

to the NMCC shortly before 10:30, in order to join Vice Chairman Myers. Secretary Rumsfeld told us he was just gaining situational awareness when he spoke with the Vice President at 10:39. His primary concern was ensuring that the pilots had a clear understanding of their rules of engagement.²³⁴

The Vice President was mistaken in his belief that shootdown authorization had been passed to the pilots flying at NORAD's direction. By 10:45 there was, however, another set of fighters circling Washington that had entirely different rules of engagement. These fighters, part of the 113th Wing of the District of Columbia Air National Guard, launched out of Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland in response to information passed to them by the Secret Service. The first of the Andrews fighters was airborne at 10:38.²³⁵

General David Wherley—the commander of the 113th Wing—reached out to the Secret Service after hearing secondhand reports that it wanted fighters airborne. A Secret Service agent had a phone in each ear, one connected to Wherley and the other to a fellow agent at the White House, relaying instructions that the White House agent said he was getting from the Vice President. The guidance for Wherley was to send up the aircraft, with orders to protect the White House and take out any aircraft that threatened the Capitol. General Wherley translated this in military terms to flying “weapons free”—that is, the decision to shoot rests in the cockpit, or in this case in the cockpit of the lead pilot. He passed these instructions to the pilots that launched at 10:42 and afterward.²³⁶

Thus, while the fighter pilots under NORAD direction who had scrambled out of Langley never received any type of engagement order, the Andrews pilots were operating weapons free—a permissive rule of engagement. The President and the Vice President indicated to us they had not been aware that fighters had been scrambled out of Andrews, at the request of the Secret Service and outside the military chain of command.²³⁷ There is no evidence that NORAD headquarters or military officials in the NMCC knew—during the morning of September 11—that the Andrews planes were airborne and operating under different rules of engagement.

What If?

NORAD officials have maintained consistently that had the passengers not caused United 93 to crash, the military would have prevented it from reaching Washington, D.C. That conclusion is based on a version of events that we now know is incorrect. The Langley fighters were not scrambled in response to United 93; NORAD did not have 47 minutes to intercept the flight; NORAD did not even know the plane was hijacked until after it had crashed. It is appropriate, therefore, to reconsider whether United 93 would have been intercepted.

Had it not crashed in Pennsylvania at 10:03, we estimate that United 93