

F-16 Pilots Considered Ramming Flight 93

By William B. Scott/Aviation Week & Space Technology
September 9, 2002



Editor's Note: This is Part 3 of an ongoing special report on how the military responded to terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Earlier articles appeared in the June 3 and June 10 issues. For this segment, one D.C. Air National Guard F-16 pilot chose not to have her name used, so is identified only by her call-sign.

ANDREWS AFB, MD. -- With Pentagon in flames and hijacked aircraft threatening Washington, White House scrambled fighters with little or no armament.

Within minutes of American Airlines Flight 77 hitting the Pentagon on Sept. 11, Air National Guard F-16s took off from here in response to a plea from the White House to "Get in the air now!" Those fighters were flown by three pilots who had decided, on their own, to ram a hijacked airliner and force it to crash, if necessary. Such action almost certainly would have been fatal for them, but could have prevented another terrorism catastrophe in Washington.

One of those F-16s launched with no armament--no missiles and no usable ammunition in its 20-mm. gun. The other two "Vipers" only had a full load of 20-mm. "ball" or training rounds, not the high-explosive incendiary (HEI) bullets required for combat, and no air-to-air missiles.

The Andrews-based 121st Fighter Sqdn. was not standing alert on Sept. 11, because the District of Columbia Air National Guard (DCANG) unit was not assigned to the North American Aerospace Defense Command air defense force. Norad had already scrambled three F-16s from their alert base at Langley AFB, Va., but they were about 12 min. from Washington when the Pentagon was struck at 9:37 a.m. (AW&ST June 3, p. 48).

The 121st squadron's day had started normally. Three F-16s were flying an air-to-ground training mission on a range in North Carolina, 180 naut. mi. away. At Andrews, several officers were in a scheduling meeting when they received word that the World Trade Center had been hit by an aircraft. Minutes later, after United Airlines Flight 175 slammed into the second WTC tower, a squadron pilot called a friend in the Secret Service "to see what was going on. He was told some bad things were happening. At that time, we weren't thinking about defending anything. Our primary concern was what would happen to the air traffic system," said Lt. Col. Marc H. (Sass) Sasseville, the current 121st FS commander. On Sept. 11, he was the director of operations and air operations officer--the acting operations group commander under the 113th Wing.

Soon thereafter, the Secret Service called back, asking whether the squadron could get fighters airborne. The unit's maintenance section was notified to get several F-16s armed and ready to fly. Anticipating such an order, Col. Don C. Mozley, the 113th Logistics Group commander, had already ordered his weapons officer to "break out the AIM-9s and start building them up." The missiles had to be transported from a bunker on the other side of the base, which would take a while.

"After the Pentagon was hit, we were told there were more [airliners] coming. Not 'might be'; they were coming," Mozley recalled.

Sasseville grabbed three F-16 pilots and gave them a curt briefing: "I have no idea what's going on, but we're flying. Here's our frequency. We'll split up the area as we have to. Just defend as required. We'll talk about the rest in the air." All four grabbed their helmets, g-suits and parachute harnesses, and headed for the operations desk to get aircraft assignments.

Another call from the Secret Service commanded, "Get in the air now!" Almost simultaneously, a call from someone else in the White House declared the Washington area "a free-fire zone. That meant we were given authority to use force, if the situation required it, in defense of the nation's capital, its property and people," Sasseville said.

He and his wingman, Lucky, sprinted to the flight line and climbed into waiting F-16s armed only with "hot" guns and 511 rounds of "TP"--nonexplosive training rounds. "They had two airplanes ready to go, and were putting missiles on Nos. 3 and 4. Maintenance wanted us to take the ones with missiles, but we didn't have time to wait on those," Sasseville said. Maj. Dan (Raisin) Caine and Capt. Brandon (Igor) Rasmussen climbed into the jets being armed with AIM-9s, knowing they would take off about 10 min. behind Sasseville and Lucky.

"We had two air-to-air birds on the ramp . . . that already had ammo in them. We launched those first two with only hot guns," said CMSgt. Roy Dale (Crank) Belknap, the 113th Wing production superintendent. "By then, we had missiles rolling up, so we loaded those other two airplanes while the pilots were sitting in the cockpit."

Inside, at the operations desk, Lt. Cols. Phil (Dog) Thompson and Steve (Festus) Chase were fielding a flood of calls from the Secret Service and the FAA's two area air traffic control facilities--Washington Center and Washington Approach Control. Thompson is chief of safety for the 113th Wing, and Chase is now commander of the new Air Sovereignty Detachment here. By then, Brig. Gen. David F. Wherley, Jr., the 113th Wing commander, was on-site, trying to determine whether the unit had authorization to launch fighters.

"By this time, [commercial] airplanes were landing, but there were still several unidentified ones flying. One was in the northwest [area], basically coming down the [Potomac] River," Thompson said. Later, they would learn that the FAA and Norad's Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS) were tracking the hijacked United Flight 93, and feared it was coming toward Washington. Thanks to intervention by passengers, the aircraft ultimately crashed in Pennsylvania.

Maj. Billy Hutchison and his wingmen had just landed after being recalled from a training mission in North Carolina. When Hutchison checked in via radio, Thompson told him to take off immediately.

"Billy had about 2,400 lb. of gas; the other two [F-16s] were too light," Thompson said. "I told Billy to take off, but don't use afterburner to save gas. He took off with nothing--no weapons. I told him to 'do exactly what ATC asks you to do.' Primarily, he was to go ID [identify] that unknown [aircraft] that everybody was so excited about. He blasted off and flew a standard departure route, which took him over the Pentagon."

According to now-official accounts, an armed Norad-alert F-16 from Langley AFB, flown by Maj. Dean Eckmann of the 119th Fighter Wing Alert Detachment 1, was the first defender to overfly the Pentagon. At the time, Hutchison and his fellow "Capital Guardians"--as the 121st FS is known--were unaware that three other fighters were over the city.

MINUTES LATER, Sasseville and Lucky were in the air, roughly 6 min. after they had reached their F-16s. "I was still turning things on after I got airborne. By that time, the [Norad alert] F-16s from Langley were overhead--but I didn't know they were there," Sasseville recalled. "We all realized we were looking for an airliner--a big airplane. That was [United] Flight 93; the track looked like it was headed toward D.C. at that time."

The DCANG was not in the Norad or NEADS communication and command loops, so its pilots weren't on the same frequencies as Norad air defense fighters. The Andrews-based F-16s were launched by the Secret Service and someone in the White House command center, not Norad. At the time, there was no standing agreement between the Secret Service and the 113th Wing for the latter to provide fighters in response to an attack on Washington.

Hutchison made two loops up the Potomac, reversing course near Georgetown and the Pentagon, flying at 500-1,000 ft. AGL. Sasseville and Lucky were at 5,000-6,000 ft., "because I didn't want to get too low for a good radar angle, and not too high, so we could get somewhere fast," Sasseville said. He later conceded he was "making things up on the fly." Obviously, there was no precedent to draw upon. All the pilots were relying on their training and ability to think under pressure.

Hutchison was probably airborne shortly after the alert F-16s from Langley arrived over Washington, although 121st FS pilots admit their timeline-recall "is fuzzy." But it's clear that Hutchison, Sasseville and Lucky knew their options were limited for bringing down a hijacked airliner headed for an undetermined target in the capital city. Although reluctant to talk about it, all three acknowledge they were prepared to ram a terrorist-flown aircraft, if necessary. Indeed, Hutchison--who might have been the first to encounter Flight 93 if it had, indeed, been flying low and fast down the Potomac--had no other choice.

Sasseville and Lucky each had 511 rounds of ammo, but that only provided roughly a 5-sec. burst of the 20-

mm. gun. And where should they shoot to ensure a hijacked aircraft would be stopped? Sasseville planned to fire from behind and "try to saw off one wing. I needed to disable it as soon as possible--immediately interrupt its aerodynamics and bring it down."

He admits there was no assurance that a 5-sec. burst of lead slugs could slice an air transport's wing off, though. His alternative was "to hit it--cut the wing off with my wing. If I played it right, I'd be able to bail out. One hand on the stick and one hand on the ejection handle, trying to ram my airplane into the aft side of the [airliner's] wing," he said. "And do it skillfully enough to save the pink body . . . but understanding that it might not go as planned. It was a tough nut; we had no other ordnance."

Still unaware that the 119th FW alert F-16s were overhead, patrolling at a higher altitude, Sasseville initially split the airspace into four sectors. He swept the northwest area of Washington--where the hijacked United Flight 93 was expected to be--and had Lucky guard the northeast area.

Approximately 10 min. after Sasseville and Lucky took off, Caine and Rasmussen launched, the first Andrews-based F-16s to carry both hot guns and live AIM-9 missiles. They worked the city's southern sectors. Soon, F-16s from Richmond, Va., and Atlantic City, N.J., as well as F-15s from Langley AFB, were arriving. The air picture was confused, at best, and radio frequencies were alive with chatter.

"The FAA controllers were doing their best to get us information [about unidentified aircraft], but we were used to working with AWACS and their weapons directors and controllers," Rasmussen said. Eventually, Washington Reagan National Airport was designated "Bullseye," and fighters were given range and bearing to targets from there.

Possibly the highest ranking pilot in the area, Sasseville "essentially declared myself the CAP [combat air patrol] commander and set up deconfliction altitudes so we didn't run into each other. There really wasn't time for niceties." For the rest of the day, a dozen or so fighters rotated in and out of the region, running intercepts on myriad helicopters and light aircraft.

"THEY WERE SNAPPING to targets everywhere," Thompson said. "A lot of light aircraft fly under the [controlled] airspace here, and they had no idea what was going on. What really scared us was Washington Approach broadcasting, 'Anyone flying within 25 mi. of the Washington Tacan is authorized to be shot down.' We kind of winced at that, because there are plenty of hard reasons to not shoot somebody down. We were really in an ID posture--and trying to really be careful."

A miracle of the post-attack hours on Sept. 11 was that no aircraft was shot down accidentally, a credit to the training and discipline of U.S. fighter crews. That fact is even more impressive when one considers many of those pilots had little or no experience with air defense techniques and protocols.

"We really didn't know the intricacies of Norad's mission--how it works," Thompson explained. "We've never been an air defense unit. We practice scrambles, we know how to do intercepts and other things, but there's a lot of protocol in the air defense business. We obviously didn't have that expertise, but it worked out fine. For the first three days, everybody seemed to be reasonably happy with our orchestrating the D.C. CAP. By day-four, we'd pretty much turned into a national asset" as Norad assumed control of CAPs nationwide.

On that first day, many of the pilots flying CAP over Washington, New York and other U.S. cities were faced with the very real possibility of having to shoot down or ram their fighter into an air transport filled with innocent passengers.

"I was asking myself, 'Is this when I have to make the million-dollar decision on my own?' But with smoke billowing out of the Pentagon . . .," Rasmussen said.

"That's what we get paid to do, though. When young guys sign up, they may not see that the 'guts and glory' of fighter-flying may cost you your life. That day brought everything into focus."

In the afternoon, Sasseville and Lucky were flying their second mission of the day--armed with AIM-9 missiles now--when they were told to contact an AWACS aircraft in the area and "expect special tasking." They were directed to fly a 280-deg. heading for 140 naut. mi.--almost due west of Washington. Unable to communicate by secure or encrypted means, the AWACS controller lowered his voice and told Sasseville via radio they were going to "escort Air Force One," President Bush's aircraft.

Two Langley F-15s offered to go along, and Sasseville concurred. Soon, an AWACS controller reported a

fast-moving, unidentified aircraft southwest of Air Force One, approximately 60 naut. mi. away, but on a "cutoff vector" to the President's Boeing 747. It was above 40,000 ft. and the 747 was "in the 20,000-ft. range," but Sasseville sent the F-15s to intercept the unknown aircraft. It was a Learjet that hadn't yet landed after aircraft nationwide had been ordered out of the air.

Sasseville and the two F-15s later joined on Air Force One, while Lucky positioned her F-16 about 10 naut. mi. in front of the 747. With the SADL data link system, she was able to monitor her location relative to Sasseville's SADL-equipped F-16 positioned on Air Force One's left wing. Another flight of F-16s from Ellington AFB, Tex., were about 5 mi. in trail. They had escorted the President from Offutt AFB, Neb., according to 121st FS officers.

Why the Washington-based F-16s were sent to shadow the President's aircraft back to Andrews AFB has not been disclosed. Apparently, someone in the Norad or Secret Service command loop had received information about a potential threat to the 747, prompting a request for additional armed escorts.

Surrounded by fighters, Air Force One descended rapidly toward its home base. Lucky made a clearing pass over the airfield, pulled up, circled back and joined on Sasseville's wing. All of the fighters remained with the 747 until the latter landed, then climbed and established a CAP over Andrews.

Despite being short of aircrews the next few days, the 121st flew continuously for about 63 hr., maintaining protective CAPs over Washington. They were aided by fighters from other ANG, Reserve and active-duty units, as well.

"We were generating airplanes faster than they could put 'em up," remarked Belknap. "And we still are."

To try 4 FREE issues of Aviation Week & Space Technology, click [here](#).

Find this article at:

http://www.aviationnow.com/avnow/news/channel_awst_story.jsp?view=story&id=news/aw090971.xml

The McGraw-Hill Companies

Copyright © 2005 Aviation Week, a division of The McGraw-Hill Companies.

All rights reserved. [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)