the civilian F.A.A., and other military commands, gathering whatever information they can and sending it up the chain. Dooley—her personality at once motherly and aggressive—generally stands behind the other two, who are seated.

The tapes catch them discussing strategy of an entirely domestic order:

08:37:08 *O.K., a couch, an ottoman, a love seat, and what else ... ? Was it on sale ... ? Holy smokes! What color is it?*

In the background, however, you can make out the sound of Jeremy Powell, then 31, a burly, amiable technical sergeant, fielding the phone call that will be the military's first notification that something is wrong. On the line is Boston Center, the civilian air-traffic-control facility that handles that region's high-flying airliners.

08:37:52 *BOSTON CENTER: Hi. Boston Center T.M.U. [Traffic Management Unit], we have a problem here. We have a hijacked aircraft headed towards New York, and we need you guys to, we need someone to scramble some F-16s or something up there, help us out. POWELL: Is this real-world or exercise? BOSTON CENTER: No, this is not an exercise, not a test. PLAY | STOP*

Powell's question—"Is this real-world or exercise?"—is heard nearly verbatim over and over on the tapes as troops funnel onto the ops floor and are briefed about the hijacking. Powell, like almost everyone in the room, first assumes the phone call is from the simulations team on hand to send "inputs"—simulated scenarios—into play for the day's training exercise.

Boston's request for fighter jets is not as prescient as it might seem. Standard hijack protocol calls for fighters to be launched—"scrambled"—merely to establish a presence in the air. The pilots are trained to trail the hijacked plane at a distance of about five miles, out of sight, following it until, presumably, it lands. If necessary, they can show themselves, flying up close to establish visual contact, and, if the situation demands, maneuver to force the plane to land.

At this point, certainly, the notion of actually firing anything at a passenger jet hasn't crossed anyone's mind.

In the ID section, the women overhear the word "hijack" and react, innocently enough, as anyone might with news of something exciting going on at work:

8:37:56 *WATSON: What? DOOLEY: Whoa! WATSON: What was that? ROUNTREE: Is that real-world? DOOLEY: Real-world hijack. WATSON: Cool!* **PLAY | STOP**

For the first time in their careers, they'll get to put their training to full use.

Almost simultaneously, a P.A. announcement goes out for Major Nasypany, who's taking his morning constitutional.

08:37:58 *P.A.: Major Nasypany, you're needed in ops pronto. P.A.: Major Nasypany, you're needed in ops pronto. [Recorded phone line:] SERGEANT MCCAIN: Northeast Air Defense Sector, Sergeant McCain, can I help you? SERGEANT KELLY: Yeah, Sergeant Kelly from Otis, how you doing today? SERGEANT MCCAIN: Yeah, go ahead. SERGEANT KELLY: The—I'm gettin' reports from my TRACON [local civilian air traffic] that there might be a possible hijacking. SERGEANT MCCAIN: I was just hearing the same thing. We're workin' it right now. SERGEANT KELLY: O.K., thanks.* **PLAY | STOP**

"When they told me there was a hijack, my first reaction was 'Somebody started the exercise early,'" Nasypany later told me. The day's exercise was designed to run a range of scenarios, including a "traditional" simulated hijack in which politically motivated perpetrators commandeer an aircraft, land on a Cuba-like island, and seek asylum. "I actually said out loud, 'The hijack's not supposed to be for another hour,'" Nasypany recalled. (The fact that there was an exercise planned for the same day as the attack factors into several conspiracy theories, though the 9/11 commission dismisses this as coincidence. After plodding through dozens of hours of recordings, so do I.)

On tape, one hears as Nasypany, following standard hijack protocol, prepares to launch two fighters from Otis Air National Guard Base, on Cape Cod, to look for American 11, which is now off course and headed south. He orders his Weapons Team—the group on the ops floor that controls the fighters—to put the Otis planes on "battle stations." This means that at the air base the designated "alert" pilots—two in this case—are jolted into action by a piercing "battle horn." They run to their jets, climb up, strap in, and do everything they need to do to get ready to fly short of starting the engines.

Meanwhile, the communications team at NEADS—the ID techs Dooley, Rountree, and Watson—are trying to find out, as fast as possible, everything they can about the hijacked plane: the airline, the flight number, the tail number (to help fighter pilots identify it in the air), its flight plan, the number of passengers ("souls on board" in military parlance), and, most important, where it is, so Nasypany can launch the fighters. All the ID section knows is that the plane is American Airlines, Flight No. 11, Boston to Los Angeles, currently somewhere north of John F. Kennedy International Airport—the point of reference used by civilian controllers.

ID tech Watson places a call to the management desk at Boston Center, which first alerted NEADS to the hijack, and gets distressing news.

08:39:58 WATSON: *It's the inbound to J.F.K.?* BOSTON CENTER: *We—we don't know.* WATSON: *You don't know where he is at all?* BOSTON CENTER: *He's being hijacked. The pilot's having a hard time talking to the—I mean, we don't know. We don't know where he's goin'. He's heading towards Kennedy. He's—like I said, he's like 35 miles north of Kennedy now at 367 knots. We have no idea where he's goin' or what his intentions are.* WATSON: *If you could please give us a call and let us know—you know any information, that'd be great.* BOSTON CENTER: *Okay. Right now, I guess we're trying to work on—I guess there's been some threats in the cockpit. The pilot—* WATSON: *There's been what?! I'm sorry.* UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: *Threat to the ... ?* BOSTON CENTER: *We'll call you right back as soon as we know more info.*

Dooley is standing over Watson, shouting whatever pertinent information she hears to Nasypany, who's now in position in the center of the floor.

08:40:36 DOOLEY: *O.K., he said threat to the cockpit!* **PLAY | STOP**

This last bit ratchets the tension in the room up considerably.

At Otis Air National Guard Base, the pilots are in their jets, straining at the reins. ("When the horn goes off, it definitely gets your heart," F-15 pilot Major Dan Nash later told me, thumping his chest with his hand.) But at NEADS, Nasypany's "tracker techs" in the Surveillance section still can't find American 11 on their scopes. As it turns out, this is just as the hijackers intended.

Radar is the NEADS controllers' most vital piece of equipment, but by 9/11 the scopes were so old, among other factors, that controllers were ultimately unable to find any of the hijacked planes in enough time to react. Known collectively as the Green Eye for the glow the radar rings give off, the scopes looked like something out of *Dr. Strangelove* and were strikingly anachronistic compared with the equipment at civilian air-traffic sites. (After 9/11, NEADS was equipped with state-of-the-art equipment.)

In order to find a hijacked airliner—or any airplane—military controllers need either the plane's beacon code (broadcast from an electronic transponder on board) or the plane's exact coordinates. When the hijackers on **American 11 turned the beacon off**, intentionally losing themselves in the dense sea of airplanes already flying over the U.S. that morning (a tactic that would be repeated, with some variations, on all the hijacked flights), the NEADS controllers were at a loss.

"You would see thousands of green blips on your scope," Nasypany told me, "and now you have to pick and choose. Which is the bad guy out there? Which is the hijacked aircraft? And without that information from F.A.A., it's a needle in a haystack."

At this point in the morning, more than 3,000 jetliners are already in the air over the continental United States, and the Boston controller's direction—"35 miles north of Kennedy"—doesn't help the NEADS controllers at all.

On tape, amid the confusion, one hears Major James Fox, then 32, the leader of the Weapons Team, whose composure will stand out throughout the attack, make an observation that, so far, ranks as the understatement of the morning.

08:43:06FOX: *I've never seen so much real-world stuff happen during an exercise.* **PLAY | STOP**

Less than two minutes later, frustrated that the controllers still can't pinpoint American 11 on radar, Nasypany orders Fox to launch the Otis fighters anyway.

08:44:59FOX: *M.C.C. [Mission Crew Commander], I don't know where I'm scrambling these guys to. I need a direction, a destination—NASYPANY: O.K., I'm gonna give you the Z point [coordinate]. It's just north of—New York City.*FOX: *I got this lat long, 41-15, 74-36, or 73-46.*NASYPANY: *Head 'em in that direction.*FOX: *Copy that.* **PLAY | STOP**

Having them up, Nasypany figures, is better than having them on the ground, assuming NEADS will ultimately pin down American 11's position. His job is to be proactive—to try to gain leverage over the situation as fast as possible. His backstop is Colonel Marr, the battle commander and Nasypany's superior up in the Battle Cab, whose role is more strategic, calculating the implications of each move several hours down the line.

Marr, 48 at the time (and since retired), is a well-liked leader. Most of his conversations on 9/11 are unrecorded: he speaks over a secure phone with his superior, Major General

Larry Arnold, stationed at NORAD's command center at Tyndall Air Force Base, in Florida, or over an intercom with Nasypany. In the latter case, only Nasypany's side of the conversations is recorded.

In the last lines of his first briefing to Marr, Nasypany unwittingly, in his last line, trumps Fox in the realm of understatement.

08:46:36NASYPANY: *Hi, sir. O.K., what—what we're doing, we're tryin' to locate this guy. We can't find him via I.F.F. [the Identification Friend or Foe system]. What we're gonna do, we're gonna hit up every track within a 25-mile radius of this Z-point [coordinate] that we put on the scope. Twenty-nine thousand [feet] heading 1-9-0 [east]. We're just gonna do—we're gonna try to find this guy. They can't find him. There's supposedly been threats to the cockpit. So we're just doing the thing ... [off-mic conversation] True. And probably right now with what's going on in the cockpit it's probably really crazy. So, it probably needs to—that will simmer down and we'll probably get some better information.* **PLAY | STOP**

American 11 slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center four seconds into this transmission.

more than 150 miles from Manhattan, within the same minute as American 11 hits the tower, the stoplight in the Alert Barn at Otis Air National Guard Base on Cape Cod turns from red to green, Colonel Marr and General Arnold having approved Nasypany's order to scramble the fighters. The pilots taxi out and fire the afterburners as the planes swing onto the runway. NEADS has no indication yet that American 11 has crashed.

Five minutes later, Rountree, at the ID station, gets the first report of the crash from Boston Center (as her colleagues Watson and Dooley overhear).

08:51:11ROUNTREE: *A plane just hit the World Trade Center.* WATSON: *What?* ROUNTREE: *Was it a 737?* UNIDENTIFIED MALE (background): *Hit what?* WATSON: *The World Trade Center—* DOOLEY: *Who are you talking to?* [Gasps.] WATSON: *Oh!* DOOLEY: *Get—pass—pass it to them—* WATSON: *Oh my God. Oh God. Oh my God.* ROUNTREE: *Saw it on the news. It's—a plane just crashed into the World Trade Center.* DOOLEY: *Update New York! See if they lost altitude on that plane altogether.*

Watson places a call to civilian controllers at New York Center.

WATSON: *Yes, ma'am. Did you just hear the information regarding the World Trade Center?* NEW YORK CENTER: *No.* WATSON: *Being hit by an aircraft?* NEW YORK CENTER: *I'm sorry?!* WATSON: *Being hit by an aircraft.* NEW YORK CENTER: *You're kidding.* WATSON: *It's on the world news.* **PLAY | STOP**

In light of this news, someone asks Nasypany what to do with the fighters—the two F-15s from Otis Air National Guard Base—which have now just blasted off for New York at full afterburner to find American 11. (The flying time at full speed from Cape Cod to New York is about 10 minutes.) Pumped with adrenaline, Nasypany doesn't miss a beat.

08:52:40 *NASYPANY: Send 'em to New York City still. Continue! Go! NASYPANY: This is what I got. Possible news that a 737 just hit the World Trade Center. This is a real-world. And we're trying to confirm this. Okay. Continue taking the fighters down to the New York City area, J.F.K. area, if you can. Make sure that the F.A.A. clears it—your route all the way through. Do what we gotta do, okay? Let's press with this. It looks like this guy could have hit the World Trade Center.* **PLAY | STOP**

"I'm not gonna stop what I initially started with scrambling Otis—getting Otis over New York City," Nasypany recalled when I played him this section of his tape. "If this is a false report, I still have my fighters where I want them to be."

Meanwhile, confusion is building on the ops floor over whether the plane that hit the tower really was American 11. Rumors that it was a small Cessna have started to circulate through the civilian air-traffic system. ID tech Rountree is on the phone with Boston Center's military liaison, Colin Scoggins, a civilian manager, who at first seems to confirm that it was American 11 that went into the tower.

08:55:18 *BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): Yeah, he crashed into the World Trade Center. ROUNTREE: That is the aircraft that crashed into the World Trade Center? BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): Yup. Disregard the—disregard the tail number [given earlier for American 11]. ROUNTREE: Disregard the tail number? He did crash into the World Trade Center? BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): That's—that's what we believe, yes.* **PLAY | STOP**

But an unidentified male trooper at NEADS overhears the exchange and raises a red flag.

08:56:31 *MALE NEADS TECH: I never heard them say American Airlines Flight 11 hit the World Trade Center. I heard it was a civilian aircraft.*

Dooley, the ID desk's master sergeant, takes the phone from Rountree to confirm for herself, and the story veers off course ...

DOOLEY (to Boston): Master Sergeant Dooley here. We need to have—are you giving confirmation that American 11 was the one—BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): No, we're not gonna confirm that at this time. We just know an aircraft crashed in and ... DOOLEY: You—are you—can you say—is anyone up there tracking primary on this guy still? BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): No. The last [radar sighting] we have was about 15 miles east of J.F.K., or eight miles east of J.F.K. was our last primary hit. He did slow down in speed. The primary that we had, it slowed down below—around to 300 knots. DOOLEY: And then you lost 'em? BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): Yeah, and then we lost 'em. **PLAY | STOP**

The problem, Scoggins told me later, was that American Airlines refused to confirm for several hours that its plane had hit the tower. This lack of confirmation caused uncertainty that would be compounded in a very big way as the attack continued. (Though airlines have their own means of monitoring the location of their planes and communicating with their pilots, they routinely go into information lockdown in a crisis.)

Amid the chaos, Nasypany notices that some of his people are beginning to panic, so he makes a joke to relieve the tension.

08:57:11NASYPANY: *Think we put the exercise on the hold. What do you think?*
[Laughter.]

Just at that moment, in one of the dark, U-shaped air-traffic-control areas at New York Center, on Long Island, a half-dozen civilian controllers are watching a second plane that's turned off course: United 175, also scheduled from Boston to Los Angeles. As the controllers try to hail the pilots, a manager comes running in and confirms that the plane that hit the first tower was, indeed, a commercial airliner, rather than a small Cessna. It's just at that moment that United 175, 38 minutes into its flight and now near Allentown, Pennsylvania, moving southwest farther and farther off course, makes a sudden swing northeast toward Manhattan. Suddenly—instantly—the civilian controllers know: it's another hijacking, and it's not going to land.

The controllers start speculating what the hijacker is aiming at—one guesses the Statue of Liberty—and the room erupts in profanity and horror. One controller is looking at his scope, calling out the rate of descent every 12 seconds as he watches the radar refresh. It is not until the last second, literally, that anyone from New York Center thinks to update NEADS. ID tech Rountree fields the call.

09:03:17ROUNTREE: *They have a second possible hijack!* **PLAY | STOP**

Almost simultaneously, United 175 slams into the south tower of the World Trade Center, something several NEADS personnel witness live on CNN, including Colonel Marr, the commanding officer. (Dooley told me she remembers looking up toward the Battle Cab and, for a long moment, seeing Marr's jaw drop and everyone around him frozen.)

On the ops floor, there is considerable confusion as to whether the second hijacking New York Center just called in is the same plane that hit the second tower, or whether there are now three missing planes.

09:03:52NASYPANY (to Marr): *Sir, we got—we've got unconfirmed second hit from another aircraft. Fighters are south of—just south of Long Island, sir. Right now. Fighters are south of Long Island.*

There's seemingly enough commotion in the Battle Cab that Nasypany needs to clarify: "Our fighters ... " The two F-15s, scrambled from Otis, are now approaching the city.

In the background, several troops can be heard trying to make sense of what's happening.

09:04:50—*Is this explosion part of that that we're lookin' at now on TV?—Yes.—Jesus ...—And there's a possible second hijack also—a United Airlines ...—Two planes? ...—Get the fuck out ...—I think this is a damn input, to be honest.* **PLAY | STOP**

The last line—"I think this is a damn input"—is a reference to the exercise, meaning a simulations input. It's either gallows humor or wishful thinking. From the tape, it's hard to tell.

"WE'VE ALREADY HAD TWO. WHY NOT MORE?" *m*eanwhile, flying southwest over the ocean, the two fighters from Otis Air National Guard Base are streaking toward Manhattan. The pilots are startled, to say the least, when they see billowing smoke appear on the horizon; no one's briefed them about what's going on. They were scrambled simply to intercept and escort American 11—a possible hijacking—and that is all they know.

"From 100 miles away at least, we could see the fire and the smoke blowing," Major Dan Nash, one of the F-15 pilots, told me. "Obviously, anybody watching CNN had a better idea of what was going on. We were not told anything. It was to the point where we were flying supersonic towards New York and the controller came on and said, 'A second airplane has hit the World Trade Center.' ... My first thought was 'What happened to American 11?'"

With both towers now in flames, Nasypany wants the fighters over Manhattan immediately, but the weapons techs get "pushback" from civilian F.A.A. controllers, who have final authority over the fighters as long as they are in civilian airspace. The F.A.A. controllers are afraid of fast-moving fighters colliding with a passenger plane, of which there are hundreds in the area, still flying normal routes—the morning's unprecedented order to ground all civilian aircraft has not yet been given. To Nasypany, the fact that so many planes are still in the sky is all the more reason to get the fighters close. ("We've already had two," he told me, referring to the hijackings. "Why not more?")

The fighters are initially directed to a holding area just off the coast, near Long Island.

*n*asypany isn't happy, and he makes sure that's duly noted for posterity as he calls out to Major Fox, the leader of the Weapons Team.

09:07:20 *NASYPANY: Okay, Foxy. Plug in. I want to make sure this is on tape. ... This is what—this is what I foresee that we probably need to do. We need to talk to F.A.A. We need to tell 'em if this stuff's gonna keep on going, we need to take those fighters on and then put 'em over Manhattan, O.K.? That's the best thing. That's the best play right now. So, coordinate with the F.A.A. Tell 'em if there's more out there, which we don't know, let's get 'em over Manhattan. At least we got some kinda play.* **PLAY | STOP**

He tells the Battle Cab he wants Fox to launch two more fighters from Langley Air Force Base, in Virginia, to establish a greater presence over New York, but the request is refused. The order from the Battle Cab is to put the Langley jets on battle stations only—to be ready, but not to launch.

"The problem there would have been I'd have all my fighters in the air at the same time, which means they'd all run out of gas at the same time," Marr later explained.

Incredibly, Marr has only four armed fighters at his disposal to defend about a quarter of the continental United States. Massive cutbacks at the close of the Cold War reduced NORAD's arsenal of fighters from some 60 battle-ready jets to just 14 across the entire country. (Under different commands, the military generally maintains several hundred unarmed fighter jets for training in the continental U.S.) Only four of NORAD's planes belong to NEADS and are thus anywhere close to Manhattan—the two from Otis, now circling above the ocean off Long Island, and the two in Virginia at Langley.

Nasypany starts walking up and down the floor, asking all his section heads and weapons techs if they are prepared to shoot down a civilian airliner if need be, but he's jumping the gun: he doesn't have the authority to order a shutdown, nor does Marr or Arnold, or Vice President Cheney, for that matter. The order will need to come from President Bush, who has only just learned of the attack at a photo op in Florida.

On the ops floor, you hear Nasypany firmly pressing the issue. He briefs Marr on the armaments on board the F-15s, and how he sees best to use them "if need be":

9:19:44 *NASYPANY: My recommendation, if we have to take anybody out, large aircraft, we use AIM-9s in the face.... If need be.* **PLAY | STOP**

If there's another hijacking and the jets can engage, Nasypany is telling Marr, a missile fired into the nose of the plane will have the greatest chance of bringing it down.

But the prospect soon becomes real. Mo Dooley's voice erupts from the ID station on the operations floor.

9:21:37 *DOOLEY: Another hijack! It's headed towards Washington!* *NASYPANY: Shit! Give me a location.* *UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Okay. Third aircraft—hijacked—heading toward Washington.* **PLAY | STOP**

This report, received from Colin Scoggins at Boston Center, will set off a major escalation in the military response to the attack, resulting in the launch of additional armed fighter jets. But 20 months later, when the military presents to the 9/11 commission what is supposed to be a full accounting of the day, omitted from the official time line is any mention of this reported hijacking and the fevered chase it engenders.

It was the Friday before Memorial Day weekend, 2003, and the hearing room in the Hart Senate Office Building, in Washington, was half empty as the group of mostly retired military brass arranged themselves at the witness table before the 9/11 commission. The story the NORAD officers had come to tell before the commission was a relatively humbling one, a point underscored by the questions commission chairman Thomas Kean introduced during his opening remarks: How did the hijackers defeat the system, and why couldn't we stop them? These were important questions. Nearly two years after the attack, the Internet was rife with questions and conspiracy theories about 9/11—in particular, where were the fighters? Could they have physically gotten to any of the hijacked planes? And did they shoot down the final flight, United 93, which ended up in a Pennsylvania field?

On hand, dressed in business suits (with the exception of Major General Craig McKinley, whose two stars twinkled on either epaulet), were Major General Larry Arnold (retired), who had been on the other end of the secure line with NEADS's Colonel Marr throughout the attack, and Colonel Alan Scott (retired), who had been with Arnold at NORAD's continental command in Florida on 9/11 and who worked closely with Marr in preparing the military's time line. None of the military men were placed under oath.

Their story, in a nutshell, was one of being caught off guard initially, then very quickly ramping up to battle status—in position, and in possession of enough situational awareness to defend the country, and the capital in particular, before United 93, the fourth hijacked plane, would have reached Washington.

Major General Arnold explained to the commission that the military had been tracking United 93 and the fighters were in position if United 93 had threatened Washington. "It was our intent to intercept United Flight 93," Arnold testified. "I was personally anxious to see what 93 was going to do, and our intent was to intercept it."

Colonel Marr, the commanding officer at NEADS on 9/11, had made similar comments to ABC News for its one-year-anniversary special on the attacks, saying that the pilots had been warned they might have to intercept United 93, and stop it if necessary: "And we of course passed that on to the pilots: United Airlines Flight 93 will not be allowed to reach Washington, D.C."

When I interviewed him recently, Marr recalled a conversation he had had with Arnold in the heat of the attack. "I remember the words out of General Arnold's mouth, or at least as I remember them, were 'We will take lives in the air to save lives on the ground.'" In actuality, they'd never get that chance.

In the chronology presented to the 9/11 commission, Colonel Scott put the time NORAD was first notified about United 93 at 9:16 a.m., from which time, he said, commanders tracked the flight closely. (It crashed at 10:03 a.m.) If it had indeed been necessary to "take lives in the air" with United 93, or any incoming flight to Washington, the two

armed fighters from Langley Air Force Base in Virginia would have been the ones called upon to carry out the shutdown. In Colonel Scott's account, those jets were given the order to launch at 9:24, within seconds of NEADS's receiving the F.A.A.'s report of the possible hijacking of American 77, the plane that would ultimately hit the Pentagon. This time line suggests the system was starting to work: the F.A.A. reports a hijacking, and the military reacts instantaneously. Launching after the report of American 77 would, in theory, have put the fighters in the air and in position over Washington in plenty of time to react to United 93.

In testimony a few minutes later, however, General Arnold added an unexpected twist: "We launched the aircraft out of Langley to put them over top of Washington, D.C., not in response to American Airlines 77, but really to put them in position in case United 93 were to head that way."

How strange, John Azzarello, a former prosecutor and one of the commission's staff members, thought. "I remember being at the hearing in '03 and wondering why they didn't seem to have their stories straight. That struck me as odd."

The ears of another staff member, Miles Kara, perked up as well. "I said to myself, That's not right," the retired colonel, a former army intelligence officer, told me. Kara had seen the radar re-creations of the fighters' routes. "We knew something was odd, but we didn't have enough specificity to know how odd."

As the tapes reveal in stark detail, parts of Scott's and Arnold's testimony were misleading, and others simply false. At 9:16 a.m., when Arnold and Marr had supposedly begun their tracking of United 93, the plane had not yet been hijacked. In fact, NEADS wouldn't get word about United 93 for another 51 minutes. And while NORAD commanders did, indeed, order the Langley fighters to scramble at 9:24, as Scott and Arnold testified, it was not in response to the hijacking of American 77 or United 93. Rather, they were chasing a ghost. NEADS was entering the most chaotic period of the morning.

"CHASE THIS GUY DOWN" *A*t 9:21 a.m., just before Dooley's alert about a third hijacked plane headed for Washington, NEADS is in the eye of the storm—a period of relative calm in which, for the moment, there are no reports of additional hijackings.

The call that sets off the latest alarm ("Another hijack! It's headed towards Washington!") comes from Boston and is wholly confounding: according to Scoggins, the Boston manager, American 11, the plane they believed was the first one to hit the World Trade Center, is actually still flying—still hijacked—and now heading straight for D.C. Whatever hit the first tower, it wasn't American 11.

The chase is on for what will turn out to be a phantom plane.

9:21:50NASYPANY: *O.K. American Airlines is still airborne—11, the first guy. He's heading towards Washington. O.K., I think we need to scramble Langley right now. And I'm—I'm gonna take the fighters from Otis and try to chase this guy down if I can find him.* **PLAY | STOP**

Arnold and Marr approve scrambling the two planes at Langley, along with a third unarmed trainer, and Nasypany sets the launch in motion.

It's a mistake, of course. American 11 was, indeed, the plane that hit the first tower. The confusion will persist for hours, however. In Boston, it is Colin Scoggins who has made the mistaken call.

"When we phoned United [after the second tower was hit], they confirmed that United 175 was down, and I think they confirmed that within two or three minutes," Scoggins, the go-to guy at Boston Center for all things military, later told me. "With American Airlines, we could never confirm if it was down or not, so that left doubt in our minds."

An unwieldy conference call between F.A.A. centers had been established, and Scoggins was monitoring it when the word came across—from whom or where isn't clear—that American 11 was thought to be headed for Washington. Scoggins told me he thinks that the problem started with someone overheard trying to confirm from American whether American 11 was down—that somewhere in the flurry of information zipping back and forth during the conference call this transmogrified into the idea that a different plane had hit the tower, and that American 11 was still hijacked and still in the air. The plane's course, had it continued south past New York in the direction it was flying before it dipped below radar coverage, would have had it headed on a straight course toward D.C. This was all controllers were going on; they were never tracking an actual plane on the radar after losing American 11 near Manhattan, but if it had been flying low enough, the plane could have gone undetected. "After talking to a supervisor, I made the call and said [American 11] is still in the air, and it's probably somewhere over New Jersey or Delaware heading for Washington, D.C.," Scoggins told me.

Over the next quarter-hour, the fact that the fighters have been launched in response to the phantom American 11—rather than American 77 or United 93—is referred to six more times on Nasypany's channel alone. How could Colonel Scott and General Arnold have missed it in preparing for their 9/11-commission testimony? It's a question Arnold would have to answer later, under oath.

In the middle of the attack, however, the hijackers' sabotaging of the planes' beacons has thrown such a wrench into efforts to track them that it all seems plausible.

9:23:15ANDERSON: *They're probably not squawking anything [broadcasting a beacon code] anyway. I mean, obviously these guys are in the cockpit.* NASYPANY: *These guys are smart.* UNIDENTIFIED MALE: *Yeah, they knew exactly what they wanted to do.* **PLAY | STOP**

Another officer asks Nasypany the obvious question.

9:32:20 MAJOR JAMES ANDERSON: *Have you asked—have you asked the question what you're gonna do if we actually find this guy? Are we gonna shoot him down if they got passengers on board? Have they talked about that?* **PLAY | STOP**

Approval for any such order would have to come from the commander in chief. Just after 9:30, however, the president was in his motorcade preparing to leave the Emma Booker Elementary School, in Sarasota, for the airport and the safety of Air Force One. The 9/11 commission determined that the president had not been aware of any further possible hijackings and was not yet in touch with the Pentagon.

But a clear shutdown order wouldn't have made a difference. The Langley fighters were headed the wrong way—due east, straight out to sea into a military-training airspace called Whiskey 386, rather than toward Washington, which NEADS believed was under attack. According to the 9/11 commission, the Langley pilots were never briefed by anyone at their base about why they were being scrambled, so, despite having been given the order from NEADS to fly to Washington, the pilots ended up following their normal training flight plan out to sea—a flight plan dating from the Cold War. As one pilot later told the commission, "I reverted to the Russian threat—I'm thinking cruise-missile threat from the sea."

At NEADS, a 28-year-old staff sergeant named William Huckabone, staring at his Green Eye, is the first to notice that the Langley jets are off course. His voice is a mix of stress and dread as he and the controller next to him, Master Sergeant Steve Citino, order a navy air-traffic controller who's handling the fighters to get them turned around toward Baltimore to try to cut off the phantom American 11. The navy air-traffic controller seems not to understand the urgency of the situation.

9:34:12 NAVY A.T.C.: *You've got [the fighters] moving east in airspace. Now you want 'em to go to Baltimore?* HUCKABONE: *Yes, sir. We're not gonna take 'em in Whiskey 386 [military training airspace over the ocean].* NAVY A.T.C.: *O.K., once he goes to Baltimore, what are we supposed to do?* HUCKABONE: *Have him contact us on auxiliary frequency 2-3-4 decimal 6. Instead of taking handoffs to us and us handing 'em back, just tell Center they've got to go to Baltimore.* NAVY A.T.C.: *All right, man. Stand by. We'll get back to you.* CITINO: *What do you mean, "We'll get back to you"? Just do it!* HUCKABONE: *I'm gonna choke that guy!* CITINO: *Be very professional, Huck.* HUCKABONE: *O.K.* CITINO: *All right, Huck. Let's get our act together here.* **PLAY | STOP**

All hell is breaking loose around them. Boston Center has called in with *another* suspected hijacking—the controllers there don't know the call sign yet—and ID tech Watson is speed-dialing everyone she can to find a position on the resurrected American 11. In the course of a call to Washington Center, the operations manager there has sprung new information about yet another lost airplane: American 77.

9:34:01 WASHINGTON CENTER: Now, let me tell you this. I—I'll—we've been looking. We're—also lost American 77—WATSON: American 77? DOOLEY: American 77's lost—WATSON: Where was it proposed to head, sir? WASHINGTON CENTER: Okay, he was going to L.A. also—WATSON: From where, sir? WASHINGTON CENTER: I think he was from Boston also. Now let me tell you this story here. Indianapolis Center was working this guy—WATSON: What guy? WASHINGTON CENTER: American 77, at flight level 3-5-0 [35,000 feet]. However, they lost radar with him. They lost contact with him. They lost everything. And they don't have any idea where he is or what happened. **PLAY | STOP**

This is a full 10 minutes later than the time Major General Arnold and Colonel Scott would give in their testimony; reality was a lot messier. Forty minutes prior, at 8:54 a.m., controllers at Indianapolis Center had lost radar contact with American 77, flying from Washington Dulles to LAX, and assumed the plane had crashed because they weren't aware of the attack in New York. Though they soon realized this was another hijacking and sent warnings up the F.A.A. chain, no one called the military; it was only by chance that NEADS's Watson got the information in her call to Washington Center.

As Watson takes in the information from Washington Center, Rountree's phone is ringing again. By this point, the other ID techs have taken to calling Rountree "the bearer of death and destruction" because it seems every time she picks up the phone there's another hijacking. And so it is again. At Boston Center, Colin Scoggins has spotted a low-flying airliner six miles southeast of the White House.

9:35:41 ROUNTREE: Huntress [call sign for NEADS] ID, Rountree, can I help you? BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): Latest report, [low-flying] aircraft six miles southeast of the White House. ROUNTREE: Six miles southeast of the White House? BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): Yup. East—he's moving away? ROUNTREE: Southeast from the White House. BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): Air—aircraft is moving away. ROUNTREE: Moving away from the White House? BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): Yeah. ... ROUNTREE: Deviating away. You don't have a type aircraft, you don't know who he is—BOSTON CENTER (Scoggins): Nothing, nothing. We're over here in Boston so I have no clue. That—hopefully somebody in Washington would have better—information for you. **PLAY | STOP**

This will turn out to be American 77, but since the hijackers turned the beacon off on this plane as well, no one will realize that until later. Depending on how you count, NEADS now has three reported possible hijackings from Boston (the phantom American 11 and two unidentified planes) as well as Washington Center's report that American 77 is lost.

Of these four vague and ultimately overlapping reports, the latest—word of a plane six miles from the White House—is the most urgent. The news sets off a frenzy.

9:36:23 NASYPANY: O.K., Foxy [Major Fox, the Weapons Team head]. I got a aircraft six miles east of the White House! Get your fighters there as soon as possible! MALE

*VOICE: That came from Boston? HUCKABONE: We're gonna turn and burn it—crank it up—MALE TECH: Six miles! HUCKABONE: All right, here we go. This is what we're gonna do—NASYPANY: We've got an aircraft deviating eight [sic] miles east of the White House right now. FOX: Do you want us to declare A.F.I.O. [emergency military control of the fighters] and run 'em straight in there? NASYPANY: Take 'em and run 'em to the White House. FOX: Go directly to Washington. CITINO: We're going direct D.C. with my guys [Langley fighters]? Okay. Okay. HUCKABONE: Ma'am, we are going A.F.I.O. right now with Quit 2-5 [the Langley fighters]. They are going direct Washington. NAVY A.T.C.: Quit 2-5, we're handing 'em off to Center right now. HUCKABONE: Ma'am, we need to expedite that right now. We've gotta contact them on 2-3-4-6. **PLAY | STOP***

"Six miles south, or west, or east of the White House is—it's seconds [away]," Nasypany told me later. "Airliners traveling at 400-plus knots, it's nothing. It's seconds away from that location."

The White House, then, is in immediate danger. Radar analysis in the following weeks will show that the plane abruptly veers away and turns toward the Pentagon, though the controllers at NEADS have no way of knowing this in the moment. Looking in the general capital area, one of the tracker techs thinks he spots the plane on radar, then just as quickly loses it.

*9:37:56 MALE TECH: Right here, right here, right here. I got him. I got him. NASYPANY: We just lost track. Get a Z-point [coordinate] on that.... O.K., we got guys lookin' at 'em. Hold on.... Where's Langley at? Where are the fighters? **PLAY | STOP***

The fighters have no chance. They're about 150 miles away, according to radar analysis done later. Even at top speed—and even if they know the problem is suicide hijackings of commercial airliners rather than Russian missiles—it will take them roughly 10 minutes to get to the Pentagon.

9:38:50 NASYPANY: We need to get those back up there—I don't care how many windows you break!... Goddammit! O.K. Push 'em back!

But the Pentagon is already in flames, American 77 having plowed through the E-ring of the west side of the building seconds before, at 9:37:46. The Langley fighters will not be established over Washington for another 20 minutes.

"YOU WERE JUST SO MAD" **O**n the ops floor, everyone is staring at CNN on the overhead screen. Seeing the first pictures of the Pentagon in flames is gut-wrenching. Nasypany's voice can be heard cursing in frustration: "Goddammit! I can't even protect my N.C.A. [National Capital Area]." You hear troops prod one another to stay focused.

CITINO: O.K.—let's watch our guys, Huck. Not the TV.

"The more it went on, the more unbelievable it got, and then the one that did the Pentagon," Dooley told me, "we just couldn't believe it. You were just so mad that you couldn't stop these guys and so you're looking for the next one. Where are they going next?"

It looks like Washington again. Three minutes after the Pentagon is hit, Scoggins, at Boston Center, is back on the phone. The Boston controllers are now tracking Delta 1989—Boston to Las Vegas—which fits the same profile as the other hijackings: cross-country, out of Boston, lots of fuel, and possibly off course. But this one's different from the others in one key respect: the plane's beacon code is still working. In this chase, NEADS will have a chance, as the excitement in Dooley's last line reflects:

9:40:57 *ROUNTREE: Delta 89, that's the hijack. They think it's possible hijack. DOOLEY: Fuck! ROUNTREE: South of Cleveland. We have a code on him now. DOOLEY: Good. Pick it up! Find it! MALE TECH: Delta what? ROUNTREE: Eight nine—a Boeing 767. DOOLEY: Fuck, another one—PLAY | STOP*

They quickly find the plane on radar—it's just south of Toledo—and begin alerting other F.A.A. centers. They're not sure where the plane is headed. If it's Chicago, they're in big trouble, because they don't have any planes close enough to cut it off. Marr and Nasypany order troops to call Air National Guard bases in that area to see if anyone can launch fighters. A base in Selfridge, Michigan, offers up two unarmed fighters that are already flying, on their way back from a training mission.

9:54:54 *SELFRIDGE FLIGHT OFFICER: Here—here's what we can do. At a minimum, we can keep our guys airborne. I mean, they don't have—they don't have any guns or missiles or anything on board. But we—NEADS TECH: It's a presence, though. PLAY | STOP*

But NEADS is victim again to an increasingly long information lag. Even before Rountree gets the urgent call that Delta 1989 is hijacked, a civilian air-traffic controller in Cleveland in contact with the pilot has determined that the flight is fine—that Delta 1989 isn't a hijacking after all.

Meanwhile, however, NEADS has gotten a call from a NORAD unit in Canada with yet another suspected hijacking headed south across the border toward Washington. In the barrage of information and misinformation, it becomes increasingly difficult for the controllers to keep count of how many suspected hijackings are pending. So far, it is known that three have hit buildings, but given the uncertainty about the fates of American 11 and American 77—no one knows yet that this is the plane that hit the Pentagon—the sense at NEADS is that there are possibly three hijacked jets still out there, and who knows how many more yet to be reported. At this point, no one on the military side is aware that United 93 has been hijacked.

Then, over a crackly radio, one of the Langley fighter pilots, now in a combat air patrol over Washington, is calling in urgently.

10:07:08 *PILOT: Baltimore is saying something about an aircraft over the White House. Any words? CITINO: Negative. Stand by. Do you copy that, SD [Major Fox]? Center said there's an aircraft over the White House. Any words? FOX: M.C.C. [Nasypany], we've got an aircraft reported over the White House. PLAY | STOP*

A fourth hijacking? Nasypany, who's running full throttle, replies instinctively.

NASYPANY: Intercept! FOX: Intercept! NASYPANY: Intercept and divert that aircraft away from there. PLAY | STOP

On one channel, you hear a weapons tech very dramatically hailing the fighters and ordering the intercept.

CITINO: Quit 2-5 [Langley fighters], mission is intercept aircraft over White House. Use F.A.A. for guidance. FOX: Divert the aircraft away from the White House. Intercept and divert it. CITINO: Quit 2-5, divert the aircraft from the White House. PILOT: Divert the aircraft.... PLAY | STOP

Meanwhile, Nasypany calls the Battle Cab. With a plane headed straight for the White House, Nasypany needs an update on his rules of engagement—fast.

10:07:39 *NASYPANY: Do you hear that? That aircraft over the White House. What's the word? ... Intercept and what else? ... Aircraft over the White House. PLAY | STOP*

The "what else?" is the big question: do they have the authority to shoot? The request skips up the chain to Arnold.

"I was in Vietnam," Arnold later told me. "When people are shooting at you, you don't know when it's going to stop. And that same thought went through my mind [on 9/11]. You begin to wonder, How can I get control of this situation? When can we as a military get control of this situation?"

Arnold, in turn, passes the request for rules of engagement farther up the chain.

It is in the middle of this, simultaneously, that the first call comes in about United 93. ID tech Watson fields it.

10:07:16 *CLEVELAND CENTER: We got a United 93 out here. Are you aware of that? WATSON: United 93? CLEVELAND CENTER: That has a bomb on board. WATSON: A bomb on board?! And this is confirmed? You have a [beacon code], sir? CLEVELAND CENTER: No, we lost his transponder.*

The information is shouted out to Nasypany.

NASYPANY: Gimme the call sign. Gimme the whole nine yards.... Let's get some info, real quick. They got a bomb? **PLAY | STOP**

But by the time NEADS gets the report of a bomb on United 93, everyone on board is already dead. Following the passengers' counterattack, the plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania at 10:03 a.m., 4 minutes before Cleveland Center notified NEADS, and a full 35 minutes after a Cleveland Center controller, a veteran named John Werth, first suspected something was wrong with the flight. At 9:28, Werth actually heard the guttural sounds of the cockpit struggle over the radio as the hijackers attacked the pilots.

Werth's suspicions about United 93 were passed quickly up the F.A.A.'s chain of command, so how is it that no one from the agency alerted NEADS for more than half an hour?

A former senior executive at the F.A.A., speaking to me on the condition that I not identify him by name, tried to explain. "Our whole procedures prior to 9/11 were that you turned everything [regarding a hijacking] over to the F.B.I.," he said, reiterating that hijackers had never actually flown airplanes; it was expected that they'd land and make demands. "There were absolutely no shutdown protocols at all. The F.A.A. had nothing to do with whether they were going to shoot anybody down. We had no protocols or rules of engagement."

In his bunker under the White House, Vice President Cheney was not notified about United 93 until 10:02—only one minute before the airliner impacted the ground. Yet it was with dark bravado that the vice president and others in the Bush administration would later recount sober deliberations about the prospect of shooting down United 93. "Very, very tough decision, and the president understood the magnitude of that decision," Bush's then chief of staff, Andrew Card, told ABC News.

Cheney echoed, "The significance of saying to a pilot that you are authorized to shoot down a plane full of Americans is, a, you know, it's an order that had never been given before." And it wasn't on 9/11, either.

President Bush would finally grant commanders the *authority* to give that order at 10:18, which—though no one knew it at the time—was 15 minutes after the attack was over.

But comments such as those above were repeated by other administration and military figures in the weeks and months following 9/11, forging the notion that only the passengers' counterattack against their hijackers prevented an inevitable shutdown of United 93 (and convincing conspiracy theorists that the government did, indeed, secretly shoot it down). The recordings tell a different story, and not only because United 93 had crashed before anyone in the military chain of command even knew it had been hijacked.

At what feels on the tapes like the moment of truth, what comes back down the chain of command, instead of clearance to fire, is a resounding sense of caution. Despite the fact

that NEADS believes there may be as many as five suspected hijacked aircraft still in the air at this point—one from Canada, the new one bearing down fast on Washington, the phantom American 11, Delta 1989, and United 93—the answer to Nasypany's question about rules of engagement comes back in no uncertain terms, as you hear him relay to the ops floor.

10:10:31NASYPANY (to floor): *Negative. Negative clearance to shoot. ... Goddammit! ... FOX: I'm not really worried about code words at this point. NASYPANY: Fuck the code words. That's perishable information. Negative clearance to fire. ID. Type. Tail. PLAY | STOP*

The orders from higher headquarters are to identify by aircraft type and tail number, and nothing more. Those orders—and the fact that the pilots have no clearance to shoot—are reiterated by NEADS controllers as a dramatic chase towards the White House continues. Two more problems emerge: the controllers can't find the White House on their dated equipment, and they have trouble communicating with the Langley fighters (which are referred to by their call signs, Quit 2-5 and Quit 2-6).

CITINO: Quit 2-6, Huntress. How far is the—suspect aircraft? PILOT: Standby. Standby. ... About 15 miles, Huntress. CITINO: Huntress copies two-two miles. PILOT: 15 miles, Huntress. CITINO: 15 miles. One-five ... noise level please ... It's got to be low. Quit 2-6, when able say altitude of the aircraft. ... Did we get a Z-track [coordinates] up for the White House? HUCKABONE: They're workin' on it. CITINO: Okay. Hey, what's this Bravo 0-0-5 [unidentified target]? FOX: We're trying to get the Z-point. We're trying to find it. HUCKABONE: I don't even know where the White House is. CITINO: Whatever it is, it's very low. It's probably a helicopter. MALE VOICE: It's probably the helicopter you're watching there. ... There's probably one flying over the [Pentagon]. MALE VOICE: It's probably the smoke. The building's smoked. [They're seeing more pictures of the flaming Pentagon on CNN.] HUCKABONE: Holy shit. ... Holy shit ... CITINO: Yes. We saw that. O.K.—let's watch our guys, Huck. Not the TV. ... Quit 2-6, status? SD, they're too low. I can't talk to 'em. They're too low. I can't talk to 'em. FOX: Negative clearance to fire. CITINO: O.K. I told 'em mission is ID and that was it. FOX: Do whatever you need to divert. They are not cleared to fire. PLAY | STOP

As it turns out, it's just as well the pilots are not cleared to shoot. Delta 1989 and the Canadian scare turn out to be false alarms. American 11 and United 93 are already down. And the fast-moving target near the White House that the armed fighters are racing to intercept turns out to be a friendly—a mistake by a civilian controller who was unaware of the military's scrambles, as weapons techs Huckabone and Citino, and their senior director, Fox, suddenly realize.

HUCKABONE: It was our guys [the fighters from Langley]. CITINO: Yup. It was our guys they saw. It was our guys they saw—Center saw. FOX: New York did the same thing. ... CITINO: O.K., Huck. That was cool. We intercepted our own guys. PLAY | STOP

At that point in the morning, Marr later told me, preventing an accidental shutdown was a paramount concern. "What you don't want happening is a pilot having to make that decision in the heat of the moment where he is bearing all that burden as to whether I should shoot something down or not," Marr said.

It is 12 minutes after United 93 actually crashed when NEADS's Watson first hears the word. Her voice is initially full of hope as she mistakenly believes she is being told that United 93 has landed safely.

10:15:00 *WATSON: United nine three, have you got information on that yet? WASHINGTON CENTER: Yeah, he's down. WATSON: What—he's down? WASHINGTON CENTER: Yes. WATSON: When did he land? Because we have confirmation—WASHINGTON CENTER: He did—he did—he did not land.*

Here, on the tape, you hear the air rush out of Watson's voice.

WATSON: Oh, he's down down? MALE VOICE: Yes. Yeah, somewhere up northeast of Camp David. WATSON: Northeast of Camp David. WASHINGTON CENTER: That's the—that's the last report. They don't know exactly where. PLAY | STOP

"I KNOW WHAT SPIN IS"

On June 17, 2004, a year after the 9/11 commission's initial public hearing, Major General Arnold and a more robust contingent of NORAD and Pentagon brass arrived to testify before the commission at its 12th and final public meeting. This time, they would testify under oath.

The hearing began with an elaborate multi-media presentation in which John Farmer Jr., the commission's senior counsel, John Azzarello, and another staff attorney, Dana Hyde, took turns illustrating, in withering detail, the lag time between when the F.A.A. found out about each of the hijacked aircraft and the time anyone from the agency notified the military. Excerpts from the NEADS tapes and parallel recordings from the F.A.A., which show the civilian side in equal turmoil, were played in public for the first time. (Both sets of recordings were provided to the commission only after being subpoenaed.)

The focus of the pointed questioning that followed wasn't on why the military didn't do better, but rather on why the story Major General Arnold and Colonel Scott had told at the first hearing was so wrong, in particular with respect to the phantom American 11, which the officers had never mentioned, and United 93, which they claimed to have been tracking. Commissioner Richard Ben-Veniste, who cut his teeth 30 years earlier working for the Watergate special prosecutor, led off the questioning and came out swinging.

"General, is it not a fact that the failure to call our attention to the miscommunication and the notion of a phantom Flight 11 continuing from New York City south in fact skewed

the whole reporting of 9/11?" he asked Arnold, who replied that he had not been aware of those facts when he testified the year before.

"I've been in government and I know what spin is," Farmer, the senior counsel, told me. The military's story was "a whole different order of magnitude than spin. It simply wasn't true." Farmer says he doesn't understand why the military felt the need to spin at all. "The information they got [from the F.A.A.] was bad information, but they reacted in a way that you would have wanted them to. The calls Marr and Nasypany made were the right ones."

Both Marr and Arnold bristled when I asked about the commission's suspicion that there had been an effort to spin the story. "I can't think of any incentive why we'd want to spin that," Marr said, his eyes tensing for the first time in what had been friendly interviews. "I'll be the first to admit that immediately after—in fact, for a long time after—we were very confused with who was what and where, what reports were coming in. I think with having 29 different reports of hijackings nationwide, for us it was next to impossible to try and get back there and figure out the fidelity [about the morning's chronology] that the 9/11 commission ended up being able to show."

Azzarello, Farmer, and several other commission members I spoke to dismissed this fog-of-war excuse and pointed out that not only had the military already reviewed the tapes but that the false story it told at the first hearing had a clear purpose. "How good would it have looked for the government in general if we still couldn't have stopped the fourth plane an hour and 35 minutes [into the attack]?" Azzarello asked. "How good would it have looked if there was a total breakdown in communication and nothing worked right?"

If nothing else, it might have given the public a more realistic sense of the limitations, particularly in the face of suicide terrorism, of what is, without doubt, the most powerful military in the world.

As one of its last acts before disbanding, in July 2004, the 9/11 commission made referrals to the inspector general's offices of both the Department of Transportation (which includes the F.A.A.) and the Defense Department to further investigate whether witnesses had lied. "Commission staff believes that there is significant evidence that the false statements made to the commission were deliberately false," Farmer wrote to me in an e-mail summarizing the commission's referral. "The false testimony served a purpose: to obscure mistakes on the part of the F.A.A. and the military, and to overstate the readiness of the military to intercept and, if necessary, shoot down UAL 93." A spokesman for the Transportation Department's inspector general's office told me that the investigation had been completed, but he wasn't at liberty to share the findings, because the report had not been finalized. A spokesman at the Pentagon's inspector general's office said its investigation had also been completed, but the results are classified.

Por-ing over time-stamped transcripts that undercut the Pentagon's official story, one is tempted to get caught up in a game of "gotcha." For those on the operations floor in the thick of it that day, however, the cold revelations of hindsight are a bitter pill to swallow.

Listening to the tapes, you hear that inside NEADS there was no sense that the attack was over with the crash of United 93; instead, the alarms go on and on. False reports of hijackings, and real responses, continue well into the afternoon, though civilian air-traffic controllers had managed to clear the skies of all commercial and private aircraft by just after 12 p.m. The fighter pilots over New York and D.C. (and later Boston and Chicago) would spend hours darting around their respective skylines intercepting hundreds of aircraft they deemed suspicious. Meanwhile, Arnold, Marr, and Nasypany were launching as many additional fighters as they could, placing some 300 armed jets in protective orbits over every major American city by the following morning. No one at NEADS would go home until late on the night of the 11th, and then only for a few hours of sleep.

Five years after the attack, the controversy around United 93 clearly eats at Arnold, Marr, Nasypany, and several other military people I spoke with, who resent both conspiracy theories that accuse them of shooting the flight down and the 9/11 commission's conclusion that they were chasing ghosts and never stood a chance of intercepting any of the real hijackings. "I don't know about time lines and stuff like that," Nasypany, who is now a lieutenant colonel, said in one of our last conversations. "I knew where 93 was. I don't care what [the commission says]. I mean, I care, but—I made that assessment to put my fighters over Washington. Ninety-three was on its way in. I knew there was another one out there. I knew there was somebody else coming in—whatever you want to call it. And I knew what I was going to have to end up doing." When you listen to the tapes, it couldn't feel more horrendously true.

When I asked Nasypany about the conspiracy theories—the people who believe that he, or someone like him, secretly ordered the shootdown of United 93 and covered it up—the corners of his mouth began to quiver. Then, I think to the surprise of both of us, he suddenly put his head in his hands and cried. "Flight 93 was not shot down," he said when he finally looked up. "The individuals on that aircraft, the passengers, they actually took the aircraft down. Because of what those people did, I didn't have to do anything."

On the day, however, there was no time for sentiment. Within 30 seconds of the report that United 93 has crashed, killing everyone on board, once again, the phone is ringing.

10:15:30