

MFR 04017302

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Event: Visit to Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, Langley AFB

Type of event: Orientation/Discussion

Date: 10/06/03

Special Access Issues: None

Prepared by: Miles Kara

Team Number: 8

Location: Langley AFB, VA

Participants - Commission: John Farmer, Kevin Shaeffer, Miles Kara

Participants - Non-Commission:

Andrew Huddleston: Dep Chief, Plans, Integration & Transformation Division, AF/XOHP

Colonel Pamela Stevenson: ACC/ JAA, Judge Advocate General

Lt Col Scott Morgan: Commander, AF RCC

Maj Allan Knox: USAF SAR/SAT Liaison, AF RCC

T/Sgt Mickie Urquhart, NCOIC, Standards and Evaluation, AF RCC

Sr Airman Simarra Brown, Standards and Evaluation, AF RCC

MSgt Robert Atchinson, First Fighter Wing [escort]

MSgt David Somdahl, 119th Fighter Wing, Public Affairs [escort]

Background

Atchinson and Somdahl co-facilitated the visit since one purpose was to understand the relationship between the 119th and the 1st fighter wings. Somdahl is a public affairs officer and a historian and was the person who interviewed the three Langley pilots who scrambled on 9/11. He is not aware that anyone else in the Air Force has gone to the extent he has to document the events of 9/11. He classified the interviews because of the tactical information on how scrambles proceed and how they are controlled. Urquhart and Brown were on duty that day and it was Urquhart he took the call from Indianapolis Center. Prior to our arrival no one from any organization has asked the RCC about events of 9/11.

Documents

Urquhart referred to the complete mission folder which contained a typed log that she created as events occurred on 9/11. Huddleston told Staff that the entire file had been delivered to the DoD Crystal City 9/11 support office to be passed along to us. It was the USAF intention that Staff have that document prior to the actual visit.

Discussion Points

Major Knox explained that the Rescue Coordination Center effort is a multi-nation, UN-specified mission. Two UN organizations have been established; The International Maritime

COMMISSION SENSITIVE

Organization (IMO) for water incidents and The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) for air incidents. The Coast Guard is the U. S. element, since 1956, responsible for the former and the USAF RCC is the U. S. element responsible for the latter, in the contiguous 48 states. The RCC is a small, 24-hour operation that is the first point of notification and directs subsequent operations until a decision is made that the operation has changed from rescue to recovery. At that point the AF RCC closes its file and turns responsibility over to FEMA. Recent historical cases that the RCC has pursued include the Payne Stewart and Columbia Shuttle tragedies and the John Kennedy Jr. crash. Prior to 1974 the RCC mission was controlled from three locations, later consolidated into one organization at Scott AFB. Later, the mission was moved to Langley AFB and six days ago was re-subordinated from Air Combat Command to Air Force Special Operations Command.

On 9/11 the RCC reported through the Air Operations Squadron to the Director of Operations, Air Combat Command. It responded to any FAA reports of missing or overdue aircraft. At point of receipt of such a report the RCC had to decide at the two-hour point if it was going to open a rescue mission. On 9/11 the RCC bypassed that standard and "quickly and significantly elevated up the chain." The RCC has "asking" authority to request support from any DoD asset to execute the SAR mission. According to a National SAR Supplement (to?) such support was to be provided on a not-to-interfer basis. On 9/11 the RCC proceeded directly to the decision to execute the SAR mission and coordinated with a variety of civil entities in Kentucky, West Virginia and Ohio to begin the search.

The requirement began with a hot line call to the RCC from the Military Desk at Indy Center. The RCC has hot lines to every FAA ARTCC to receive requests and then uses a bank of speed dial phones to coordinate actions thereafter. The RCC has a legal agreement with each of the States and direct contact with each State. That agreement specifies that the States will do what they can do and then they will come back to the RCC for federal support if required. The sequence is bottom up, beginning with volunteer, then local, then State and, finally, federal assistance. The capability today is the same as it was on 9/11. In that context, Major Knox described SAR as a "gigantic cooperative network."

On that day TSgt Urquhart received a call at 1308Z about a possible missing aircraft. Her situational awareness at the time was what they had learned from CNN. They understood that two unspecified aircraft had impacted both WTC towers. She consulted a detailed timeline that she created electronically as events proceeded. A copy was forwarded to the DoD document clearing center at the end of September in response to a Commission document request. She recorded the request as pertaining to AA77 and as requested by "EK" [initials] at Indy Center.

She initially called the West Virginia State Operations Emergency Services as the entity most closely associated with the location data provided by FAA. In a later call to Indy Center to Kevin (EK) at 1320Z she was told that the last contact with AA77 was during the period 1250-1254Z, but the Center was continuing to run the tapes of the contact with the aircraft. Urquhart was told at 1402Z by Indy Center that the location of the crash was South of Beckley, near Ashland Boyd City Airport. A minute earlier Indy told the RCC that had a report from the police about the crash.

In response to a direct question, Knox said he was told by Indy Center that the location was "not somewhere they would normally lose radar contact." The RCC understood in its dealings with

COMMISSION SENSITIVE

the various FAA ARTCC's that locations existed where radar contact was lost with commercial aircraft, especially in the interior U. S.

The RCC opened mission folders concerning AA77 with three states: Kentucky, West Virginia, and Ohio. The missions were closed at 2121Z that day. AA77 was the only incident aircraft on 9/11 that was handled in any way by the RCC. They were not notified on any of the other three impact aircraft, the alleged downing of the C-130 Gopher 06 or the false reporting on the status of Delta 1989.

Electronic Locator Transmissions (ELT). Such transmissions are voluminous, at least 20 a day, and they clog the system. According to Knox, the pilot in commercial VFR planes cannot activate an ELT and there is no requirement for such a capability in the cockpit. ELTs are part of the electronics of the plane and are primarily detected at impact. Knox further quantified the ELT issue. Ninety-seven percent are false alarms. Three out of one hundred are distress calls and one of a hundred might be investigated. All ELT detections by the SAR satellite system are fed to the RCC through the NOA mission control center in Maryland. Knox does not recall an ELT detection being brought to his attention on 9/11. The RCC will review its data to verify that statement.

Knox explained that the first RCC effort is to take care of the mission, in response to a question about "distress mode" communications. Their job is to execute their check lists which have been well established over time. Their SAR "manager" is their computer; most activity and note taking is conducted electronically. There was a check list for hijack situations in existence prior to 9/11 and a copy will be provided. They did not tape their lines on 9/11.

Lt Col Morgan added that on 9/11 he was participating in a Joint Casualty Rescue Center exercise in New Orleans on 9/11 and his first thought when notified about developing events was that it was some sort of exercise. He added that there was now tighter coordination with the air defenders—with CONR and with First Air Force, but that needs to get better, especially with the advent of NORTHCOM. The fidelity of radar data is getting better and they have worked with FAA using its NTAP program to assist in locating downed aircraft.

Staff learned of a civilian source—[redacted] a volunteer with the Colorado Civil Air Patrol, who has done extensive work on his own on the radar coverage issue, both FAA and USAF, and who has been consulted by RCC on occasion. Knox thought [redacted] would be worth contacting.

Overall the RCC perceives that it is now recognized as a valued partner by NORAD as well as other government entities. In Morgan's words, "we have become quite valuable."

9/11 Personal Privacy