

could not have reached Washington any earlier than 10:13, and probably would have arrived before 10:23. There was only one set of fighters circling Washington during that time frame—the Langley F-16s. They were armed and under NORAD’s control. After NEADS learned of the hijacking at 10:07, NORAD would have had from 6 to 16 minutes to locate the flight, receive authorization to shoot it down, and communicate the order to the pilots, who (in the same span) would have had to authenticate the order, intercept the flight, and execute the order.²³⁸

At that point in time, the Langley pilots did not know the threat they were facing, did not know where United 93 was located, and did not have shoot-down authorization.

First, the Langley pilots were never briefed about the reason they were scrambled. As the lead pilot explained, “I reverted to the Russian threat. . . . I’m thinking cruise missile threat from the sea. You know you look down and see the Pentagon burning and I thought the bastards snuck one by us. . . . [Y]ou couldn’t see any airplanes, and no one told us anything.” The pilots knew their mission was to divert aircraft, but did not know that the threat came from hijacked airliners.²³⁹

Second, NEADS did not have accurate information on the location of United 93. Presumably FAA would have provided such information, but we do not know how long that would have taken, nor how long it would have taken NEADS to locate the target.

Third, NEADS needed orders to pass to the pilots. At 10:10, the pilots over Washington were emphatically told, “negative clearance to shoot.” Shootdown authority was first communicated to NEADS at 10:31. It is possible that NORAD commanders would have ordered a shootdown in the absence of the authorization communicated by the Vice President, but given the gravity of the decision to shoot down a commercial airliner, and NORAD’s caution that a mistake not be made, we view this possibility as unlikely.²⁴⁰

NORAD officials have maintained that they would have intercepted and shot down United 93. We are not so sure. We are sure that the nation owes a debt to the passengers of United 93. Their actions saved the lives of countless others, and may have saved either the Capitol or the White House from destruction.

The details of what happened on the morning of September 11 are complex, but they play out a simple theme. NORAD and the FAA were unprepared for the type of attacks launched against the United States on September 11, 2001. They struggled, under difficult circumstances, to improvise a homeland defense against an unprecedented challenge they had never before encountered and had never trained to meet.

At 10:02 that morning, an assistant to the mission crew commander at NORAD’s Northeast Air Defense Sector in Rome, New York, was working