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Two pilots revisit their 9/11 'Like being in the middle of a bad movie': Otis fighters scrambled; airmen watched as the twin towers burned, then collapsed

By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | September 11, 2005

Flying 4,000 feet above Manhattan four years ago today, F-15 pilot Timothy Duffy peered down to the World Trade Center's North Tower with an eerie mix of disbelief and hope.

"I was thinking they were going to save this building," said Duffy, one of two pilots who had been scrambled from Otis Air National Guard Base that morning.

"It was like being in the middle of a bad movie," Duffy said. "You're up there, you're flying over the city, the towers are on fire. It was just wrong, the whole thing."

In their most extensive interviews since the attacks, Duffy and his wingman, Major Daniel Nash, detailed their doubts, frustrations, and personal emotions and the roles they played on one of the most awful days in US history.

In short, both pilots said in interviews that they have concluded they did everything they could. They were first on the scene, but by the time they arrived, both World Trade Center towers had been hit.

"I know it changed something in me . . . I thought about it continuously for a long time," Nash said. "But I finally came to the realization that we probably wouldn't have done anything, definitely for the first plane."

Nash, 38, still has not spoken to his three children about his role on Sept. 11. His oldest is now 9.

"We did what we could. It wasn't much," Nash said. "Nobody would be calling us heroes if we shot down four airliners on September 11. You can imagine the stuff that would have gone on if the military had done that. It was a lose-lose situation as soon as they took hold of the airplanes."

Duffy, who was close friends with the copilot on United Flight 93 before it was hijacked and later crashed into a field in Pennsylvania, came to a similar conclusion.

"I've flown this thing a thousand times over in my mind, you know?" said Duffy, a lieutenant colonel. "What if we had done this? What if we had done that? I don't think I would have changed anything from what we did."

For Duffy, 44, the day started at about 6 a.m. He had a Diet Pepsi for breakfast and drove 45 minutes down Route 3 to Otis, leaving his wife and five children in their Duxbury home.

Otis fighters cannot take orders from the FAA, but they started getting ready while they awaited instruction from the Northeast Air Defense Sector, or NEADS, which controls military air defense over the Northeast.

Duffy alerted Nash, the other pilot on alert that day, and they both ran into a brightly lit locker room nearby and began putting on their G-suits and helmets.

They jumped into a Ford pickup and drove the half-mile to the barnlike hangars where the alert F-15s are stored. A siren started blaring and a voice came over the public address system: "Alpha kilo one and two, battle stations."

This was a signal for them to get strapped into the jets and to await orders.

At 8:46, just at the time the first tower was hit, Nash and Duffy were ordered to start their engines, a process that takes about five minutes.

They were airborne by 8:53, and without permission to break the speed of sound, Duffy started going about Mach 1.4 -- more than 1,000 miles per hour -- toward John F. Kennedy International Airport.

While in the air, Duffy radioed for information about the unidentified aircraft. No one knew what to tell him because the transponder on the hijacked airplanes had been turned off.

At 9:13 -- by the time both towers had been hit -- they were ordered to establish combat air patrol over Manhattan. They spent the next several hours sending away news helicopters and private airplanes to keep the airspace clear.

When Daniel Nash got home that night, he found his wife nervously drinking a glass of wine -- something she rarely does. Nash said he watched television nonstop. He was angry and hurt.

One acquaintance said Nash had tears in his eyes on several occasions when he spoke about flying that day, contradicting his nickname -- Nasty.

"There was a lot of frustration," Nash said. "I maybe even felt guilty, even though logically I knew that we would have watched it happen."

"We're still supposed to be there to defend the country, and we were powerless because of the way they did it. It was a pretty emotional day."

Some critics have questioned why they did not arrive sooner. Duffy and Nash were flying F-15 Eagles that were built in 1977. In their prime, the planes can go Mach 2.5; they could have been to New York in less than 10 minutes.

Still, the pilots stressed that they never had orders to shoot down any of the planes.

"That's not a decision that we would get to make, or that I would even want to make if I had to," Duffy said. "I'm happy I didn't have to, in the long run. But people have said, 'Would you have done it?' Absolutely, that's my job."

Nash is critical of the way the Boston Center handled the situation in the early minutes. The tower had initially tried to contact a former alert site in Atlantic City, unaware that it had been phased out.

"It sounds like the FAA didn't have their [act] together at all when they were calling the [Otis] tower," Nash said. "That has been explained away. . . . To me, it sounded like there was someone who didn't know what they were doing."

Nash has scrambled to escort three commercial airliners since Sept. 11, 2001, all false alarms. Two fighters from Otis also scrambled to bring a plane carrying Richard Reid, the "shoe bomber," to Boston.

The base realignment commission recommended sending the Otis fighters 130 miles away to Barnes Air National Guard Base in Westfield. The recommendation is expected to gain the approval of President Bush and Congress.

Duffy called the decision "unconscionable." "Do I think they should keep this base open just because of 9/11? No," Nash said. "But I think this is an ideal location to prevent something like that from happening again."

Nash is still active in the Air National Guard, working as an administrator and still flying training missions several times a week. Duffy, who was a part-time reservist in the National Guard, flew his last mission in December. Around the same time, he went on an extended leave of absence from United for a shoulder injury that may prohibit him from flying again.

He is the president and CEO of Fighter Associates, a consulting firm that trains companies to use fighter squadron methods in the business world.

He is also the director of services in New England for Siemens, and he serves as the Air Force liaison in New England to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

In the halls of the 102d Fighter Wing, their colleagues still call them "the 9/11 heroes."

"That was one of the events that has been a part of my life, and you move on. It is what it is," Duffy said. "You don't have to like it, you don't have to agree with it. That's what it is, so you move on."

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