

inbound aircraft. In the apt description of one witness, “It drops below the radar screen and it’s just continually hovering in your imagination; you don’t know where it is or what happens to it.” Eventually, the shelter received word that the alleged hijacker 5 miles away had been a medevac helicopter.²²⁴

Transmission of the Authorization from the White House to the Pilots

The NMCC learned of United 93’s hijacking at about 10:03. At this time the FAA had no contact with the military at the level of national command. The NMCC learned about United 93 from the White House. It, in turn, was informed by the Secret Service’s contacts with the FAA.²²⁵

NORAD had no information either. At 10:07, its representative on the air threat conference call stated that NORAD had “no indication of a hijack heading to DC at this time.”²²⁶

Repeatedly between 10:14 and 10:19, a lieutenant colonel at the White House relayed to the NMCC that the Vice President had confirmed fighters were cleared to engage inbound aircraft if they could verify that the aircraft was hijacked.²²⁷

The commander of NORAD, General Ralph Eberhart, was en route to the NORAD operations center in Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado, when the shootdown order was communicated on the air threat conference call. He told us that by the time he arrived, the order had already been passed down NORAD’s chain of command.²²⁸

It is not clear how the shootdown order was communicated within NORAD. But we know that at 10:31, General Larry Arnold instructed his staff to broadcast the following over a NORAD instant messaging system: “10:31 Vice president has cleared to us to intercept tracks of interest and shoot them down if they do not respond per [General Arnold].”²²⁹

In upstate New York, NEADS personnel first learned of the shootdown order from this message:

Floor Leadership: You need to read this. . . . The Region Commander has declared that we can shoot down aircraft that do not respond to our direction. Copy that?

Controllers: Copy that, sir.

Floor Leadership: So if you’re trying to divert somebody and he won’t divert—

Controllers: DO [Director of Operations] is saying no.

Floor Leadership: No? It came over the chat. . . . You got a conflict on that direction?

Controllers: Right now no, but—

Floor Leadership: Okay? Okay, you read that from the Vice President, right? Vice President has cleared. Vice President has cleared us to