

At the same time, the NEADS mission crew commander was dealing with the arrival of the Langley fighters over Washington, D.C., sorting out what their orders were with respect to potential targets. Shortly after 10:10, and having no knowledge either that United 93 had been heading toward Washington or that it had crashed, he explicitly instructed the Langley fighters: “negative—negative clearance to shoot” aircraft over the nation’s capital.¹⁷²

The news of a reported bomb on board United 93 spread quickly at NEADS. The air defenders searched for United 93’s primary radar return and tried to locate other fighters to scramble. NEADS called Washington Center to report:

NEADS: I also want to give you a heads-up, Washington.

FAA (DC): Go ahead.

NEADS: United nine three, have you got information on that yet?

FAA: Yeah, he’s down.

NEADS: He’s down?

FAA: Yes.

NEADS: When did he land? ‘Cause we have got confirmation—

FAA: He did not land.

NEADS: Oh, he’s down? Down?

FAA: Yes. Somewhere up northeast of Camp David.

NEADS: Northeast of Camp David.

FAA: That’s the last report. They don’t know exactly where.¹⁷³

The time of notification of the crash of United 93 was 10:15.¹⁷⁴ The NEADS air defenders never located the flight or followed it on their radar scopes. The flight had already crashed by the time they learned it was hijacked.

Clarifying the Record

The defense of U.S. airspace on 9/11 was not conducted in accord with pre-existing training and protocols. It was improvised by civilians who had never handled a hijacked aircraft that attempted to disappear, and by a military unprepared for the transformation of commercial aircraft into weapons of mass destruction. As it turned out, the NEADS air defenders had nine minutes’ notice on the first hijacked plane, no advance notice on the second, no advance notice on the third, and no advance notice on the fourth.

We do not believe that the true picture of that morning reflects discredit on the operational personnel at NEADS or FAA facilities. NEADS commanders and officers actively sought out information, and made the best judgments they could on the basis of what they knew. Individual FAA controllers, facility managers, and Command Center managers thought outside the box in recommending a nationwide alert, in ground-stopping local traffic, and, ultimately, in deciding to land all aircraft and executing that unprecedented order flawlessly.