

The Day The Vectors Stopped

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Dawn broke as clear as I'd ever seen, the thick cobalt blue of the night being chased silently into the western horizon by the radiance of yellow growing on the east. A benevolent high-pressure system had settled onto the East Coast of the U.S., clearing skies while allowing wonderfully moderate temperatures to prevail. I was driving into work on my favorite road on Long Island, the Ocean Parkway, which traverses the barrier island along the south shore, and lets me pass through the world famous Jones Beach area before the parkway turns northbound and towards the New York TRACON.

I love mornings like this, not only because I can soak up the natural beauty of the seashore environment - an effective way to lift my spirits before having to face the crush of air traffic that a good VFR day like this will most certainly bring - but also because as I cross the drawbridge leading out of Jones Beach, I can look to my left and clearly see the proud twin spires of the World Trade Center, some 25 miles away, gleaming in the bright morning sunlight now spilling over the horizon.

Little did I know that this would be the last time I would ever set eyes on those buildings.

The morning routine was well under way at work, with the scramble of commercial departures pouring out of the area airports and nosing their way towards the jet airways. The majority of the departure push was completed as I went out on break; the time was 8:45 a.m.

I walked outside to drink in more of this beautiful morning, looking up to watch the heavy jet arrivals pass majestically overhead as they were being vectored to the final approach course at JFK International. It never ceases to amaze me as I watch these behemoths quietly glide by that my friends in this very building are guiding them in this most crucial phase of flight. If only we had windows...

My reverie was interrupted by the angry buzz of my cell phone. A call from home! It was my son "Dad, what happened with the airplane?"

"What airplane?" I said, thinking that he was probably in a last minute scramble before school, having forgotten to finish his homework the night before.

"The plane that hit the building."

That got my attention. "What building?!"

"The news is saying that an airplane just hit the World Trade tower."

"I'll call you back!" I ran into a nearby office where I knew there was a radio, and quickly tuned it into one of the metro area's 24-hour news stations. The early, chaotic on-the-scene reports were being shouted by reporters trying to talk over the scream of rescue vehicles pouring into the area. I quickly called my union facility representative, to ensure that he was aware of the breaking news.

"I'm watching it on TV!" was his immediate reply. It dawned on me that he was out at a NATCA multi-regional conference being held in New Orleans, Louisiana. Dozens of NATCAvists from all over the country were watching this unfold right before their eyes. And here I am, at the TRACON, learning about this from a phone call from my son! "I'm gonna go see if we were talking to this guy. I'll call you back." I slapped the flip-phone shut and ran up the stairs.

It's always disconcerting, walking into the dimly lit Operations Room after having

been out in the bright sunlight, and this was no different. As I rounded the corner at the end of a bank of scopes, I stood there for a moment, to let my eyes adjust. The silhouettes moving about took human form, and I moved over beside a friend of mine, who was standing behind the final approach controller for one of the 'Big 3' Airports. He was staring at the multicolored display with rapt attention. As quickly as my eyes adjusted, I realized that the tension in the room was electric.

"Were we talking to him?" I asked gently, following his gaze at the swarm of targets before us, quickly reading the traffic flow as the controller at the position kept issuing instructions in crisp, professional staccato. He slowly turned his head towards me, his mouth agape.

His voice was thick with emotion. "It just happened again!"

I felt like I had just been slapped.

His arm lifted straight from his body, almost as if a string was pulling it, until his finger was pointing right at the scope. "There. It just happened again."

I looked where he was pointing. The southern tip of the island of Manhattan.

Our eyes locked. We both knew exactly what was going on. We were under attack by terrorists. There could be no other explanation. Suddenly, a single question bubbled to the forefront of my consciousness: *What do I do now?* I stood there for I don't know how long, my mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water as a million and one options shot through my mind. Finally, I realized that there was only one thing that I could do. I went and grabbed my headset.

The events went liquid shortly thereafter. No one had to wait to be told to stop departures, but then in rapid succession the airspace cleansing began. Normally, at this time of the day, we're getting into our early lunch rush. The scopes around the room become littered with targets; student pilots thick as fleas, turboprops zooming about like seagulls in a feeding frenzy, and jets of all stripes droning in and out of the area airports. Now, the screen was almost blank. The airspace of New York, arguably the busiest and most complex airspace on the planet, was all but empty. I don't know how long it took, but it wasn't very long. As the quiet descended on the room like a heavy blanket, the voice behind me said, "I've never seen anything like this." It was my supervisor. He has over 35 years of ATC experience.

Then another co-worker walked into the sector. He had been watching TV in the break room. He announced that the Pentagon had just been hit. I couldn't believe my ears. The Pentagon?? That can't happen. *THIS* can't be happening! I turned to the controller working the position next to me. He's a Viet Nam veteran. His eyes were set. "So that's it, then." he said, his voice rock steady, his tone final. "We're at war." The wheels in my head did yet another spin, my own military training evaluating the possibilities. As the answer locked into place, I nodded my agreement. My throat was too tight to speak. I looked at my hands. They were shaking.

I didn't even see the footage of the events until a few hours later, when I finally got home. I watched the news for about five minutes, and then shut off the TV, after I felt the bile begin to rise in the back of my throat. It would be another day before I learned that Susan Mackay, the wife of Boston Center controller Doug Mackay, was on American Airlines flight 11, the first one to hit the WTC. It would be a few more days before the body of another friend of mine, a New York City firefighter, would be pulled out of the rubble. But the feelings of grief and utter helplessness in the face of such unspeakable horror were already settling in.

I tried to keep up a brave front for the kids, cooing that everything would be all

right, that our guys would go out there and find the Bad Guys, and put them out of business. I wished I could've convinced myself, but one look at the gray glass of the TV told me that there was a whole world of horror and terror out there, and that at long last, it had washed upon these shores, crashing in like a tsunami.

I held my kids close, and said a prayer, asking that they would not get swept away too, like so many of my neighbor's neighbors and friend's friends had, so senselessly, just this very morning. I tried to keep the kids busy, got them going on their schoolwork, because "tomorrow was going to be just another normal day."

As I was helping my daughter, I noticed a little inspirational message at the top of one of the pages in her homework agenda. It read, "You may be but one person in all the world, but to one person, you may be the world." That gave me some needed perspective. I stroked my daughter's hair as I took a deep, calming breath. For whatever divine reason, I realized I was where I needed to be, doing what I needed to be doing. In time, perhaps something in all this insanity would make sense. But for now, I knew what my job was - to keep on doing the things that I needed to be doing.

Things were anything but normal for the next couple of days, as the resuscitation of the National Airspace System began. Chaotic and convoluted it was, but resuscitate it we did, anemic as it may have been. It took several days for all the NATCAvists down in New Orleans to find their way home. Most had to rent vehicles and drive home. The NATCA National Executive Board (NEB) had told the Communications Committee to shut down our WebBoards. NATCA has both a public and a private Internet-based electronic Bulletin Board Service (BBS), which allows controllers from all over the country to post messages and discuss issues on a multitude of topics, where along with our websites - the National Office can disseminate the latest news on issues affecting NATCA, aviation, and labor. Because of the criminal nature of the attacks, as well as the over-arching National Security concerns surrounding them, any discussion or speculation related to these events or the new procedures in place - which seemed to be changing daily - would receive no statutory protection and/or union privilege whatsoever. For our own protection, NATCA issued a gag order on itself.

It was only a couple of days after "The Events" that the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) Team began to appear throughout the facilities touched by the tragedy. The CISM Team is a cooperative effort between the FAA and NATCA, where specially trained NATCA controllers come to a facility after a major accident or incident, to talk to not just the controllers involved with the event(s), but anyone in the facility - supervisors, support specialists, secretaries - who may be feeling stressed out by what happened, and to give them information on ways to help them cope, as well as contact information for more in-depth assistance, should it be needed. For major accidents, there will often be formal de-briefings. Normally only 1 or 2 controllers goes at a time, usually for just one day, and almost never more than 3 for even a major accident. The events of September 11th mobilized almost the entire CISM Team of 14 controllers for almost a month.

With our interactive forums closed, the only national communications we had was through our websites. We had just last year moved NATCA's entire Internet presence onto a new system and revamped the entire look and feel of both the public and private sites. The main architect of this re-structuring was none other than my dear friend Bryan Thompson, who is also the Editor-In-Chief of The NATCA Voice, our national grassroots newsletter. Bryan, a controller at the Chicago TRACON, and a former U.S. Marine, was feeling especially frustrated by the terrorist attacks and the ensuing self-imposed NATCA gag order. Then the letters

started pouring in. John Carr, President of NATCA, began forwarding e-mails and letters the National Office was receiving from controllers and ATC organizations from all over the globe. So Bryan created a new area on the website to post these messages of support and camaraderie, as well as other relevant news items. It became his way of working through the event. You can judge for yourself how well he did; the area became so large, we broke it off as a stand-alone website, and now it is probably one of the largest and most comprehensive websites of news, information, and tributes dedicated to the events of September 11th on the Internet:

<http://september11.natca.org/>

It was through this website that I was able to see the full scope of the events of that terrible Tuesday, and the many ramifications thereof. When the U.S. Secretary of Transportation, Norm Mineta, gave the order to shut down the NAS, the response was immediate. Across the country, over 700 airplanes were brought down safely in 4 minutes; in less than 2 hours, over 5,000 flights that had been airborne were on the deck. There was not a single incident outside of the four hijacked aircraft. Then we began receiving information about all the flights around the world that were diverted. Photos of Gander and Newfoundland in Canada, flooded with diverted aircraft, heavy jets packed onto runways like they were on an aircraft carrier. Stories of the citizens of these small communities opening their homes to the stranded passengers. The letters and e-mails from around the world continued to flow in, the world aviation community embracing us in sorrow and brotherhood.

Slowly things began to get back to normal, or as we're calling it, the 'New Normal'. The private BBS came back on line, and a few weeks later, the public BBS was back up. We're still cautious in what we say, but we're talking about how we feel.

While the terrorists had most certainly hit America with a near-crippling sucker punch to our collective Solar Plexus, what they didn't realize at the time they planned their attacks was that by turning aircraft full of innocent civilians into weapons of mass destruction, they had attacked every nation on Earth. The world was now pulling together, not just militarily, but emotionally. We as Americans were hurt, and our friends around the globe reached out to help. And in the especially close fraternity of aviation, we unified in friendship, empathy, and understanding. As the sordid process of reclamation and rebuilding continues, we in the ATC community are faced with a whole new paradigm of safety and security. There are many more questions than answers of how to best implement many of the new challenges before us, but for Air Traffic Controllers around the world, our mission remains unchanged. We are to grab our headsets, and safely keep the airplanes moving.

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