

MFR 04016821

(P)

**Commission Sensitive**  
**MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD**

Event: Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) New York Air Route Center Interview with Paul Thumser

Type of event: Recorded Interview

Date: Tuesday, October 1, 2003

Special Access Issues: None

Prepared by: Geoffrey Brown and Miles Kara

Team Number: 8

Location: FAA New York Air Route Center, Rokonkomo, New York

Participants - Non-Commission: Alfred Johnson, FAA General Consul

Participants - Commission: John Azzarello, Miles Kara, Geoffrey Brown

-----  
NOTE: Please refer to the interview transcript for a complete account.  
-----

**Background**

Thumser has extensive experience as a pilot and as an operations supervisor. He was chief pilot for a light commuter airlines and in October 1981 for a variety of reasons he left the flying world and was hired in October, 1981 as an air traffic assistant. He started at NY TRACON and moved to New York Center in 1989. He ultimately became an operations supervisor in Area B and was supervising that area on 9-11. He reported through the operations supervisor to the Operations Manager in Charge (OMIC), Bruce Barrett who ultimately reported to Mike McCormack. On 9/11 McCormack would have reported to the acting AEA501 at Eastern Region, Rick duCharme.

**Observations based on pilot experience**

**ELT.** An Emergency Locator Transmission (ELT) cannot be triggered by a pilot in a B767. ELTs are tested at 00-05 of each hour. On a B767 impact would be the only way to trigger one. The ELT heard on 9-11 could have come from anywhere--121.5 civilian 243.0 military. A lot of times when an ELT is received outside the testing time a pilot will report that they set it off.

**RCC** (Rescue Coordination Center). The RCC is operated by the Air Force and they are the contact for credible ELTs. [Staff Note: We visited the RCC and they receive all ELTs; so many in fact that they are a nuisance and they have special procedures and software to manage that.]

Parameters for an ELT for that type of airplane (767) to be set off due to a hard turn or a hard landing aren't credible. The sensitivity setting on those ELTs is not low. For example, on the Egyptian air crash into the ocean there was no ELT set off. Thumser was the midnight supervisor, and therefore the OMIC that night. He vectored an airplane to

investigate, and that plane did not pick up an ELT. Based on that example and others he judged it would have to be a serious impact to set the ELT off.

### **Supervisory Responsibility Prior to Hijackings**

There is detection equipment when airplanes are within 5 miles horizontally or 1000 to 2000 feet vertically of each other. An alarm goes off and a print out comes through at the watch desk area. One went off that morning prior to the unfolding events of the day.

When such an alarm goes off the controller of record has to be relieved from that position and an NTap - a computer printout with targets, altitudes and times - is retrieved in order to match the times and altitudes to check if a controller has made an error. If it is concluded that there was less than required separation, then the voice tapes are checked to see what the controller and the pilot said. Airways facilities checks the voice tape. Because of an occurrence that morning Thumser put Ivonna Dowis in charge of Area B and Thumser began the investigation of operational error. The Error that Sector R39 had that morning did not have anything to do with the events of 9-11.

At about 0835 EDT Bruce Barrett informed Thumser of possible hijack and Thumser went back to Area B.

### **AA11**

Mark Merced Sector R56 controller and Ivonna briefed Thumser on what was happening. And Thumser retook charge of the area. Merced started tracking AA11 while having conversations with Boston Center. Thumser could only hear one side of the conversation.

The last known altitude for AA11 was flight level 290. Everyone is aware of that and Thumser finds out about it. Protecting flight level 290 then becomes the controller objective, not allowing anyone within 2000 ft, vertically of that altitude keeping in mind there had been no radio contact with AA11 for 15 or 20 minutes. It was a primary target only with a major course deviation.

AA11 was not supposed to come through the New York area. Although Thumser did not know it was destined to LAX, the AA11 flight plan was not through ZNY airspace. The people (other sectors, other centers) who needed to know did and New York Center was tracking the primary. R42 controller, Dave Battiglia, started a track on AA11.

In order to partially validate that track Thumser asked Merced to take Eagle936 to Flight Level 310. Vectored with a slight adjustment, the Eagle went just to the left of the American probable track 10 to 15 miles northwest of LaGuardia. The Eagle did not spot AA11. It was major trouble that the Eagle flight did not see AA11. They had high confidence if AA11 was at flight level 290 the Eagle would have spotted it.

Thumser became extremely concerned because of the high volume of traffic at all altitudes in the ZNY New York City airspace. His sense of urgency translated to all in the area, according to his recall.

When Thumser first got to the area had only heard of a possible hijacking—NORDO aircraft, shut off transponder, and off course. At that time he had received no information of the threatening communications.

He told the Sector 68 controller, controlling departures coming down out of LaGuardia

and Kennedy, that AA11 may enter his airspace. He also told other sectors in his area. He then went back to Merced and learned that the primary target was lost over Manhattan. Radar coverage is overlapping in ZNY so he thought the plane has gone very low. He told the whole area that the primary target was lost and that they didn't know lat/long/altitude or anything else.

#### UA 175

At that exact point Dave Battiglia informed Thumser of the lost UAL175. The data block was there but it was no longer tracking altitude. The block went into coast after 4 radar returns (48 seconds).. The first four hits after a loss, based on history, are projected by the computer. Thumser noticed the UAL175 data block going to coast track.

Dave Battiglia called a few seconds later and informed he is not communicating with UAL175. They then notice on Battiglia's screen the limited data block on a different code. Battiglia says it is UAL175, but it has changed altitudes.

Mike McCormick is in the area now. UAL175 [as a limited data block] starts to descend. They tell Sector 39 that UAL175's limited data block may be entering its space. That was 10 or 13 miles before UAL 175 turns to the southeast east. They had a good fix on altitude, unlike AA11. The Mode C transponder was still on.

At that point the area was informed that a "small airplane" had hit the World Trade Center. The information Thumser had at that time was - had a hijacked airplane (AA11) that lost primary directly over Manhattan so he immediately equated that it was AA11 that hit the WTC.

But now he was dealing with UAL175. Safety and control in Area B is compromised, so Thumser tells everyone to stop all traffic in Area B. UAL175 is turning at this time and there is chaos in the Area related to the attempt to clear all traffic in UAL175's path. At the point that UAL175 is 20 miles southeast of Allentown, [Note: Thumser had access to detailed charts depicting the flight paths of UA175 and AA11 that were posted on the wall] turning southeast and descending. That was an extremely abnormal situation.

His awareness of the UAL 175 hijack began at the beginning of the turn to the Southeast and told Dave LeCates to scramble McGuire. [His recall] He didn't recall saying "I think this is a hijack." McGuire doesn't have fighters, but was thinking something was going to happen, and he was reaching for any possibility to get military assistance. After Thumser's original statement was consulted Thumser says he told LeCates to scramble McGuire after the northeast bound turn of UAL175. While handling the descent of UAL175, he said "tell them [tower] he's coming." He wanted to help stop the plane, somehow. He even had a thought of running another airplane into it at that time. It was a bizarre enough situation to tell someone to scramble.

LeCates never acknowledged or responded. He recalled conversing quietly to LeCates, he didn't say loudly as he didn't want to disturb area. Thumser also told staff, "If I had authority...knowing what I know...with the background I have...I would have shot that plane down."

When working at Kennedy he had worked hijacks and had used procedures in place to provide fighter escort. The Paine Stewart Lear jet incident is another example. Had been

done in past. When asked if part of the procedures was the ability to shoot down aircraft, Thumser thought it would have to be directed by the White House. [Staff Note: Staff has since learned that the only possible hijack Thumser could have worked was a February 1993 Lufthansa incident. He cited the Stewart incident only as an example, not as an incident that he worked.]

If there hadn't been the preceding AA11 event, Thumser would not have thought UAL175 was a hijack. He would have thought it had a serious equipment problem and would land at Kennedy. Kennedy has a large maintenance base. In the old days would have treated it like an emergency and would have told Kennedy, possibly Newark to get ready. [Staff Note: That statement is belied by what he next said.]

About 20 miles Northeast of Potsdam, UAL175 made its turn to the North and Thumser was now thinking it was headed towards the WTC. He then qualified that it was not at turn towards northeast, but at the point of the turn to the southeast that he understood UAL175 was headed towards the WTC. [This may be reconstructive on his part, in hindsight.]

As Thumser looked at the transcript it was 0853 EDT when he stated American 75 hijack. AT that time he had information that a small airplane had hit the WTC, but didn't have verification that it was AA11. UAL175 was in a high rate of descent, was traveling 350 or 400 knots and headed towards the ground. They lost target soon thereafter and nearly instantaneous heard of the second WTC hit.

#### **Area B Controller Meeting**

Thumser recalled that after it the immediate situation was over they shut down traffic and combined sectors on the Center floor. Other people were tasked to watch Area B's scopes and Robert Ott, one of the office managers, was tasked to guide Area B controllers through a recall process. It is not abnormal procedure to give statements in such situations. Ott gave Thumser and Area B controllers direction not to call home or friends. Ott sequestered everyone in a conference room.

They went to an old operations room and Marty Fournier, with Bob Ott, recorded statements by controllers--Mark Merced, Dave Battiglia, Chris Tucker, Tony Palmieri and Thumser. For whatever reason they wanted the statements recorded That is rarely done. Thumser gave a verbal recorded statement. He recalled that he did not want to say everything because of what else was in room. [check tape] Thumser posed no objection to Staff listening to his statement.

#### **Other Comments**

Thumser had never heard of the possibility of a terrorist using a plane for a suicide mission.

Assumed the chief and the deputy were on the phones relaying all the information.

Looking at the [post-facto] hijack profile and what they did, it seemed simple [in hindsight] to project where the hijacked airplanes were going. He reiterated he thought UAL175 was going to hit WTC about seven minutes before impact.

It was like [watching someone]driving the wrong way down the street.

“What I thought it was going to do was conjecture, not fact.”

### **Hijackings in General**

Pre 9-11 controllers would receive communication from the pilot about the hijack--code words or a specific transponder code. Neither of those things happened on 9-11. Other ways to detect or suspect a hijack--not talking to ATC and/or extremely off course. Without communications nothing could be confirmed, however.

Pre 9-11 the controller would receive the communication - pilot reports hijack – get the information and report to the area supervisor. The area supervisor would report to the watch desk and the OMIC (Operations Manager in Charge) would follow up. He doesn't believe anyone below the OMIC would do the follow up.

Prior to and on 9-11, concerning NORAD and NEADS, Thumser had reasonable awareness and thought it would take 5 or 6 phone calls to get there and they probably would have called an air force base.

He was not familiar with Dynamic Simulation training concerning hijackings and had no computer or other training for hijacking. Operations supervisors do not go through the same training as controllers. Controller were only to a) get information and pass it and b) do what the pilots ask to do.

There were very few hijacks pre-9-11 for a controller to respond to in the real world. He recalled no exercises or drills—there was very little emphasis and drills. He had no knowledge of any exercises or drills sponsored by the FAA or the military and certainly none with multiple hijacking events.

Post 9-11 he hasn't personally gone through any such training, and does not believe controllers have gone through any either. The only review they've gotten is what to do in case of a known hijacking. He emphasized that on 9-11 they were only told of a “suspected hijacking”.

Nevertheless, Area B was treating both UAL175 and AA11 as a hijacking, though not confirmed. No one said to Thumser don't say it's a hijack until it is confirmed a hijack.

### **AA11 Rebirth**

He never heard any rumors of that sort concerning AA11, but did hear within New York Center that it might not have been AA11 that hit the WTC. Personally, he made the logical assumption that it was AA11. You wouldn't see a fire from the WTC if a small aircraft hit it. He didn't hear anyone say anything about it not being AA11 hitting the center and doesn't recall anything from outside the path of the AA11 track still being airborne. He heard nothing heard about a plane from Poughkeepsie being lost..

Does not believe he wrote an AA11 statement for the accident package. Usually facility that has control of the airspace or the airplane that is involved in the accident does the incident. AA11 originated in Boston; he is a little surprised that they didn't ask him for a statement.

The last known AA11 Mode C (transponder) altitude was flight level 290. It is possible to transit from Boston Center air space into NY TRACON air space without passing

through New York Center air space.

### **Recommendations and other Comments**

Security at gates, security at airports (ramps, cleaners, maintenance, fuelers) is important- that's where access to planes is. Clamp down on security in ramp area. The Air Traffic Control perspective is that very little that can be done except cooperate with the hijacker. If a situation similar occurred—within minutes to New York—it would be very difficult without already airborne combat pilots with authority to shoot down.

Cooperation is better now with the military, with the NEADS/NORAD direct line. There could be additional hotlines distributed throughout, but Thumser is not confident that every operational supervisor should be given that responsibility.

Pre-9-11 military communications were very difficult. The relationship only dealt with aircraft in and out of warning areas.

Thumser believes UAL175 might have had an updated transponder that could not be turned off. Here his reference is to the original UAL175 code 1470 that became 3020, then a minute later 3321. He posed the rhetorical question, "why turn 4 knobs when you could turn it off with one switch?" And then continued, "does that seem an attempt by United Airlines pilot to signal, hijackers to shut off, or c hijackers change code for confusion?" The transponder is right to the side of the pilot and in Thumser's flying experience the first digit would have been changed first.. Even switching one digit would have caused a limited data block to display on controller scopes. Transponders and codes are taught early in flight school. The hijackers would have known the mechanics.