

COMMISSION SENSITIVE

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Event: Lt Colonel Steven O'Brien, USAF 133<sup>rd</sup> Air Lift Wing

Type: Interview

Special Access Issues:

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Date: May 6, 2004

Team: 8

Participants (non-Commission): John Inazu, USAF legal; Lt Col Paul Mahaney, 133<sup>rd</sup> Air Lift Wing

Participants (Commission): Miles Kara and Lisa Sullivan

Location: USAF Legal Department at Pentagon

**Background**

Since December 1976, O'Brien has been a member of the Minnesota Air National Guard. On 9-11, he was aircraft commander of Gofer 06, a C-130 H3 aircraft.

He was contacted by the USAF department of public affairs about his activities on 9-11. They authorized him to do an interview with the cable channel, the Learning Channel. He was interviewed by the *Minneapolis Tribune*. Most recently, he was requested to do an interview with Minnesota Public Radio.

On 9-11, he and his crew were in DC to ferry cargo back to Minnesota. He was returning from a guard lift mission in the Virgin Islands. They spent the night of September 10<sup>th</sup> at Andrews Air Force Base and were planning on returning to Minneapolis the next day. They were originally scheduled for a 10 AM departure (**did I hear 10 AM correctly?**) on the 11<sup>th</sup>. This was in his flight plan. When his mission was aborted, he was cleared by Command and Control to return "whenever they were ready." The eventually got off at 9:30 AM.

**C-130 H3**

The H3 carries no armament. They have some defensive systems, chaff and flares (?). None were loaded that day. There are no armed C 130-H models that he is aware of. There was no way he could have done anything to stop those aircrafts that day.

**Situational Awareness**

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INTERAGENCY SECURITY CLASSIFICATION APPEALS PANEL,  
E.O. 13526, SECTION 5.3(b)(3)  
ISCAP APPEAL NO. 2011-048, document no. 22  
DECLASSIFICATION DATE: September 29, 2014

As he and his crew were preparing to depart Andrews AFB, they had no knowledge of the attacks on the World Trade Center in NY. As he departed the Washington DC area, it was a frustrating feeling because they could have orbited over the Pentagon area.

The crew tuned the VHF radio to an AM station to learn more details about the events in NYC once they were aboard the plane. The first thing he remembers hearing as they got reception was a report that a second plane had hit the WTC. They were airborne at this point.

### **Delayed Take-Off**

Flight strips from Andrews Tower for the C-130: "1333 – wheels up." O'Brien confirmed that time of take-off.

O'Brien believes his take-off was delayed for three minutes at Andrews because a 747 took off right before him. Controller held O'Brien because of weight turbulence issues. There is a separation criteria between aircrafts at take off. O'Brien remembers watching the 747 "cranking up" at the same time as him. It got going and departed in an unusual short amount of time. He doesn't recall controllers showing the 747 any priority over the C-130.

Miles told O'Brien: "If you had not been delayed three minutes, you would have been in the flight path of AAL 77, the plane that hit the Pentagon.

### **Eye-Witness account of the plane hitting the Pentagon**

Miles played the recording of O'Brien telling Washington (Approach or Center?) ATC that the plane was "down." O'Brien confirmed that he meant the plane had crashed. He acknowledged the choice of words made his meaning unclear.

(He added that once before he had witnessed a classmate of his crash his plane on final approach, so he'd seen the sight of a jet fuel explosion once before.)

On the recording, O'Brien identified the plane before it impacted the Pentagon as a 757. He did not know what airline company it was (he was not asked this by air traffic control at the time). He commented that the aircraft as it approached was "unusually banked for a very steep for a turn-It was between a 30-45 degree bank." He was looking at it from higher up. There appeared to be a red stripe on the silver plane. He also told the intelligence folks at Youngstown, Ohio this information.

His initial guess that the plane was a 757 turned out to be correct. The red stripe was probably the signature "American Airlines" designation on the body of the plane, reflecting on the wing.

### **Communications**

O'Brien was not in any communication with other dispatchers or controllers at the time; just Washington ATC. He was not on Command Post frequency at Andrews. Things were happening fairly quickly and he did not have time, nor did he think to initiate an "off-call" (departure call) with Andrews Command Post. He said that in a busy airspace such as over Washington, DC, a pilot "really has to listen up on the radios to ATC because of the fairly precise vectors given by the controllers."

His navigator on the team that day was Lt Col Joe Debito. The UHF radio was used to talk to military command. He doesn't recall military aircraft on the radio.

TCAS: equipment that allows you to identify other transponder codes in the area. That is how he identified other traffic. He noticed the 757 before the ATC pointed out the fast mover over the radio. From his vantage point, it was fairly obvious who the controller was talking about. The surprise came when the controller asked him to identify the aircraft for him. The controller is supposed to know more than a pilot about the planes in his air space.

Was the 757 the only other aircraft he was aware of on the scene that day?

Yes. O'Brien can't recall other aircrafts in the vicinity, such as a helicopter that took off the Pentagon or two Bob Cats that were at 17 and 21, 000 feet. Because he does not recall them does not mean they weren't there. He had no reason to take note of them.

The Washington controller asked O'Brien to follow the 757 in. O'Brien did so; there was a significant distance between them. He was trying to keep the aircraft in sight. The sun was low – pollutants – many factors contributed to the difficulty in keeping the plane in sight.

Miles was able to determine that the C-130 was about two minutes behind the aircraft (AAL 77).

O'Brien asked ATC for permission to orbit the Pentagon after impact. ATC gave him a heading of 2-7-0. O'Brien did not want to fly through the plume of smoke.

ATC were emphatic that he leave the area of the Pentagon. He wasn't going to argue with ATC.

He was specifically asked if he was armed, he was not, did he see or was he aware of any fighter aircraft in the area, he did not. He did not fire any kind of armament at either the plane he was following or the Pentagon.

He first sighted AAL 77 at 4,000 feet. AAL 77 was a little higher up at that point. AAL 77 was descending rapidly. By the time ATC asked O'Brien to ID him, he was below him.

He doesn't remember hearing about the national ground stop over the radio frequency.

### UAL 93

When they left the Pentagon site, he asked his crew members if they were ok to press on. We decided to continue back to Minneapolis, MN. The first controller at Cleveland Center asked him if he saw any traffic. O'Brien didn't see another plane at that time. The controller ordered O'Brien to make a 90 degree turn. He executed it at 10:04 AM (Miles obtained time off of the radar). At that time, a crew member in the tail of the plane saw some smoke off the right hand side of the aircraft. O'Brien reported the sighted to Cleveland Center and gave him a location. The controller said he had lost the plane on radar in the approximate location. It was confirmed rather quickly the smoke was the crash site of UAL 93. The sight was about 20 miles off the left wing of the C-130.

What was your awareness of other aircraft in the sky at that time?

He vaguely remembers a smaller white aircraft at a lower altitude (below 10,000 feet). It looked like a white business jet. Miles said the business jet was a Falcon Jet it was at 8,000 feet. It did a 360 degree loop over the crash site.

Do you recall seeing any other military aircraft in your flight path that day?

No, he does not. Nor did he fire any weapons at UAL 93 (as stated before, he did not have the means to do so).

He was handed-off to another Cleveland Center controller. Miles asked it the Cleveland Controller challenged him. O'Brien said the controller wanted to know what he was doing in the air, but there was hesitancy in his voice.

O'Brien had to divert his plane, so he landed in Youngstown, Ohio.

### Shoot Down Order

O'Brien did not know that at 10:05 AM, Dulles Tower/ in the Washington area made an announcement over the radio frequency that all airplanes entering class B airspace will be shot down.

When he was told to turn to a different heading while over the Pentagon, he vaguely remembers thinking that if it was a terrorist incident they didn't want to have to sort out the good guys from the bad guys if they had to take action.

### Post-Event

He was interviewed by the FBI, and he had a basic debrief with the intelligence folks at Youngstown.

### **Radar Capabilities**

“Skip paint” from the transcript of his interview - that was a transcription error - it was meant to say skin paint in reference to the primary radar.

There is a fairly sophisticated radar in the H3 model. Skin paint medium mode is a function on the radar system. It will go out 20 miles.

UAL 93 was at 8,000 feet in final moments. UAL 93 did not come up on his radar.