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Context of 'Just Before 10:06 a.m. September 11, 2001: Locals Hear a Missile Before Flight 93 Crashes?'

This is a scalable context timeline. It contains events related to the event **Just Before 10:06 a.m. September 11, 2001: Locals Hear a Missile Before Flight 93 Crashes?**. You can narrow or broaden the context of this timeline by adjusting the zoom level. The lower the scale, the more relevant the items on average will be, while the higher the scale, the less relevant the items, on average, will be.

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9.36 a.m. September 11, 2001: Military Cargo Plane Asked to Identify Flight 77



A typical C-130. [Source: US Air Force Reserve Command]

Washington’s Reagan National Airport air traffic control instructs a military C-130 cargo plane that has just departed Andrews Air Force Base to intercept Flight 77 and identify it. (Wald and Sack 10/16/2001; Ellison 10/17/2001) Remarkably, this C-130 is the same C-130 that will be 17 miles from Flight 93 when it later crashes into the Pennsylvania countryside (see 10:08 a.m. September 11, 2001). (Pittsburgh Channel 9/15/2001; Sternberg 9/11/2002) The pilot, Lt. Col. Steve O’Brien, will claim that he took off around 9:30 a.m., planning to return to Minnesota after dropping supplies off in the Caribbean. He will describe his close encounter: “When air traffic control asked me if we had him [Flight 77] in sight, I told him that was an understatement—by then, he 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.” O’Brien reports that the plane is either a 757 or 767 and its silver fuselage means it is probably an American Airlines plane. “They told us to turn and follow that aircraft—in 20 plus years of flying, I’ve never been asked to do something like that.” (Sternberg 9/11/2002) O’Brien and his crew, Maj. Robert Schumacher and flight engineer Master Sgt. Jeffrey Rosenthal, are unaware of the attacks in New York. Schumacher will say that, after being directed to follow Flight 77, he first thought that the plane was having technical difficulties, “that the pilots were really just trying to fly the airplane, and get it on the ground safely.” After the impact, O’Brien tunes in to a news broadcast, but is surprised to hear about a second crash in New York, not at the Pentagon. He will recall: “The first thing we heard on there was ‘We’re now hearing about a second airplane hitting the World Trade Center.’ That was not what we were expecting to hear. We were expecting to hear about an airplane impacting the Pentagon... and the light goes on, and it’s like, ‘Oh my God, the nation’s under attack!’” (Catlin 5/31/2004) The 9/11 Commission will report that O’Brien specifically identifies the hijacked plane as a Boeing 757. Seconds after impact, he reports to the Washington tower, “Looks like that aircraft crashed into the Pentagon, sir.” (9/11 Commission 6/17/2004)

Just Before 10:06 a.m. September 11, 2001: Locals Hear a Missile Before Flight 93 Crashes?

Several local people believe they hear a missile overhead just before Flight 93 goes down. Barry Lichty, a US Navy veteran and mayor of Indian Lake Borough (just to the east of where Flight 93 crashes), is watching television with his wife. He says he hears “a loud roar above the house that sounded like a missile.... Shortly thereafter, we heard an explosion and a tremor. My first reaction, as a former utility employee, was that maybe someone shot a missile into the substation.” He says Flight 93 “did not come over my house. I don’t know what we heard.” (Kashurba 2002, pp. 158-159) Joe Wilt, who lives a quarter-mile from the crash site, hears a “whistling like a missile, then a loud boom.” He says, “The first thing I thought it was, was a missile.” (Michaud 9/12/2001; Lane and Pan 9/12/2001) And Ernie Stuhl, the mayor of Shanksville, later says, “I know of two people - I will not mention names - that heard a missile. They both live very close, within a couple of hundred yards.... This one fellow’s served in Vietnam and he says he’s heard them, and he heard one that day.” (Bunch 11/18/2001) Officials will emphatically deny that Flight 93 was shot down, as some people later suggest (see September 14, 2001). (Gazarik and Acton 9/14/2001; Longman 2002, pp. 264) However, a number of witnesses report seeing a small, white jet plane near the crash site, around the time Flight 93 reportedly goes down (see (Before and After 10:06 a.m.) September 11, 2001).

(Before and After 10:06 a.m.) September 11, 2001: Witnesses

See Low-Flying, Small White Jet at Flight 93 Crash Site

A second plane, described “as a small, white jet with rear engines and no discernible markings,” is seen by at least ten witnesses flying low and in erratic patterns, not much above treetop level, over the crash site within minutes of United Flight 93 crashing. (Carlin 8/13/2002)

■ Lee Purbaugh: “I didn’t get a good look but it was white and it circled the area about twice and then it flew off over the horizon.” (Wallace 9/12/2002)

■ Susan Mcelwain: Less than a minute before the Flight 93 crash rocked the countryside, she sees a small white jet with rear engines and no discernible markings swoop low over her minivan near an intersection and disappear over a hilltop, nearly clipping the tops of trees lining the ridge. (Pillets 9/14/2001) She later adds, “There’s no way I imagined this plane—it was so low it was virtually on top of me. It was white with no markings but it was definitely military, it just had that look. It had two rear engines, a big fin on the back like a spoiler on the back of a car and with two upright fins at the side. I haven’t found one like it on the Internet. It definitely wasn’t one of those executive jets. The FBI came and talked to me and said there was no plane around....

But I saw it and it was there before the crash and it was 40 feet above my head. They did not want my story—nobody here did.” (Wallace 9/12/2002)

■ John Fleegle and two work colleagues arrive at the crash site “before any fireman or paramedics or anybody.” According to Fleegle, “When we got there, there was a plane flying up above and he was smart, he flew straight for the sun so you couldn’t look at it and see exactly what type of plane, if it was a fighter or what it was.” However, Fleegle claims the plane “was decent sized. It wasn’t just a little private jet or something like that, from what we could see.” (Lappe and Marshall 2004, pp. 35-36)

■ Dennis Decker and/or Rick Chaney, say: “As soon as we looked up [after hearing the Flight 93 crash], we saw a midsized jet flying low and fast. It appeared to make a loop or part of a circle, and then it turned fast and headed out.” Decker and Chaney described the plane as a Learjet type, with engines mounted near the tail and painted white with no identifying markings. “It was a jet plane, and it had to be flying real close when that 757 went down. If I was the FBI, I’d find out who was driving that



Looking straight down onto the Flight 93 crash site. North is to the top. Note the impact point north of the road, and the burned trees to the south of it. [Source: FBI]

plane.” (Pillets 9/14/2001)


- Kathy Blades, who is staying about quarter of a mile from the impact site, runs outside after the crash and sees a jet, “with sleek back wings and an angled cockpit,” race overhead. (Bunch 11/18/2001)
- Anna Ruth Fisher says, “After the crash, another jet went near over to look.” Her mother, Anna B. Fisher, adds, “We were looking at the smoke cloud when we saw the jets circling up there.” (Kashurba 2002, pp. 27)
- Jim Brandt sees a small plane with no markings stay about one or two minutes over the crash site before leaving. (Pittsburgh Channel 9/12/2001)
- Bob Page sees a large plane circling the crash site for about two or three minutes, before climbing almost vertically into the sky. He cannot see what kind of plane it is or if there are any markings on it, but says, “It sure wasn’t no puddle jumper.” (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review 9/12/2001)
- Tom Spinelli: “I saw the white plane. It was flying around all over the place like it was looking for something. I saw it before and after the crash.” (Wallace 9/12/2002)

The FBI later claims this was a Fairchild Falcon 20 business jet, directed after the crash to fly from 37,000 feet to 5,000 feet and obtain the coordinates for the crash site to help rescuers (see 10:07 a.m. September 11, 2001). (Pittsburgh Channel 9/15/2001; Heltzel and Gibb 9/16/2001) The FBI also says there was a C-130 military cargo aircraft flying at 24,000 feet about 17 miles away (see 10:08 a.m. September 11, 2001), but that plane wasn’t armed and had no role in the crash. (Pittsburgh Channel 9/15/2001; Heltzel and Gibb 9/16/2001) Note that this is the same C-130 that flies very close to Flight 77 right as that plane crashes into the Pentagon (see 9.36 a.m. September 11, 2001).

10:07 a.m. September 11, 2001: Business Jet Asked to Help Locate Flight 93 Crash Site



Falcon 20 business jet. [Source: Portuguese Air Force]

According to some accounts, following a request from the FAA’s Cleveland Center, a Fairchild Falcon 20 business jet reports seeing puffs of smoke in the area of Flight 93’s last known position. (Heltzel and Gibb 9/16/2001; Federal Aviation Administration 9/17/2001 ) The FBI later says the business jet was within 20 miles of Flight 93 when it crashed, at an altitude of 37,000 feet, and on its way to Johnstown. It was asked to descend to 5,000 feet to help locate the crash site for the benefit of the responding emergency crews.

(Pittsburgh Channel 9/15/2001) Stacey Taylor appears to be the Cleveland Center controller who made the request. She later recalls: “I had another airplane [other than Flight 93] that I was working. And I told him, I said, ‘Sir,’ I said, ‘I think we have an aircraft down.’ I said, ‘This is entirely up to you, but if you’d be willing to fly over the last place that we spotted this airplane—and see if you can see anything.’ ... So he flew over and at first he didn’t see anything and then he said, ‘We see a great big plume or a cloud of smoke.’” (MSNBC 9/9/2006) The business jet belongs to VF Corp, a Greensboro, North Carolina clothing firm. (Heltzel and Gibb 9/16/2001) According to David Newell, VF Corp’s director of aviation and travel, Cleveland Center contacted the plane’s copilot Yates Gladwell when it was at an altitude “in the neighborhood of 3,000 to 4,000 ft,” rather than 37,000 feet, as claimed by the FBI. He will add: “They got down within 1,500 ft. of the ground when they circled. They saw a hole in the ground with smoke coming out of it. They pinpointed the location and then continued on.” (Chertoff et al. 3/2005) This incident occurs around 40 minutes after the FAA initiated a nationwide ground stop, which required planes in the air to land as soon as reasonable (see (9:26 a.m.) September 11, 2001). (Donnelly 9/14/2001; 9/11 Commission 7/24/2004, pp. 25) The FBI will claim the VF Corp

business jet is probably the plane some witnesses on the ground see up above, shortly after the crash of Flight 93 (see (Before and After 10:06 a.m.) September 11, 2001). (Pittsburgh Channel 9/15/2001) However, at least two witnesses say they saw a plane overhead even before the time of the Flight 93 crash, and one of them describes it as “definitely military,” rather than a business jet. Also, some will describe it as flying much lower than the Falcon 20 was—just “40 feet above my head,” according to one witness. (Pillits 9/14/2001; Wallace 9/12/2002)


10:08 a.m. September 11, 2001: Military Cargo Plane Pilot Asked to Verify Flight 93 Crash



Lt. Col. Steve O'Brien standing in front of a C-130. [Source: CBC]

Cleveland Center air traffic controller Stacey Taylor has asked a nearby C-130 pilot to look at Flight 93's last position and see if he can find anything. Remarkably, this C-130 pilot, Lt. Col. Steve O'Brien, is the same pilot who was asked by air traffic control to observe Flight 77 as it crashed into the Pentagon earlier on (see 9.36 a.m. September 11, 2001). O'Brien tells Taylor that he saw smoke from the crash shortly after the hijacked plane went down. (Ellison 10/17/2001; MSNBC 9/11/2002; 9/11 Commission 6/17/2004) An article in the London Independent will later suggest that Flight 93 might have been brought down by the US military using “electronic warfare applications” that can disrupt the mechanisms of an airplane (See August 13, 2002); it will refer to this C-130, since “in 1995 the Air Force installed ‘electronic suites’ in at least 28 of its C-130s—capable, among other things, of emitting lethal jamming signals.” (Carlin 8/13/2002)

(After 10:20 a.m.) September 11, 2001: Jet Plane Allegedly Carrying United Airlines Executives Circles Flight 93 Crash Site

Patrick Madigan, the commander of the Somerset Barracks of the Pennsylvania State Police, arrives at the Flight 93 crash scene around 10:20 a.m. (Department of the Army and the Air Force National Guard Bureau 2002 ) He says that at some point later in the day (he does not specify a time), a “strange incident” occurs: “We were there at the site and an airplane started circling. It was a jetliner circling the crash site very low. No one knew what to expect because we knew that all of the planes were supposedly grounded.” (The FAA had, at about 9:45 a.m., ordered that all aircraft be instructed to land at the nearest airport (see (9:45 a.m.) September 11, 2001).) After a few minutes of uncertainty, it is announced that the plane is carrying United Airlines executives, who are circling the site to view it before they land in nearby Johnstown. (Kashurba 2002, pp. 63) Another low-flying jet plane was witnessed over the site earlier on, around the time Flight 93 went down (see (Before and After 10:06 a.m.) September 11, 2001).

11:30 p.m. September 11, 2001: FBI Uninterested in Flight 93 Witness's Evidence

Susan Mcelwain, who lives two miles from the Flight 93 crash site, had seen a small jet plane flying very low overhead as she was driving home. She later recalls that it had been “heading right to the point where Flight 93 crashed and must have been there at the very moment it came down.” But it was only later in the afternoon, after returning home and turning on the TV, that she'd realized what she'd seen was connected to the attacks in New York and Washington. While she was confused that a Boeing 757—not a small jet plane—was being reported as having gone down near where she'd been, she'd then realized that the small plane was flying in a different direction to that being described for Flight 93. So she got her husband to tell the police about what she'd witnessed. Consequently, late in the evening,

the FBI turns up to talk to her about it. Yet, as McElwain later recalls, “They did not want my story.” They keep asking her how big the plane she’d seen was. When she tells them it was small, not much bigger than her van, one of the agents tells her, “You don’t know what a 757 looks like.” She retorts, “Don’t be condescending towards me. If you don’t want to believe me, that’s fine, but I thought I should report what I saw. You ought to know there was something else in the air at the same time this was going on. We want to make sure it was ours and not somebody else’s.” After this, she will recall, the agent “did seem to get a little nicer. Told me that it was a white Learjet. Somebody was taking pictures. And I said, ‘Before the crash?’ and he says, ‘Well, we’ve got to go,’ and that was the end of it.” (Pillels 9/14/2001; Wallace 9/12/2002; Lappe and Marshall 2004, pp. 38-40) Numerous other witnesses also saw a small jet plane flying above the crash site around the time Flight 93 reportedly went down (see (Before and After 10:06 a.m.) September 11, 2001).

September 14, 2001: Officials Deny Flight 93 Shot Down

Officials deny that Flight 93 was shot down, but propose the theory that the hijackers had a bomb on board and blew up the plane. (Gazarik and Acton 9/14/2001) Later in the month, it is reported that the “FBI has determined from the on site investigation that no explosive was involved.” (Gullo 9/25/2001)

September 16, 2001: Usual Investigative Procedures Not Followed in Examining Flight 93 Wreckage

A report suggests the crash site of Flight 93 is being searched and recorded in 60 square-foot grids. (Billington 9/16/2001) This approach is preferred by Wallace Miller, the local coroner, and Dennis Dirkmaat, a forensic anthropologist involved in searching the crash site. According to journalist and author Jere Longman, “The distribution patterns developed from such precise marking of airplane parts, remains and personal effects might have told them such things as exactly how the airplane struck the ground. Theoretically, by associating the location of particular remains with the location of parts of the airplane, they may have also gained some clues about which passengers had rushed the cockpit.” However, almost a year later Longman reports that this approach was not followed: “The FBI overruled them, instead dividing the site into five large sectors. It would be too time-consuming to mark tight grids, and would serve no real investigative purpose, the bureau decided. There was no mystery to solve about the crash. Everybody knew what happened to the plane.” (Longman 2002, pp. 262) While the FBI claims there is no mystery, some news articles suggest the plane was shot down. (For example, (Bunch 11/15/2001; Carlin 8/13/2002)) In addition, at the time of this decision, investigators are still considering the possibility that a bomb might have destroyed the plane (see September 14, 2001). Unlike every other major airplane crash in modern history, no National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation is being conducted into the crash of Flight 93 (see After September 11, 2001). (Lappe and Marshall 2004, pp. 40-41)

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