

both aircraft were transcontinental 767 jetliners that had departed Logan Airport. Remembering the “we have some planes” remark, Boston Center guessed that Delta 1989 might also be hijacked. Boston Center called NEADS at 9:41 and identified Delta 1989, a 767 jet that had left Logan Airport for Las Vegas, as a possible hijack. NEADS warned the FAA’s Cleveland Center to watch Delta 1989. The Command Center and FAA headquarters watched it too. During the course of the morning, there were multiple erroneous reports of hijacked aircraft. The report of American 11 heading south was the first; Delta 1989 was the second.¹⁵⁵

NEADS never lost track of Delta 1989, and even ordered fighter aircraft from Ohio and Michigan to intercept it. The flight never turned off its transponder. NEADS soon learned that the aircraft was not hijacked, and tracked Delta 1989 as it reversed course over Toledo, headed east, and landed in Cleveland.¹⁵⁶ But another aircraft was heading toward Washington, an aircraft about which NORAD had heard nothing: United 93.

United Airlines Flight 93

FAA Awareness. At 9:27, after having been in the air for 45 minutes, United 93 acknowledged a transmission from the Cleveland Center controller. This was the last normal contact the FAA had with the flight.¹⁵⁷

Less than a minute later, the Cleveland controller and the pilots of aircraft in the vicinity heard “a radio transmission of unintelligible sounds of possible screaming or a struggle from an unknown origin.”¹⁵⁸

The controller responded, seconds later: “Somebody call Cleveland?” This was followed by a second radio transmission, with sounds of screaming. The Cleveland Center controllers began to try to identify the possible source of the transmissions, and noticed that United 93 had descended some 700 feet. The controller attempted again to raise United 93 several times, with no response. At 9:30, the controller began to poll the other flights on his frequency to determine if they had heard the screaming; several said they had.¹⁵⁹

At 9:32, a third radio transmission came over the frequency: “Keep remaining sitting. We have a bomb on board.” The controller understood, but chose to respond: “Calling Cleveland Center, you’re unreadable. Say again, slowly.” He notified his supervisor, who passed the notice up the chain of command. By 9:34, word of the hijacking had reached FAA headquarters.¹⁶⁰

FAA headquarters had by this time established an open line of communication with the Command Center at Herndon and instructed it to poll all its centers about suspect aircraft. The Command Center executed the request and, a minute later, Cleveland Center reported that “United 93 may have a bomb on board.” At 9:34, the Command Center relayed the information concerning United 93 to FAA headquarters. At approximately 9:36, Cleveland advised the Command Center that it was still tracking United 93 and specifically inquired whether someone had requested the military to launch fighter aircraft to intercept the aircraft. Cleveland even told the Command Center it was prepared to