Less than two hours elapsed from the hijacking of the first aircraft on September 11, 2001, at 8:14 am EDT, to the crash of the fourth plane in a Pennsylvania field at 10:03. Those 109 minutes were a jumble of incomplete and conflicting information. But ten years later, thanks to the efforts of the 9/11 Commission and other researchers, we can accurately construct a timeline of events during and after the attacks. This timeline documents the key role played by the Air National Guard in the nation’s immediate response. At the same time that New York City firemen raced toward danger on the ground, Air National Guard aviators flew into an unknown situation in the skies.

“WE DID WHAT GUARDSMEN ALWAYS DO”

BY ANDREW WACKERFUSS, Ph.D., Office of Air Force Historical Studies - PAINTING BY RICK HERTER
On the morning of September 11, 2001, air traffic controllers near Boston first grew concerned about American Airlines Flight 11 when it stopped responding to routine communications around 7:44 a.m. Their concerns intensified when the plane made a sharp turn, its transponder stopped broadcasting and a series of strange messages came from the cockpit. One said: “Nobody move. Everything will be okay. If you try to make any moves, you’ll endanger yourself and the airplane. Just stay quiet.”

These ominous messages, said in an accented voice that investigators later believed to be the hijacker-pilot Mohammed Atta, caused several controllers to conclude the plane had been hijacked. FAA controllers contacted officers at the Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS), which was under the command of the Continental U.S. NORAD and which could call upon two of the seven alert sites that provided air defense for the continental U.S. The FAA controllers also placed a direct call to the tower at Otis ANG Base in Cape Cod, Mass., at 8:34 a.m. This was the first notification that the ANG’s services would be needed that day.

Two pilots with the Massachusetts ANG 102d Fighter Wing were on alert duty that day. Lt. Col. Tim Duffy, a traditional Guardsman and commercial airline pilot, was disappointed to be on alert instead of on the flying schedule for that day’s crisp and cloudless weather. He was experienced when the plane made a sharp turn, its transponder was no longer transmitting. Duffy later believed that this situation was not an ordinary hijacking. This intuition led him to push his F-15 faster, in order to get on the scene as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, Duffy and Nash could not know that Flight 11 had just struck the World Trade Center’s North Tower, killing all aboard the aircraft and many hundreds of others in the building.

When word of this first crash came through aviation channels, the pilots went into a holding pattern in a military training airspace off Long Island, which would put them in close range to a second hijacked craft, United Flight 175, hit the South Tower. Nash and Duffy proceeded to Manhattan and established a CAP. They would soon have their hands full identifying and escorting dozens of aircraft as the FAA began the unprecedented action of grounding all commercial air traffic in the United States.

WASHINGTON, DC
In the airspace surrounding Washington, DC, around 9:30 a.m., Minnesota ANG Lt. Col. Steve O’Brien had just taken off from Andrews Air Force Base. He and the rest of his C-130 crew were returning home after a long deployment on a supply mission in the Caribbean. As the cargo plane passed over the Potomac River, O’Brien received an unusual request from Washington air traffic controllers, who hoped he could get a visual on what controllers now feared was a third hijacking—American Airlines Flight 77. “I told him that was an understatement,” O’Brien later told the Minneapolis Star-Tribune. “By then, he [AA 77] had pretty much filled our windscreen. Then he made a pretty aggressive turn so he was moving right in front of us, a mile and a half, two miles away. I said we had him in sight, then the controller asked me what kind of plane it was. That caught us up, because normally they have all that information. The controller didn’t seem to know anything.”
Within 20 miles of Washington’s airports, and used “whatever which ordered them to establish a CAP, intercept any aircraft fore spoke directly with the White House operations center, there elements of national air defense at that time. They there- chain of command and had no way to communicate with oth- called the “Capital Guardians,” they were not in NORAD’s 113th Wing at Andrews AFB were taking to the skies. Though Capt. Borgstrom and Maj. Brad Derrig—established a CAP career, but I don’t think anyone’s heard that order before.” Borgstrom later recalled, “I’ve never heard it before in my short go without breaking the sound barrier,” Capt. Craig Borg- capital at maximum subsonic speed. “That’s as fast as you can already hit, NEADS ordered them to head directly over the al Guard’s 119th Fighter Wing had been scrambled several minutes earlier based on the belief that Flight 11 was still air- borne and headed to DC. Now with the World Trade Center already hit, NEADS ordered them to head directly over the capital at maximum subsonic speed. “That’s as fast as you can go without breaking the sound barrier,” Capt. Craig Borg-strom later recalled, “I’ve never heard it before in my short career, but I don’t think anyone’s heard that order before.” 40 miles away, they saw smoke billowing from the Pen- tagon, and they headed toward it to identify several small unidentified aircraft approaching. These turned out to be mil- itary and law enforcement helicopters, so two of the pilots— Capt. Borgstrom and Maj. Brad Derrig—established a CAP while the third, Maj. Dean Eckmann, swept low over the city. As he passed over the Pentagon, evacuees there cheered the reassuring sight of U.S. air power, then renewed their efforts to help those still trapped inside. Meanwhile, pilots from the District of Columbia ANG’s 113th Wing at Andrews AFB were taking to the skies. Through the “Capital Guardians,” they were not in NORAD’s chain of command and had no way to communicate with oth- er elements of national air defense at that time. They there- fore spoke directly with the White House operations center, which ordered them to establish a CAP, intercept any aircraft within 20 miles of Washington’s airports, and use “whatever force is necessary… to keep them from hitting a building downtown.” By 11 a.m., a total of seven guardsmen had taken to the skies, established direct communication with each other, and by noon had secured the national capital region’s airspace.

ON THE GROUND
When United Flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania, the attacks of September 11 came to an end. Of course, nobody knew that at the time. Throughout the morning, National Guard personnel reported to duty without formal orders. In many ways, the typical experience of the National Guard on September 11 was not that of the pilots who were already on duty when the attacks occurred, but of members who learned of the attacks while at their civilian jobs. Maj. Chris Hamilton, a lawyer and security forces officer with the 102d Fighter Wing at Otis, was preparing to start a trial at the U.S. District Court in Boston, when U.S. Marshals closed the building and ordered everyone outside—"I realized there was something wrong." Hamilton later told Air Force historians, "when there was this absolutely eerie silence in Boston because the U.S. District Courthouse is right across the water from Logan Airport. Normally it is very loud, and there was just this eerie silence—no planes in the air, no nothing. I knew something was up when I actually saw fighter jets from the 102d over Boston. I told the partner that I was with that I needed to go, I needed to report to my unit." Hamilton’s wife packed his gear as he raced home. "With no questions asked, she packed my bags." "I think the vast majority of the squadron reported with- out having been prompted to," he said. "As I understood it, they also understood it: that this was serious and it’s time to do your duty." These and similar stories encapsulate the immediate response of thousands of National Guardmen on September 11. Without notice and with other commitments, as many as 60,000 of the Air Guard’s 110,000 members reported for duty, and then worked tirelessly even as formal orders took days to secure. On September 11 alone, the ANG flew 179 missions, and the tasks to come would be even greater. Brig. Gen. Paul S. Kimmel, former assistant for opera- tional readiness to the director of the ANG, said that on September 11 and afterward, the men and women of the National Guard did “what Guardsmen always do, and that’s respond and respond well when there’s a need. The initia- tive people took on their own without direction was amazing and showed the real value of the Air National Guard."