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MFR 04016819

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Event: Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) New York Air Route Center (ZNY)

Type of event: Interview with Mark Merced

Date: Wednesday, October 1, 2003

Special Access Issues: None

Prepared by: Geoffrey Brown

Team Number: 8

Location: FAA New York Air Route Center, Rokonkomo, New York

Participants - Non-Commission: Alfred R. Johnson, Jr., FAA Deputy Regional Consul,
Eastern Region

Participants - Commission: John Azzarello, Miles Kara, Geoffrey Brown

Please refer to the interview recording for a complete account.

Merced noted to Commission staff that he was very hesitant to participate in an interview. Commission staff received his personal statement through a request. Commission staff did not receive the statement originally because he was directly involved with AA 11, and New York Center only provided us with documents involving UAL 175. Merced did not have the time prior to the interview to review his statement.

Merced began his career 1991 at ZNY. He trained and became a certified air traffic controller (ATC). He has been an ATC with Area B for his full career.

AA 11:

Merced was "working" sector 56, Kennedy Sector, on the morning of September 11, 2001. His shift started at 6:30 am, and he was R 56 (radar for sector 56) without an RA (radar associate). Boston Center's (ZBW) Kingston Sector notified him of a specific primary target. The controller told Merced that ZBW was tracing a primary target at Flight Level 290 (FL 290, or 29,000 feet), that the flight was a possible hijack, and this it was likely AA 11. Merced physically pointed out that target to Dave Bottiglia, and Bottiglia started to follow the track. Merced does not remember if the track was actually "marked" with a data tag [please see David Bottiglia MFR for further details]. Merced recalls an "Eagle" flight headed towards Boston. He descended that flight 31, 000 feet, and asked for it to look for AA 11. The "Eagle" flight was unable to confirm a visual recognition of AA 11, so Merced directed that flight to continue on course. He attempted to do the same with a Federal Express flight out of Bradley that was at Flight Level 270.

Merced noted that after his second attempt to receive a visual on AA 11 by directing flights near the primary target the target itself "disappeared". He was "watching it the whole time", and the controllers were using all the methods they could to locate the target. Merced told Ivonna, who was the Controller in Charge (CIC) of Area B, to call New York Tracon in an attempt for altitude information on the primary target. Merced was working with Bottiglia, but does not remember Bottiglia setting an "AA11a" data tag

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on the primary. Merced noted that Bottiglia received an "H" position once he was no longer tracking AA 11. Merced noted that Chris Tucker was assigned to the departures radar, and set that radar scope to receive information from the floor to the ceiling to check for AA 11. Merced informed Commission staff that this operation was very infrequently done in the past, "especially for commercial aircraft".

Once AA 11 disappeared, "someone" called Washington Center (ZDC) and informed them of the situation with AA 11. Merced assumed that AA 11 had continued southbound, but was flying at an altitude below the radar sweeps. Merced noted that the controllers could tell the primary target's approximate speed by monitoring the distance between the lines that indicate a "hit" on the radar sweep, and that the aircraft performed a slight turn to the southwest. Merced noted that this is all the information he received on the target.

UAL 175:

Merced first heard of the WTC impacts after UAL 175 hit the south tower. He was actively aware of what Bottiglia was monitoring and doing. Bottiglia noted that when he was informed of the impact of the south tower, he had "no real doubt" that it was UAL 175. Bottiglia had told him a plane informed him that the WTC was on fire, but he had did not know or think that the fire was caused by the impact of AA 11. He did not which aircraft struck the different sites until after he went home around 5 o'clock that evening. Merced noted that when he was informed that the WTC was hit he left ZNY to attempt to contact a friend who was in the WTC.

Merced noted that Area B personnel were "sequestered" in a conference room after the events. At this meeting, he gave a written and a taped statement.

Prior to 9/11:

Merced informed Commission staff that prior to 9/11 he would have expected the pilot of a hijacked aircraft to covertly communicate the situation by using a hijack transponder code (7500) or through a verbal code.

Merced noted that prior to 9/11 it was often that an aircraft would not be in constant contact with the air traffic controller, and that this was no reason to assume the aircraft was undergoing a hijack. He further noted that a lost transponder signal does happen, but prior to 9/11 an air traffic controller would have approached the problem thinking that there was something electrical wrong with the aircraft. Once the aircraft deviates from course, Merced would have thought that there was an emergency and the pilot was headed for the nearest airport.

Merced informed Commission staff that Bottiglia was told by the pilot of UAL 175 that he overheard threatening communications in a communication from AA 11. Merced that since ZBW had said that AA 11 was possibly a hijacked aircraft he took UAL 175's news seriously. Merced had never handled a hijack in his career.

Merced noted that an FAA ATC has no authority to notify the military or Herndon. He notes that that is the responsibility of the supervisor for the area.

Prior to 9/11 Merced had no experience with a military scramble exercise, but had worked on military exercises in the past through a small piece of airspace at 14,000 feet and below. Merced experienced no difficulty coordinating the use of this airspace for military purposes, besides a few instances in which the military aircraft "spill out" of the airspace assigned to them. He had no practice with the military on hijacking procedures, but felt prepared to vector a military aircraft to a target.

Merced's hijacking training was mostly annual refresher training that included hijack scenarios on a Dynamic Simulation, called DynSim, which simulates air traffic. These exercises, as noted, involved one aircraft, and a pilot as the participant in communication through code use. Even post 9/11 Merced has only exercised scenarios involving single aircraft.

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Merced noted that an emphasis has been placed on the importance of maintaining contact with an aircraft, post 9/11 when the controllers experience a NORDO aircraft they do whatever can be done to communicate with that aircraft. Prior to 9/11, Merced noted there was no standard on how or when to attempt to communicate with a NORDO aircraft.