Looking Back on 9/11: "We Knew What We Had to Do"

By: Theresa Kraus, FAA Historian

September 11, 2001, began as a normal, quiet day in both the FAA's Intelligence Operations Watch and the Washington Operations Center, now collocated and named the Washington Operations Center Complex, or WOCC, on the tenth floor of the agency's headquarters building. The Washington Operations Center, which opened in 1970 and reported directly to the deputy administrator, provided 24/7 situational awareness on civil aviation operations in the National Airspace System and worldwide. The facility had been routinely expanded and upgraded since 1979 when a rash of hijackings necessitated better equipment and larger working spaces, preceding the creation of an intelligence function within the Office of Civil Aviation Security (ACS). The Intelligence Operations Watch, created in 1987, was the primary node for the FAA to coordinate with the U.S. Intelligence Community and was also staffed 24/7.

New York's Twin Towers Courtesy: FAA

At 0835 EDT, all normalcy ended at FAA headquarters when the Eastern Region operations center reported the possible hijacking of an American Airlines aircraft enroute from Boston to Los Angeles. At 0840, the aircraft was reportedly heading towards JFK Airport, and six minutes later, headquarters received information that an aircraft had hit the World Trade Center in New York City. At 0856, another American Airlines flight, enroute from Dulles International Airport to Los Angeles International Airport, disappeared from radar. Three minutes later, a second aircraft struck the World Trade Center. At 0930, a report indicated a United Air Lines flight had disappeared from radar. Two minutes after that, another communication reported an aircraft had hit the west side of the Pentagon. At 0956, the operations center received a report that United Air Lines Flight 93, enroute from Newark International Airport to San Francisco International Airport, was being hijacked, and at 1042, it received information the aircraft had crashed in Pennsylvania.

News of the first hijacking travelled quickly through the agency. Intelligence specialists, Angela Stubblefield (then a trainee and now FAA Chief of Staff) and Chris Rocheleau (now Acting

Associate Administrator for Aviation Safety) were at the end of their midnight shift in the intelligence operations watch. As they prepared to depart, they were called back to assist in managing the unfolding tragedy. At that time, Claudio Manno (now Associate Administrator for Security and Hazardous Materials Safety) served as the chief of the agency's intelligence organization.

The intelligence watch was in a small sensitive compartmented information facility, or SCIF, on the third floor of headquarters building 10A. During a crisis, the Washington Operations Center crisis room, equipped with telephones, tables, maps, and other necessary equipment, would house a crisis action team comprised of agency experts from the air traffic, security, aviation safety, policy, communications, and the administrator's office to coordinate response to the event. The operations center's communications personnel assisted in coordinating communications activities with other federal agencies while ongoing intelligence coordination occurred with the FBI, the CIA, the Departments of Transportation, Justice, and State, as well as the White House.

When operations center personnel heard news of the second plane hitting the twin towers, Karlesta Mitchell (now deputy manager of the WOCC), then on duty, recalls thinking, "We're being attacked; the U.S. is under attack." As Mitchell explains, the operations center immediately became "a madhouse with a mission." As the intelligence watch officers tried to piece together information on what was happening, the crisis action team moved into the WOCC, which included a tiny SCIF, to oversee operations, and communications specialists set up a conference bridge to keep in touch with other government agencies, airlines, DOT, and the White House.

Despite the ongoing flurry of activity, Claudio Manno reports that "we knew what we had to do" to keep the national airspace system (NAS), FAA personnel, and the flying public safe. Inside the third floor and 10th floor SCIFs, the intelligence analysts worked hard to get reliable information in an attempt to piece together the who, what, and why of the attacks. Intelligence reports came into the agency at a rapid pace from reliable and suspect sources. The "fog of war" proved intense as the analysts quickly had to determine fact from fiction. For example, they received a report that a bomb had exploded at the State Department; a rumor quickly dispelled. After the first four aircraft hijackings, they received numerous reports of other possible hijacked planes in the air over the United States and overseas.

In 2001, intelligence analysis was largely a manual, paper-driven operation. Aviation-related intelligence, largely as faxed or emailed reports, came from federal agencies, such as the CIA, FBI, NSA, and the State Department. The FAA had intelligence liaison officers at each of these agencies. The FAA also had civil aviation security field officers stationed at some of the largest overseas airports. Those officers also gathered intelligence from their overseas contacts. The intelligence watch officers scoured these reports looking for credible information and immediate threats.

U.S. intelligence agencies had received no specific credible threats prior to the 9/11 attacks. There had been an increase in chatter, but there was very little actionable information. According to Lynne Osmus, (Then Deputy Associate Administrator for Civil Aviation Security) there was

“a lot of chatter regarding the Middle East – there was something cooking – but not in the U.S.” Angela Stubblefield concurs, saying “we saw an increase in noise, but nothing specific . . . we sent out a message saying we hear an increase in chatter and to be vigilant,” but no specific actions were required at the time beyond the security measures already in place.

Like everyone around the country, during the attacks, FAA’s intelligence organization first faced confusion, then anger, and lastly questions – had they missed something in the intelligence reports? (Subsequent investigations would reveal they had not.) The WOC and the Intelligence Watch quickly set aside their disbelief, focused on the job, and worked with other agencies to find out who the attackers were, if there were any additional threats, and most importantly, what the agency needed to do to prevent any additional attacks. As Claudio Manno said, “People really stepped up, put personal feelings aside to get the job done.”

After the attacks, Manno, like many others, stayed at work for approximately the next 18 hours. The intense workload did not slow down once the FAA ordered the ground stop. During the ground stop, air traffic control professionals initiated historic actions and brought approximately 4,500 airplanes to the ground within a few hours. Many FAAers, including Manno’s intel staff, worked 14-16 hours a day, 7 days a week for the next 45 days, as information was gathered, new security directives put into place, and plans developed to reopen the national airspace system; procedures put in place to eventually transfer FAA security personnel to the new Transportation Security Administration, and preparations completed for multiple congressional hearings and questions from the Joint Intelligence Committee and the 9/11 Commission.

Aircraft landed at Halifax International Airport during U.S. ground stop Courtesy: Halifax International Airport Authority

Once the intensity level and high workload began to subside, the FAA worked with its counterparts in other agencies to improve and refine communications and intelligence sharing. Prior to 9/11, for example, the federal government lacked a coordinated watch list of potential terrorists. Many agencies maintained watch lists; the airlines had watch lists, and FAA had a watch list. The individual lists were not coordinated and often served different purposes. After the attacks, security offices went to work developing a system to establish criteria for watch lists,

as well as how to vet, coordinate, refine, and share lists. The multi-agency Terrorist Screening Center now coordinates a single federal No Fly list.

Agencies also worked to improve how they shared intelligence. Prior to the attacks, the FAA received information that the Intelligence Community believed had a bearing on aviation, and FAA intelligence analysts then screened that information looking for credible threats. This often meant the FAA did not receive all of the intelligence that might have a bearing on aviation. The 9/11 Commission made numerous recommendations that led to cultural, capability, policy, and process changes to improve collaboration. The FAA's Domestic Events Network (DEN), perhaps one of the most enduring symbols of post-9/11 reforms in information sharing, now facilitates sharing of operational information in real time between Departments and Agencies across the Federal Government to ensure shared situational awareness and support coordinated action.

With the creation of the TSA in 2001, the FAA Office of Intelligence became the nucleus for the new TSA Office of Intelligence and all of the FAA personnel and equipment transferred to the new agency. In 2005, despite some counterterrorism intelligence support from TSA, which was provided under a Memorandum of Understanding, the agency recognized that it still needed the capability to receive and analyze a broader set of intelligence and aviation threats to execute's the Administrator's responsibilities to keep the NAS and FAA facilities and personnel secure. The intelligence function was reestablished in FAA under what is now the Associate Administrator for Security and Hazardous Materials Safety (ASH). While the TSA is responsible for intelligence relating to the security of all transportation modes, the FAA intel office has a different focus. The FAA's intelligence program now focuses on identifying, investigating, and analyzing threats to FAA facilities, employees, systems, and information, as well as threats to U.S registered aircraft while operating in airspace overseas where there may be ongoing conflicts, such as Afghanistan, for example. The office also develops and deploys appropriate mitigation strategies to protect the FAA from compromise by foreign intelligence entities and insider threats through ASH's insider threat, defensive and cyber counterintelligence and international travel security programs. In 2006, the FAA integrated the WOC into ASH.

9/11 had a major impact on those who lived through it. As Chris Rocheleau explains, "You never forget it – it really changed the world, and we were a part of that." Every 9/11 since 2001, a group from the former Office of Civil Aviation Security contacts one another via an email chain as a means of staying in touch, sharing recollections, and checking on one another. The tragedy created a unique bond that cannot be broken.